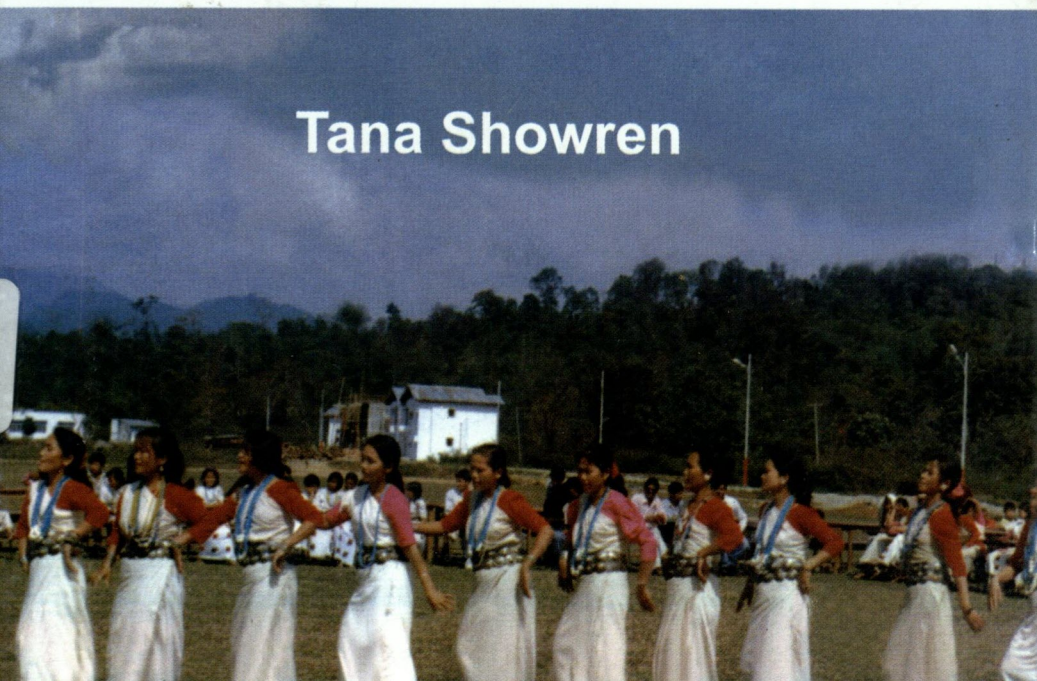




**The NYISHI of**  
**Arunachal Pradesh**  
**An Ethnohistorical Study**

**Tana Showren**



This thought-provoking work examines ethnohistory, an underexplored field of study that lies at the intersection of interpretation, reinterpretation, intellectual history, literature and gender studies. A pioneering piece of ethnohistory, uses a variety of interdisciplinary means to reconstruct the oral history of an important Tribe in North East India, i.e. NYISHI. It traces the impact of misnomer nomenclature labelled on the Tribe throughout century and psychic agony inherent in the transformation of people under the twin impact of reign of the Ahom and colonialism. It analyses how these factors shaped and reflected the society as static and stagnant. In reconstructing the history of traditional political institution that have been wrongly interpreted and understood have been systematically re-examined to attain the objective study. Author also raises whole issues concerning the methodologies of ethnohistory and the dynamics of the whole last millennium history of Nyishi of North East India. Author powerfully combines analyses of medieval writings, eighteenth century texts, archival records, local and colonial records, and extensive ethnographic field work, and attempt to piece-together oral history and oral traditions of the Nyishi people which will appeal to the general reader, intellectuals, specialist, policy-maker, professionals and researchers.

The study of oral history leads into an area of human culture to which social scientist are now increasingly turning their interests as part of research on pre-literate non-segmentary acephalous societies linking up with developing method on such subject , social memory, the emotions, the ethnography of speaking and verbal arts action more intensely. It is now timely to have a book of guidance for researchers as to the possibilities and problems of researching in the area where no written record and archive sources are available. This book will definitely serve as useful aid for such researchers who eager to work on the topics of oral history, oral tradition and understanding the non-literate community.



**Dr. Tana Showren** teaches in the Department of History, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, Rono Hills. His publications include: *The Problems of Internally Displaced Persons & Refugees in the North East India* 2005, *Nyetam*

of the Aane Donyi: The Nyishi Ritual Invocation Hymns of Evolutionary Explanation of Indigenous Religion, 2006 and numbers of research articles and essays. He teaches Historical Methods, and Regional Historiography. He is the Director of Central Nyedar Namlo Research Council for Indigenous Religion in the State. During the last few years his research interest has been intellectual, ethnology, oral tradition and cultural history of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly problems of cultural issues, ideology and indigenous religion consciousness, on which he has published several scholarly articles. In recent time his research area is history and cultural of Arunachal Pradesh to comprehend the contemporary social consciousness and to explore the possibility of deconstruction and methods of reconstruction. Tracing the critic of earlier constructed ethnographic information of rationality to social and nature of humanism in the early 20th century, which he tries to underline the importance of the tribe social consciousness and their integration with Pan-Indian composite culture.

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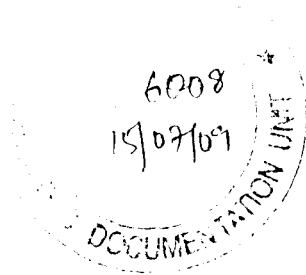
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An Ethnohistorical Study

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### North East India: Land and People

The North East India of the Indian Union consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Most of these States barring the erstwhile princely States of Manipuri, Tripura and Sikkim were carved out gradually from the erstwhile Province of Assam. The North East India offers two distinctly geomorphologic divisions of the regions *viz.*, the plains area and the hills area. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim are hill States, while Assam, Manipur and Tripura covered with both plains and hills. The Himalayan range runs through Arunachal Pradesh and continues towards Patkoi Range in Naga Hills, and Mizo Hills, to the further south in Myanmar. The immediate international boundaries of the region on the North are China (Tibet), Bhutan to the North-West, Myanmar to the East, and Bangladesh to the South, while it is connected with the mainland of India by the narrow corridor-Siliguri-neck in Darjeeling district of West Bengal bordering North-West of the regions.

The Brahmaputra Valley which is the largest plains tract in the region is an alluvial plain, about 450 kilometres in length, with an average breadth of about 50 kilometres, lying almost east and west

in its lower portion. It stretches out for about 600 kilometres from Western edge of Assam to the Sadiya in the East, where the region was easily accessible from the West Bengal on the West since in early times. The Brahmaputra receives a vast numbers of affluent, great and small from the hills to the north and south. Most of the northern streams are snow-fed, while those of south depend upon the annual rains for their volume, and shrink to small dimensions during the dry season. The chief tributaries of the Brahmaputra on the north are the Kameng, Poma, Pare, Subansiri, Siang, Dihing, Lohit and Dibang; and on the south the greater affluents are the Disang, the Disoi, the Dhansiri, the Kapili, with whole streams of the North Cachar and several minor creeks from the Khasi Hills, are the chief southern affluents of the Brahmaputra. The region's average height of the hills varies considerably and is deeply cut into by river channels, narrow gorges; and is covered with dense forest and bamboo jungle. The geological features of the regions are found the same characteristic formation as distinguish the Sub-Himalayan rocks throughout their whole length from the Indus to the eastern limit of this region. These rocks consist of great thickness of soft massive sandstones and shales of tertiary age; and fresh water origin, the dip of which is towards the interior zone of metamorphic rocks. These Sub-Himalayan sandstones that are found at the outer zone of rocks elsewhere along the chain is known as the Siwaliks and all the hills are well-marked ranges of Trans-Himalayan hills with an intervening Dun<sup>1</sup>, and marked with an alluvium soils belongs to the greater Indo-Gangetic Plains.

Topography and the soil make up of the climate of the regions of North East India differ from place to place. Subsequently the flora and fauna also vary from region to region. The forests of the regions are classified as the tropical moist deciduous forests, the Himalayan moist temperate forests, the Sub-tropical dry evergreen forests, the dry-alpine shrubs, the Himalayan dry temperate forest; and the Sub-alpine forests<sup>2</sup>. In the high altitude of the region, we see the snow-fox, yak and many other species of snow deer are found here. But in the plains and foothills of the regions, the dense forests of pine, teak,

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<sup>1</sup> *Report on the Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam for the year 1877-78*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Champion, H.C. and Seth, S.K., *A Revised Survey of the Forest Types of India*, Manager of Publication, 1968, Delhi, p. 18.

sal, oak and the varieties of herbs and vegetations could be found. Varieties of species of wild animals are found in the forest areas of the region. The important wild animals to be found in the region are one-horned rhinoceros, Bengal tigers, elephant, clouded leopard, Himalayan bears, black panther, barking deer, buffalo, pigs, monkeys, fruit-bat, wild dogs, antelope, panda, and *sebbe* [*Bos Frontalis*] are found in different parts of the regions<sup>3</sup>. Numerous species of birds like hornbills, babblers, bulbuls, warblers, fly-catchers, parrots, hawks, green pigeons; and pheasants are found. The entire North East India receives the heaviest rainfall in the country. The foothills and the Brahmaputra Valleys like the Dibang, Dihang and Lohit are most exposed to the monsoon clouds and have the largest share of rainfall in the region. The highest precipitation ranges unto 380 Cms. The central part of the region records 200 Cms of rainfall a year. The rain continues from April to September but the heaviest downfall is from June to July.

Geologically, the mountains of North East India are of much later origin than those of the Peninsular India, which originally belonged to the Gondwana Age. The regions situated on the south-east lap of the Himalaya were formed gradually owing to the rise of the bed of the Ocean known as Tethys. It is believed that the birth of human race appeared on the earth concomitantly with the geological transformation resulting to the rise of the trans-Himalayas. Archaeological evidence from this vast and one of the most strategic regions of India is still so meagre that any attempt to trace the course of human history and its movement becomes a difficult undertaking. However, in recent past fossil remains have been noticed in Nagaland, Tripura and Garo Hills. Discovery of Palaeolithic remains from Meghalaya, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh itself have necessitated the reshaping of the earlier notion of lateness of culture of the regions. It also appears likely that Hominids like mammals in the Miocene period, after their origin in Himalayan Siwaliks moved in course of time into the eight sister States of the region, *viz.*, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura as well as Myanmar and China and other parts of South East Asia. Discoveries of a Stone Age sites mainly at Ron gram, Rengchagiri and Selbalgiri in the Garo Hills; and a Neolithic

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<sup>3</sup> Report on the Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam for the year 1877-78, pp. 12-13.

site at Daojali Hading in the North Cachar Hills, and at Barapani in the Khasi Hills in Meghalaya, signifies existence of the earliest human civilization. The finds of a typical example of shoulder Celt [T-shaped] exhibits that there was the beginning of earlier agriculture revolution here in human history. This type of tools found even extended up to Bihar-Orissa border suggesting the probability of movements of peoples from one place to another, from the ancient time, traversing this obscure and torturous paths of pre and proto-history period. We find its vibrating corroboration reflected in various ways. The *Puranas* and *Tantras* refer to Kamarupa, *Bhagadatta*, the ruler of the *Kiratas* having its capital at *Pragjyotispur* [The city of Eastern Astrology]. Kalidasa and Kautilya mentioned this part of the country in their writings. The Vedic literature, the Epics, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Ptolemy and as well as early inscriptions of *Virapurusatatha* appear to have made note of this region. The Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang, also visited Kamarupa in 640 A.D. The gradual influx of Brahmanical system of waving *varnas* penetrated into the Brahmaputra Valley, which shaped the life style of the peoples. The autochthonous-derivate tribes of which the Koch, Chutia, Cachari, etc., are significant who ruled a good number of principalities. Before the fall of Kamatapur, an event occurred at the eastern extremity of the region, which was destined to change the whole course of Brahmaputra Valley's history. This was the invasion of the *Shan* kingdom of Pong of modern Myanmar on this land in 1228 A.D., and their continuity was disturbed only during the last part of eighteenth century [1792], when the British imperial power stepped into this part of the country. The British colonial power completely annexed the whole territory of North East India in August 1842<sup>4</sup> with the issue of Proclamation by the Governor-General-in-Council.

The North East India has a distinct socio-cultural mosaic with variegated assortment of people, which it still retains in its different ethnic identity. The region seems to have been known as abode of the *Nisadas*, *Kiratas*, *Chinas*, etc.<sup>5</sup> These non-Aryan peoples speaking the Austric and Sino-Tibetan languages were sometimes broadly

<sup>4</sup> *Political Proceedings*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1852, No. 171, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> S.K. Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Krti, The Indo-Mongoloid: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 9 [Hereafter abbreviated as KJK].

designated *dasuyus*, who inhabited the eastern frontiers and outlying parts of Bengal apparently including the North East India. Anthropometrics, genetic and linguistic findings of recent years also appear to indicate existence of the speakers of the Austric and Sino-Tibetan languages or Mongoloid and Australoid ethnic elements in the population of these regions. The autochthones that settled in the hill tracts were subsequently identified and differentiated one from the other based on various historical processes of vicissitudes. The means of transport and communication difficulties, to a great extent had contributed to their being in isolation for a number of generations. These acclimatization processes, in course of time, alienated some groups from the bigger ones, while other groups found themselves in affiliated situations with some groups to compose a larger social-identity. Such alignment and alienation of various groups came to bear different ethnic appellations identifying themselves as distinct tribes.

Before using the term 'Tribe' it would be worthwhile if we define the word first. The word tribe is derived from Latin word *TRIBUS* or *TRIBI*; meaning probably related to Latin *Tres/Three*. A tribe is defined by Dr. W.H. Rivers as, "social groups of a simple kind, the members of which speaks a common dialect, have a single government, and act together for such common purposes as warfare."<sup>6</sup>

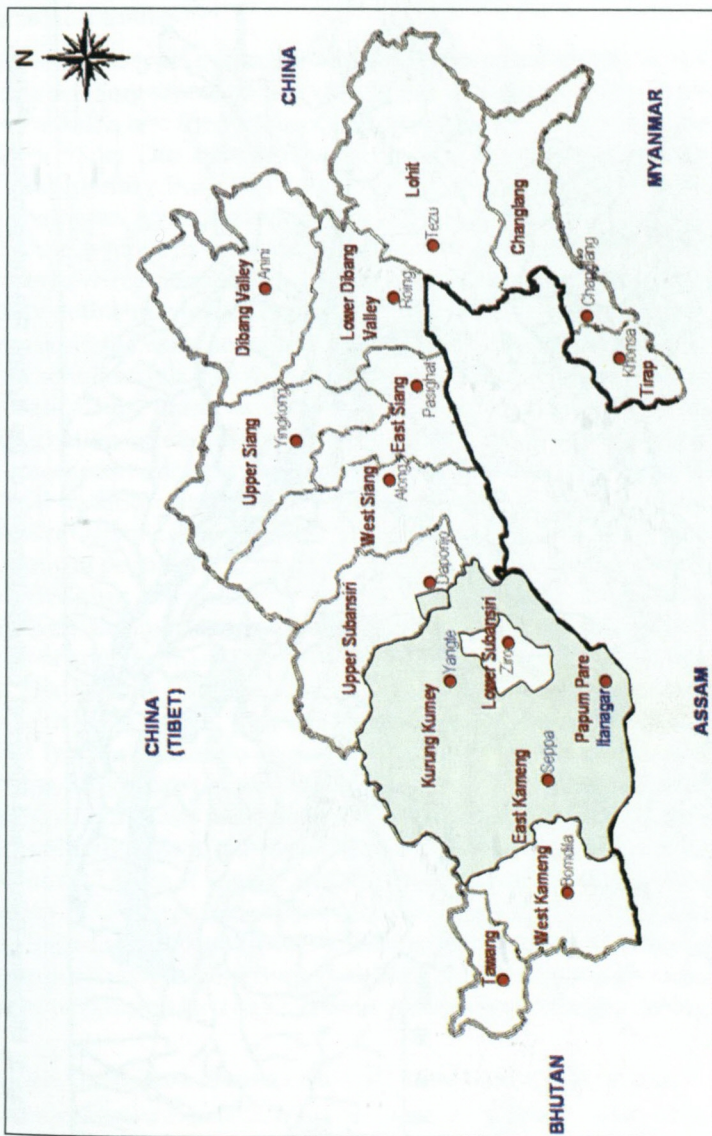
In this definition it is necessary to understand by single government a political unity of a very simple, which may not imply the existence of any obvious mechanism of government, such as, a hereditary monarchy or an elected council, with which we are familiar amongst civilized people. It is true that they are not a permanent crystal line structure in the stage of historical and social development and all the time, due to interaction and adaptation, these groups of people are found to accommodate themselves in different degrees to diversified situations. While the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica Volume, II*; defines the tribe as, "Traditions of common descent and having temporary or permanent political integration above the family level and a shared languages, culture, and ideology. In the ideal model of a tribe, members typically share a tribal name

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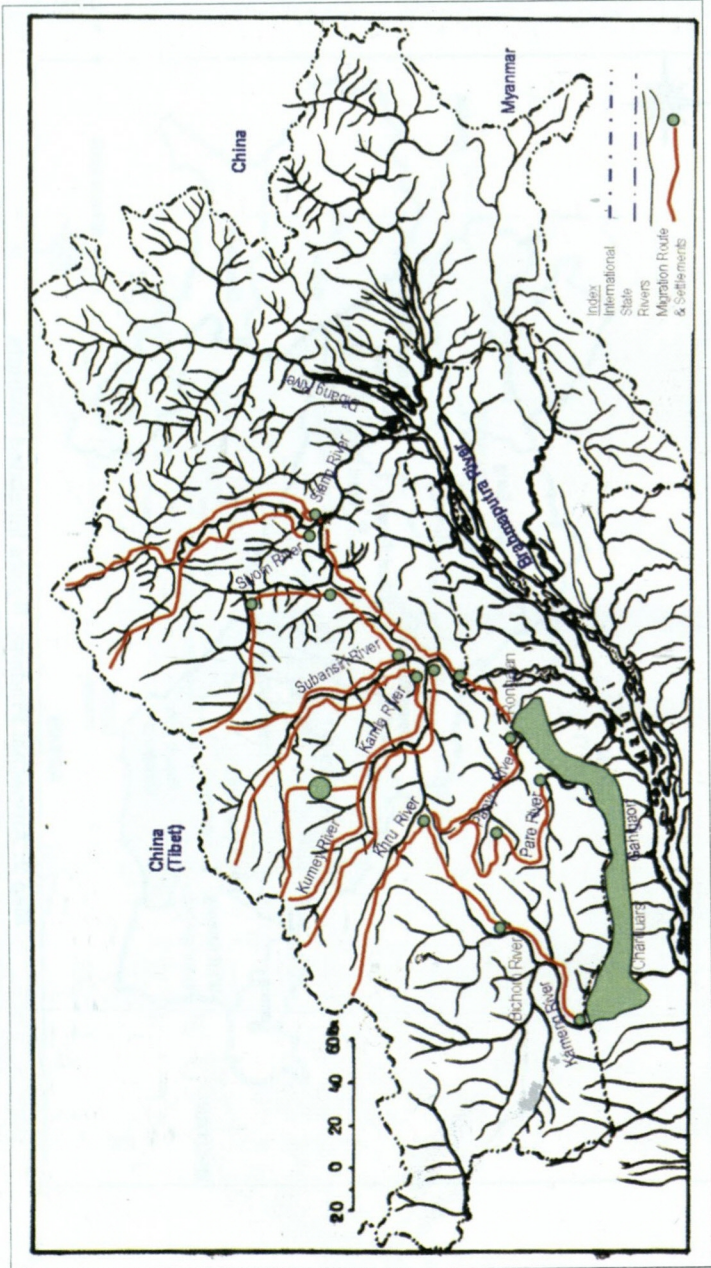
<sup>6</sup> W.H. R.Rivers, *Social Organization*, London, 1924, p. 22. [Hereafter abbreviated as RSO].



Map 1: North East India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam



Map 2: Arunachal Pradesh: Nyishi Inhabited Districts



Map 3: Migration Routes and Places of Early Settlements of the Nyishi: Pre-independence Period

and a contiguous territory; they work together in such joint endeavours a trade, agriculture, house, construction, warfare, and ceremonial activities."<sup>7</sup>

As an ideal type, cultural evolutionists regard the tribe as the form of social organization that developed into a stratified society and eventually, into the system of social organization known as the Primitive State. This tribe generally derives its unity not from a territorial identity but from a sense of extended kinship. As an anthropological term, the word tribe fell out of favour in the later part of the twentieth century. Some anthropologists and social scientists have rejected the term itself, on the ground that it could not precisely define the meaning. While others objected to the negative connotations, the word acquired in the colonial context, particularly, African scholars, felt that the term was pejorative sense as well as inaccurate. Thus, many modern anthropologists replaced it with the designation 'ethnic group', usually defined as a group of people with a common ancestry, and language, or shared cultural and historical tradition, and an identifiable territory. According to the *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, the tribe is a, "group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor."<sup>8</sup> However, United Nations or any forum of UN has not formally defined the word tribe so far. The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defined the tribe in these words, "any aggregate of people united by ties of descent from a common ancestor, community of customs and traditions, adherence to the same leaders, etc."<sup>9</sup> The Constitution of India [SC and ST Lists Modification Order No.414, 1956] nowhere states explicitly how a 'tribe' can be recognized and how it can be distinguished from a 'caste'. In fact, there exists no satisfactory definition of the term tribe anywhere. An East Asia Consultation held in Sagada [Philippine], defined a tribal community as forming a, "group of people generally constituted a homogenous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living

<sup>7</sup> *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol. II.. 15<sup>th</sup> Edn. London, 1993, p. 918.

<sup>8</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, London, 1973, p. 2359.

<sup>9</sup> *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* [The unabridged Edition], New York, 1962, p. 1784.

in a particular geographic area, generally lacking in scientific knowledge and modern technology, and having a social structure based on kinship."<sup>10</sup>

The conventional views about the tribes were that they represented a stage in the evolutionary theory of human social organization. Nevertheless, now faced with environmental crisis, a result of man's relentless quest to conquer nature, the old notion of tribe-peasant continuum is under ruthless strain. An element of permanency is being discovered in tribal social formations. They are no longer looked upon as transitory circumstances. They represent a different principle of organizing individuals into collectivities based on moral relation rather than coercive power, and on expansion of self into surroundings as well as on reciprocity, equality and mutuality. In order to make them eligible to merit and give a social justice the Constitutional benefits from our welfare State, which has been declared after the Independence, these ethnic groups have generally been capsulized as 'Weaker Section' and listed separately as 'Scheduled Tribe'. In this part of India, there are altogether about 153 Scheduled Tribes with distinct identifiable traits and characteristics spread over in different areas of the North East India.

The history of the arrival into India of the various Mongoloid groups speaking dialects of the Tibeto-Burman, and Sino-Tibetan speech-family is not known, nor has all the various languages and dialects in the family have been satisfactorily classified. It would appear that their presence in India was noted by the tenth century B.C., when the *Vedas* were compiled. In all probability these races and peoples crossed and recrossed the present Brahmaputra Valley time and again. Communication routes ran through across its lofty hills to Bhutan, China [Tibet], Myanmar and beyond to the farther lands of South-East Asia. Serving as pathways for movement of peoples by way of expansion and extension<sup>11</sup>, the region is one of the highly picturesque and enchanting parts of our country that attracted several waves of diverse racial or ethnic groups through ages. It has come to stay as the confluence of the most colourful mosaic of multi-linguistic and multi-cultural diversity.

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Fucks, *The Aboriginal Tribes of India*, Delhi, 1973, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> KJK, p. 16.

Arunachal Pradesh, erstwhile known as North East Frontier Agency [NEFA], the land of the rising Sun, is the home of a large number of colourful tribes. These tribes speak slightly different tongues and have socio-cultural patterns of their own, though collectively they share the common Indian heritage of a highland population. The territory comprised of 16 districts, which are from West to East; and are named after the principal rivers of this hilly terrain. The State is largely divided into three important cultural zones *viz.*, the Western zone, the Central zone and the Eastern zone. *Mahayana Sect* of Buddhism populates the Western zone while the major population of the Central zone is believer of *Donyi-Poloism* [Indigenous Faith]. The Eastern zone is largely dominated by the *Hinayana Sect* of Buddhism and also sizeable number of indigenous worshippers [*Like Rang Frah*, etc.]. There are Tawang Monpas [*Brahmi Monpas*] in Tawang district. The Sherdukpen, the Khowas [*Buguns*], the Miji, the Hrusso [*Aka*], the Monpas and Kalaktang Monpas live in the West Kameng district. In East Kameng district, the Nyishi, the Sulung [*Puroik*] and Bangro are inhabited. The Nyishi occupied the whole of the Papum Pare district. In Lower Subansiri district, the Nyishi and the Apatani live there. The whole of Kurung Kumey district is also completely concentrated by the Nyishi population. In Upper Subansiri district, besides, the Nyishi the Tagin live. In East Siang district, the Minyong, the Padam, the Boris, the Passi, the Panggis, the Karko, the Tangam, etc., are the dwellers. In West Siang district, the Galo are the largest community, besides, the Boker, the Ramos, and the Palibo live here. The Memba and the Khamba live in Upper Siang district. In Changlang district, the Tangsa, the Moshang, the Longphi, the Kimchin, the Morang, the Tekhat, the Moglung, etc., live along with a small group of the Yangkuk and Longchang. In Tirap district, the Nocte, the Wancho and other minor tribes are inhabited. The Idu-Mishmi, the Digaru, etc., are inhabitants of the Dibang Valley, while the Adi [*Padam*], the Idu-Mishmi live in Lower Dibang Valley district. The Khampti, the Singpho, the Adi, the Deori, and the Idu-Mishmi inhabit Lohit district; and in Anjaw district, the tribes like, the Meyor, Miju-Mishmi, and Digaru Mishmi are inhabited.

The North East India is perhaps unique, historically, in that its twenty first century existence is still fashioned on rich cultural and traditional heritage laid down from generations to generations. Yet it has by no means been able to maintain its rigid old customs, and

social mores to its national equilibrium and coherence based on an admirable change and continuity. The people of this region, particularly aborigine tribes have their own languages, dialects, religions, customs, dresses, manners, ornaments and traditions; and together they contribute to the diverse culture and multi-religions in the region in particular and India as a whole. It has brought about not only the need for rethinking on ideology of State and polity formation or change, but also triggered off cultural and social structural movements with the traditional and ethnic reckoning by societies. North East India occupies a prominent place in this context. Besides, the twenty first century World is witnessing the revolution of technologies of information, such as, computers, satellites, mass media and telecommunications, which have been playing a crucial role in the process of globalisation. The social effect of new technology is both instrumental and symbolic-intrinsic. At the instrumental level, it contributes to differentiation of occupations, roles, and values which form part of a uniform global culture and sub-culture system. Enigmatically, the march of global society, culture carrier amongst its legions, the forces that reinforce small identities for instance, ethnicity, sub-nationalism and cultural and religious fundamentalism. Despite all its benevolent consequences, the expansion of the geo-political domain does not resolve the problems of social, cultural and political alienation, conflicts due to ethnicity, and minorityism. Yet, given the situation of the contemporary technological revolution the march of these global forces is inevitable. Each society, including our own regions and our people have to come to terms with its pace of development. The peoples of these regions could possibly do it in a meaningful and satisfactory manner if we evaluate these problems with a comparative ethno-historical understanding of peoples themselves, and also societies of pre and post Independence phase of development of the regions.

## **The Nyishi Tribe**

The Nyishi constitutes one of the principal aborigine tribes of North East India inhabiting in East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, and Upper Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh and some parts of North Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of Assam. The tribe known for its prowess and sturdy built up, independence loving by nature and temperament, simple, but industrious and straightforward, since the days of the

*Varman* [1-650 A.D.], the *Salastambha* [670-910 A.D.], the *Brahmapala* [990-1206 A.D.] and the *Ahom* rulers [1228-1826 A.D.], and has played a significant role by way of contributing towards the shaping of history and culture of the entire North East India in particular and country as whole. Attempts have been made in this section to introduce the research topic and hypotheses, which have manifested by extensive fieldwork and through in-depth study of data available in various archives, libraries and museums of the country. The Nyishi inhabiting region extending from the Eastern limits of Sub-Himalaya to the portion of Southern face of great Himalaya. The study region is situated in between 26° 55' North and 28° 21' North latitudes and 92° 36' East and 94° 21' East longitudes. It covers an area of approximately 19,519 Square kilometres. The total population of the areas comes to 2,76,622. The Circle-wise area and the distribution of the Nyishi population of Arunachal Pradesh are shown in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1: Circle-Wise Areas and Total Population and Density**

Sl.No.	Circle	Density		
		Area (in km <sup>2</sup> )	Total Population	Density/km <sup>2</sup>
1.	Seijosa	504.62	5,194	10
2.	Pakkhe-Kessang	1538.38	5,595	4
3.	Seppa	491.35	24,245	49
4.	Richukrong	720.65	2,317	3
5.	Pipu Dipu	376.70	3,816	10
6.	Bameng	1071.15	4,583	4
7.	Khenewa	600.25	2,728	5
8.	Lada	672.70	1,930	3
9.	Sawa	130.74	2,476	19
10.	Chayangtajo	315.46	4,181	13
11.	Kimin	407.77	6,150	15
12.	Doimukh	167.91	9,964	59
13.	Balijan	819.53	11,572	14
14.	Naharlagun	199.88	39,672	196
15.	Itanagar	175.91	39,121	225
16.	Toru	205.54	2,856	14

Contd...

Table 1.1—Contd...

Sl.No.	Circle	Density		
		Area (in km <sup>2</sup> )	Total Population	Density/km <sup>2</sup>
17.	Sagalee	590.93	6,543	11
18.	Leporiang	245.91	2107	9
19.	Mengio	616.62	3,840	6
20.	Ziro	790.40	24,608	31
21.	Yachuli	625.36	13,895	22
22.	Pistana	191.44	5,785	30
23.	Palin	329.45	5,757	17
24.	Yangte	153.75	1,738	11
25.	Sangram	157.81	5,745	35
26.	Nyapin	658.69	6,510	10
27.	Koloriang	460.05	4,797	10
28.	Chambang	238.55	4,498	19
29.	Sarli	1308.15	1,970	2
30.	Parsi-Parlo	301.77	2,891	10
31.	Damin	1824.13	2,784	2
32.	Loding-Koling	825.02	2,206	3
33.	Tali	487.06	3,500	7
34.	Kamporijo	430.73	6,399	15
35.	Dolumukh	367.77	1,080	3
36.	Raga	516.87	3,565	7
Total Area of study		19,519	2,76,622	14

Source: As per Census of India 1991 and 2001.<sup>12</sup>

Out of this four districts total population of 2,76,622, the males are 1,42,049 while females are 1,34,573. Their entire habitat region is comprised of hilly and mountainous tracts, low-lying foothills; and rugged irregular topography, excepting small pockets of plains confining towards Sub-Himalayan foothills. The region is adjacent

<sup>12</sup> As per Census of India 1991 and 2001. [Data on the Nyishi inhabited circle of Upper Subansiri is not available and table shows only the population of 36 Circles of four districts of Arunachal Pradesh].

to the plains of the North bank of Brahmaputra river. The major part of the area fall under the Nyishi Hills with the highest elevation being 6387 metres above the Sea level. The hilly region is characterized with narrow valleys, deep gorges, steep slopes and zigzag pattern of numerous creeks.

Comprising an area of approximately 19,519 Square kilometres in the Eastern Himalayan range, the Nyishi Hills is full of dense forests, high mountains, ridges; and deep valleys with torrential rivers and streams, separating the inhabitants from one another living in small villages. It is contoured by West Kameng district in the west, China [Tibet] in the north and north-east, Upper Subansiri in the east and West Siang in the south-east and the State of Assam in the south. Its topography, flora and fauna offer wide variety. We come across dump rain forest, which is characterized as tropical evergreen forest, tropical semi-evergreen forests, sub-tropical forests, pine forest, temperate forest; and alpine forests, sub-tropical zone up to about 6300 metres with numerous orchids and various vegetations. *Khokan*, *simul*, *hillock*, *makahi*, and *bola* trees are abundant in the Nyishi Hills. Various kinds of bamboos grow up to even a higher altitude where deciduous and mixed deciduous forests have characterized *viz.*, spruce [*picea*], pine [*pinus*], chestnut [*castanea sativa*], and oak [*quercus*].<sup>13</sup> The fauna in the study region offers luxuriantly variety of carnivores and herbivores animals [*mammals*] like Tiger [*panthera tigris*], leopard [*panthera pardus*], the jungle cat [*felis chaus*], Indian elephant [*elephas maximus*], barking deer [*muntiacus-muntjack*], jackal [*canis aureus*], Indian fox [*vulpes bebgalensis*], palm civet [*paguma larvata*], etc. The semi-domesticated and domesticated mammals are *sebbe* [*bos frontalis*], pariah dog [*canis familiaris*], pig [*sus domesticus*], buffalo [*bubalus bubulis*], goat [*capra hircus*]. Numerous aesthetic and important species of birds like great myna [*acridotheres grandis*], great hornbill [*buceros beconis*],<sup>14</sup> baya weaver [*ploceus phillipinus*], woodpecker [*picus canus*], common kingfisher [*alcedo atthis*], turtle-dove [*streptopelia orientalis*], green pigeon [*treron curvirostra*], and black eagle [*ictinactis malayensis*], etc.,

<sup>13</sup> H.H. Godwin-Austin, *Notes on the Geology of the Datta Hills*, JRASB-1875-XLIV; [2], pp. 37-38.

<sup>14</sup> S.R. Tickell, *Description of a New Species of Hornbill*, JRASB, 1855-XXIV, p. 285.

are found.<sup>15</sup> 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 various kinds are abundant in the Nyishi Hills.

The climate throughout the year is largely influenced by the nature of its terrain varying with the topographical divisions and elevation. All the Nyishi inhabited districts, as a whole, are mountainous terrain intersected by valleys and gorges through which flow innumerable streams and rivers. The winter prevails from December to February. This is followed by the pre-monsoon season concomitant with thunderstorms till May. The foothills, low-lying region received extremely heavy rainfall, particularly during the monsoon period. Consequently, the climate at lower elevation is highly humid. The summer is comparatively hot and the high humidity makes it sultry, aggravating in places, which are denuded of vegetation. During the winter, the lower regions of the hills experience moderate cold, while higher elevation or interior areas receive severe cold. The higher elevation is not as hot as it is in the foothill regions.

Deep influence of this variant ecology is vibrant in the life and culture of the Nyishi. The houses are generally built on raised platforms and stilts to avoid dampening effect of the ground.<sup>16</sup> The roofs are also constructed so as to protect the inmates from rains and hailstorms. The deep gorges and valleys with torrential creeks dissecting the entire region into undulating hilly terrains left only small areas in hill-tops or valleys for the inhabitants to settle and did not allow them opportunity to come together in massive scale comparable to the plains of other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Smaller groups of people thus resided in their villages and developed characteristic ways of life slightly vary from one district to another. The recent development of education, modern amenities and access to scientific knowledge has started obviating these barriers of nature and generating a spirit of large-scale interaction and integration amongst the Nyishi, and its counterparts of the country. The region

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<sup>15</sup> H.H. Godwin-Austin, *Supra*, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick J. Simoons and Elizabeth S. Simoons. *A Ceremonial Ox of India: The Mithan in Nature, Culture, and History*. London: 1968. pp 47-48, and U.G. Bower. *The Hidden Land*, London, 1953, p. 49.

is drained by flow of large number of rivers namely; Kameng, Dising-Passo, Papum, Pachin, Pare, Panyor, Kurung and Kumei, which run from the north to south. The Kameng river basin covers the East Kameng district. The Papum, Pachin and Pare rivers offer basins for the Papum Pare district, while Kurung and Kumei rivers provides plain basin for the Kurung Kumei and Lower Subansiri districts. The hills have the different passes across its foothills, which served as routes of communication and contact with the plains. British records mentioned nine [9] passes in Darrang and *Charduars*, and six [6] passes in Lakhimpur districts<sup>17</sup> of modern Assam. These definitely relate to passes through plains while some of the other routes could also run across its hills. A considerable volume of trade was carried on during the *Ahom* and the British periods between the Nyishi and plains people through these passes [*Duars*].

The people belong to a large number of tribal groups, many of the clans divisions gradually emerging with greater knowledge about them. Thus an evolution of their different clan's genealogy may be traced from the earliest time. The empirical study of such people would no doubt open up a new vista leading to the store-house of knowledge for the social scientists, anthropologists and sociologists. Many aspects of life of the Nyishi, which could not be easily uncovered or appreciated, with a superficial knowledge of their social system would aptly have misled earlier researchers and outsiders. In-depth study of their ethnohistorical and cultural characteristic would not only enrich knowledge but also help the people concerned to understand them in a better way. The region under study is inhabited by near about 155 clans of same ancestry. They provide a uni-culture and similarities of social structure that reflect clan-relationship. Over the passage of time, all these clans may have moved in groups in this region before they were separated due to more and more demarcation of the clan-based boundaries generally after their inter-clan feuds.<sup>18</sup> The downfall of the *Ahom's* power in the Brahmaputra Valley in the first half of the nineteenth century also led to the British imperialist in India to survey the areas

<sup>17</sup> A. Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India*, 1989 [Reprinted] from *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hills Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884. p. 27 [Hereafter abbreviated as AM].

<sup>18</sup> Frederick J. Simoons and Elizabeth S. Simoons, *op.cit.* p. 52. and U.G. Bower, *op. cit.* p. 48.

properly and organized the boundaries with clear definition leading to the present position. Similarly was the significance of the history of the Nyishi in the North East India, especially after the British annexation of the Lower portion of Assam [*i.e.*, Kamarupa, Nogaon, and Darrang district of present Assam] under the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Till the Mohammedan invasions of the region, the Nyishi had hardly attracted the attention of the outside of the North East India. The notice of the tribe was drawn when Muhammad Kazim, the then Court Chronicler of the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, informed of the prevalent of the Nyishi in the north bank of the Brahmaputra and Kazim writes that, "The Dafla [*Nyishi*] are entirely independent of the Assam Raja and plunder the country contiguous to their mountains."<sup>19</sup>

Since then there was passing references to this tribe from the outside world other than the *Ahom* chronicle-records in the Valley. It was mostly unknown region to the British officials of the hills till 1792. That year Captain Welsh's report of the region drew the attention of the British authorities. This report spoke of the hill regions of the Sub-Himalayan as being a wide tract of hills and jungles, inhabited by uncivilized and unconquered peoples. No great native power ever seems to have thought these tracts worth conquering. It has been left as rugged hills of the earth to wild beasts and unknown tribes.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is to be observed that very little was known about the Nyishi till the British officials or administrators brought them to the lime light by way of submitting reports and piling tour diaries of the Nyishi presence and socio-political and economics activities in this part of the country. This study is expected to enhance a great deal of new knowledge of social, cultural, religious and political practices and help in understanding of an ethnohistorical significance of the life of the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh.

The past history of the Nyishi is mainly enclosed and only partially disclosed. History of the Tribe is, therefore, partly objective or 'real' and largely a matter of construction. The scope and objective of this work is to study the ethnohistorical aspects of the Nyishi tribe right from the earliest time up to the period of Independence of

<sup>19</sup> *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. II, 1849, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> *A Full Account of Captain Welsh's Expedition*, Published by the Foreign Dept., 1841, p. 80.

India [1947]. The attempted unity of this study lies in its scope and objective. We have in India many scholarly works written by Indian on different aspects of the Nyishi history and culture. Right from the pre-Christian era of our own time, Nyishi Hill has drawn the attention of various countries of Asia and Europe. Some of these writings are objective and informative and many others are based on insufficient information and hearsay, and therefore not quite reliable, but they have their own value. Quality and view-points keep on changing not only because of the adequacy and inadequacy of material evidence but also and perhaps more so, because of the bias and prejudices, religious and political conviction of the writers. Peoples of other parts of the country know very little of this enchanting Tribe. Difficulties of communication and distance from the other parts of the country together with the nature of its terrain have kept the Nyishi largely isolated from the rest of the country and hindered progress of historical and scientific investigation. Yet the Nyishi Hill did not remain in complete obscurity and with the passage of time it has been gradually coming into the limelight. Another impediment in respect of the writing of the early history of Nyishi lies in the lack of literary tradition as in case of most of the inhabitants of the hills. Besides, there is no ready made writing that may be followed in constructing a connected history of the Nyishi.

The ethnological history of the Nyishi of earliest period can be traced only in vague outlines due to paucity of materials at our disposal. This may be partly due to lack of knowledge about the Tribe on the part of the early writers. When the term 'ethnohistorian' was first used, we do not know. But it has analogies- of course, with 'ethnographers' and 'ethnobotanists' both of which have now found places in dictionary. But 'ethnohistory' has not as yet appeared in either of the two dictionaries consulted [*the Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* and *the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, unabridged edition*]. Meanwhile Erminie W. Voegelin has attempted a working definition of ethnohistory as: "The study of identities, locations, contacts, movements, numbers, and cultural activities of primitive peoples from the earliest written records concerning them, onward in point of time."<sup>21</sup> To attempt an ethnohistory of the Nyishi would be virtually to attempt a difficulty

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<sup>21</sup> E.W. Voegelin, 'An Ethnohistorians View Point' in *JSTOR, Ethnohistory*, Vol 1. No. 2. [November, 1954] p. 168.

study, because of the paucity of the historical records for this Tribe. Ethnohistory, as its name implies, involves at least two academic disciplines: 'ethnology and history'.<sup>22</sup> The nature of ethnohistory has been broadened and refined by a variety of practitioners<sup>23</sup> in the contemporary period. Historians and anthropologists now have no difficulty agreeing that ethnohistory is essentially: "the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of change in a culture defined by ethnological concepts and categories."<sup>24</sup> Whether we consider ethnohistory a form of cultural history or a sub-discipline of cultural anthropology, we can accept that it represents a common-law marriage of history and ethnology, whose purpose is to produce scholarly offspring who bear the "diachronic dimension of history and the synchronic sensitivity of ethnology."<sup>25</sup> This study seeks to construct the early-unwritten oral historical accounts into a history proper by using critical evaluation of the *hard materials* [archaeology and historical documents] and *soft materials* [oral tradition and ethnology] sources. In this study field work is not only possible, it was necessary. The study began with a concern about ethnographical outline, social organisations and traditional political institution which was an insufficient treatment accorded by earlier writers.

It is in this background, the author undertook the research on the present theme, which aims at analysing the oral tradition accounts, myths and legends, literature, which is corroborated and evaluated by archival and linguistically findings about the origin and movements of the Nyishi, and also by tracing their socio-political institutions. The Tribe who has got rich cultural heritage with distinct life-style, culture, belief and traditions has got catchy treatment from the earlier researchers and scholars hitherto. From a non-sedentary shifting agriculture, they have been forced to adopt

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 170

<sup>23</sup> D.A. Baerreis, 'The Ethnohistory Approach and Archaeology', in *JSTOR, Ethnohistory*, Vol. 8 No. 49 [1961], p. 77. Richard, M Dorsen, 'Ethnohistory and Ethnic Folklore: An Ethnohistorians's View Point', Vol. 8, [1961], p. 30, and Nancy, L. Questreich, *Ethnohistory: An Ethnological Point of View*, in *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 3, [1961], p.92, and *et al.*

<sup>24</sup> Axtell James, *Ethnohistory: An Historian's View Point*, *JSTOR, Ethnohistory*, Vol. 26, No.1, [Winter 1979], p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

to an entirely new way of sedan try life. Their social organisations, which developed and crystallized over centuries, had adapted itself to a particular environment and ecology, which had also shaped their traditional social, legal and economic structure. These hills had been highly coveted because of their unique geographical location, rich flora and fauna, lying in between the organised State system from all sides. Since the early days, the *Varman*, *Chutia*, *Koch* and *Ahom* rulers had set their eyes on the area and tried either to conquer it or to bring it under their sphere of influence. The British who had become master of the neighbouring province of Bengal were ultimately compelled to interfere in the affairs of Assam in their colonial pursuit and this led eventually to their interference in the Nyishi Hills too. The British adopted various *Ahom* styles of administration and relations with neighbouring States and hill tribes, such as *posa*, as the legacy in the initial phase and also improvised them, and innovated some new methods and techniques for their calculated intervention in the various affairs of the Nyishi. These incursions from the alien power were bound to arouse resentment and protest on the part of the Tribe. To grapple with the hostile nature of the tribe's problems and to ensure the colonial interest of the empire, the British tried to persuade them to accept the commute of *posa* into annual cash payment.

So a vigorous scientific interpretation and a critical objective analysis of these forces is a need of the time, which may only give an insight into the historical situation, and can do justice to fill up the gap left by earlier scholars and researchers who have treated the subject so far. The present work would greatly help in understanding the Nyishi origin and movements, divisions of clans, and also varied policies and measures adopted by the British towards the Tribe and eventual establishment of viable relationship. The study of Nyishi society in its contemporary situation is again significant. It stresses the historical importance of ethno-cultural flexibility as an adaptive strategy of the Tribe. The objective of the present study lies in the fact that in the light of the research work and subsequent findings, the gap in the historical and ethnographical settings of the Nyishi is identified, and ethnohistorical study is constructed.

There has been a bulk of researches on the different ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh and North East India during the last few decades. But the studies available on the Nyishi community is

still few and scanty. No scientific study has been made on the Nyishi till now. The available vast literature of social sciences, anthropology and ethnology still lacks the information related to the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh.

Since the Nyishi was a semi-migratory community in the early days. To study the traditional political institution, social organisation and traditional economic base of the tribe, we have no early writing on these aspects. It is only from the beginning of the thirteenth century we have the reference on the Nyishi particularly in *Buranjis*. Some of these *Buranjis* referred the passing-intercourse of Tribe with the plains people. The Court Chroniclers, who had no intimate knowledge about the Nyishi, mainly recorded *Buranjis*. Sometime these records were based on the reports given by military officials and *Katakis* who generally had contact with the Tribe on certain occasions. Therefore, we find sometime, places and individual names are inaccurately and wrongly recorded in *Buranjis*. However, these records focus mainly on the political and administrative problem with the Nyishi, and also of their way of living. In these records we also find that military expedition, raid and counter-raids, occurred between the *Ahom* and the Nyishi, are elaborately described. Up till now as the earliest written records on the Nyishi, these *Buranjis* definitely provide abundant information regarding the general political, economic and social life of the Tribe.

In the latter medieval period, particularly during the reign of the Mughal Monarchs in Indian sub-continent, we find some passing remarks on the Tribe by the Court Chroniclers, who generally accompanied their invading leaders to Assam. Most prominent among these chroniclers are Shyhabuddin Talish who wrote about the Nyishi independent way of life in his work, *Fathiiyya-I-Ibriya*, while Mohammed Kazim also mentioned about the Nyishi in his expedition report. Although their writings are very catchy and sceptical, yet these provide significant information about the general socio-political scenario of the period in the hills and the plains. After this passing description of the Nyishi by these Mughal Court Chroniclers, we have some brief accounts about the Nyishi in the reports of Captain Thomas Welsh's *Assam Expedition of 1792-93 A.D.* During the reign of king *Gaurinath Singha* [1780-1795 A.D.] a powerful *Moamaria* rebellion broke out in the Brahmaputra Valley and *Gaurinath Singha* appealed for help to Lord Cornwallis, the then

Governor-General of Bengal. Accordingly, in September 29, 1792 Assam expedition under the command of Captain Welsh was despatched. In 1794 Welsh reported the entire Assam expedition in which brief report on the affairs of the Nyishi was also given. This report informs mainly about the nature of political relation that existed between the *Ahom* rulers and the Nyishi and has not contained any other aspect.

John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam* [1837] gives a brief description about *posa* collected by the Nyishi from the plains, which is one of the earliest reports given by the colonial administration after the Treaty of Yandaboo [February 24, 1826]. Under the colonial administrators' writings on the Nyishi, William Robinson's work *A Descriptive Accounts of Assam* [1841] and *Notes on the Dophlas and the Peculiarities of Their Language* [JASB, Vol. XX, 1851] are considered as important and valuable writings on the Nyishi. Robinson carried out some limited fieldwork among the Nyishi of erstwhile Balipara Frontier Tract [the present day Sonitpur District of Assam]. The study informs us about the race, linguistic pattern and general life style of the people. John Butler's *A Sketch of Assam with Some Accounts of the Hill Tribes* [London, 1847] contains some description on the Nyishi characteristic features and racial problem. In a similar way, B.H. Hodgson noted the Nyishi as the Mongoloid group in his article on the *Aborigines of North-East India* [JASB, 1847-XVIII] and *Aborigines of the North-East Frontier* [JASB, 1850, XIX]. E.T. Dalton's work *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* [Calcutta, 1872] has highlighted the physiography, religion, polyandry system, customs, arts and extent of the areas of the Nyishi. However, this work is largely based on the sources of William Robinson's reports. Brigadier General Stafford's report on the Nyishi, who commanded the *Nyishi Military Expedition of 1874-75*, and *Narrative Report* of Lt. H.J. Harman In-Charge of *Nyishi Military Expedition Survey* [Calcutta, 1876] have extensively described about the Tribe's secluded social life and the details information regarding the raids and trouble caused towards the British subjects. It is in this report it was noted about the *posa* that the Nyishi levied this from the plains since the days of the *Ahom* as the ownership right of the land below them. Reliable information on geology, flora and fauna found in the Nyishi Hills is by Major H.H. Godwin Austin [Deputy Superintendent of Topographical Survey of India who accompanied General Stafford]. The Report, *Notes on the Geology part of the Dafla [Nyishi] Hills, Assam* [JASB, 1875,

XLIV.No.2] discussed in detail about the rich flora and fauna of the Nyishi country. W.W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Assam*, [London, 1879] presented a statistical account on the population of Nyishi living in the district of Darrang and also their agricultural and economic practices. The entire study has been centred on the British controlled area and did not study beyond the Inner Line boundary. The next important report on the demographical and physical settlement of the Nyishi is E. Stack's, *Miris, Daphlas and Abors, as reported on the Census of India 1881* [Calcutta, 1883].

Amongst the colonial writer-administrators who wrote extensively and elaborately about the Nyishi is Alexander Mackenzie. Mackenzie in his pioneering work, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* [Calcutta, 1884] described the Nyishi political and economic relation established with the then *Ahom* monarchs and fall-out of such relations in possible chronological order. His study seems to have recorded events with utmost care with reference to wider policy adopted towards the Nyishi at various stages. The policies he has discussed are generally administrative and measures of political management. Obviously what Mackenzie has successfully projected in his work is a testimony of the policy and exposition of 'white-man's burden' in the North East India. But because of conspicuous absence of an objective and analytical study on the Nyishi, his work has a limitation and appears to be inadequate approach to the study of an ethnohistory proper. Another useful work on the Nyishi is by L.A.Waddell. His work, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley* [London, 1937] has depicted the meaning and various nomenclature of the Nyishi, which was used by the plains people. In 1896, G.W.Dun in his *Preliminary Notes on the Daphlas* [Simla, 1896] informed about the physical and racial information of the Nyishi. While R.C. Hamilton has made a study of the Nyishi grammar and language. His work, *An Outline Grammar of the Dafla Language as Spoken by the Tribes Immediately South of the Apa Tanang Country* [Shillong, 1900] is the first kind of its study which deals with syntax, vocabulary and orthography of the Nyishi.

Sir Edward Gait's book *A History of Assam* [1905] has still been considered a first comprehensive study done on the Brahmaputra Valley under the colonial power. In this study we find the detail historical and political background, origin and growth of the *Ahom*

monarchy and also about the hill tribes. In this work, the Nyishi socio-economic and political relations with the *Ahom* rulers find sporadic references. George, D.S. Dunbar in his memoirs, *Abors and Galongs: Notes on Certain Hill Tribes of the Indo-Tibetan Border* [*Memoirs of A.S.B. Vol.V. 1913-17*] made references of the Nyishi origin and racial affinities with other ethnic groups of the north bank of the Brahmaputra. G. Loyd and J.H. Hutton's *Report on the Census of India 1921* [Shillong, 1923] gives a brief reference of the Nyishi demographic, physical features and racial origin. While P.C. Bose's article *Head-dress of the Hill-Tribes of Assam* [*JASB, 1929, XXV, Article No.2 and paper read before the Anthropological Section of the 15<sup>th</sup> Indian Science Congress, 1928*] gives a detail accounts of the Nyishi *podum* [headgear] and its significance in the tribal socio-political life. L.W. Shakespear, in his work, *History of the Assam Rifles* [Delhi, 1929] made some references on certain historical events and subsequent measures taken against the Nyishi by the British authorities. N.L. Bor's *The Daflas and Their Oaths* [*JASB, Vol.II. Article No.4, 1936*] discussed at length the procedures and methods of the Nyishi ordeal and oath system. His article, *Yano Dafla Grammar and Vocabulary* [*JASB, Vol.IV. Article No.9, 1938*] also described about the syntax, orthography and sentence-building of the Nyishi language. Francis Hamilton's *An Account of Assam* [1940] referred about the unruly and intractable behaviours of the Nyishi. Sir Robert Reid's book *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam From 1883-1941* [Shillong, 1942] speaks about the curious facts that the recipients of *posa* among the Nyishi were not always men of influence, but even servants [*nyera*] in some cases received *posa*. This study has filled up an important gap for, the book continues from where Alexander Mackenzie left off, *i.e.*, the year 1884, and thus brings us right to the modern period of the early forties of this century.

During the period of Independence and post-Independence, a number of studies have been brought out in the form of *monographs, tour diaries, memoirs, reports, etc.*, mostly by the administrators, military officials and ethnographers. Prominent among them are C.V.F. Haimendorf, a Social Anthropologist and his work *Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of the Subansiri Region* [Shillong, 1947] extensively discussed about the ethnographic outline, complex, cultural pattern and clan system of the Nyishi. His later works, *The Apa Tanis and Their Neighbours* [London, 1962] and *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh-Anthropological Research in North-East India* [New Delhi, 1982]

is comprehensive projects of anthropological research among Indian tribal populations. In these books he deals at length with social, customary and economic change among the Nyishi of India's North East Frontier borderlands. S.K.Chatterjee's work *Kirata-Jana-Krti* deals with the study of racial origin and movements of the different ethnic groups of North East India, in which he described about the racial affinity and migration of the Nyishi based on available archaeological and philological sources. U.G.Bower's study, *The Hidden Land* [London, 1953] narrated vividly the village and house pattern of the Nyishi. However, this study is more or less a thoroughly exploratory and survey work to have the urgently needed information on the frontier territories and the tribes.

After the Independence, the most important and reliable works on the Nyishi are done by a few social anthropologists and ethnographers-cum-administrators. These studies include Verrier Elwin's, *A Philosophy For NEFA* [New Delhi, 1957] which is one of the valuable and helpful books to understand the tribal world, councils, jurisprudence, the practice of shifting cultivation, the development of arts and crafts, the adaptation of local architectural designs, etc.<sup>26</sup> Other two works of Elwin are *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* [Shillong, 1958] and *Democracy in NEFA* [Shillong, 1965], first of which is of some unique interests, as this throws a great deal of light on the thought and poetic imagination of the tribes about whom little until then had been written. While the second study is a source book about the political and judicial institutions of the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency. In all these studies the Nyishi historical events, traditional political institutional, social organisations and economic bases are discussed in some details. These books, however, have some obvious limitation and shortcoming as they lack scientific interpretation and analysis. P.D.Saikia has prepared a project, *Studies in Dafla Social and Religious Life* [Gauhati, 1964] wherein the religious condition of the Nyishi has been narrated in a general approach. B.K.Shukla's study, *The Daflas of the Subansiri Region* [Shillong, 1959] deals with some comprehensiveness about the social, political and cultural life of the Nyishi. But the area of this work is limited to Lower Subansiri district only. The rest of the Nyishi-inhabited regions are nowhere in the picture. Moreover, the work of Shukla with heavy slant towards

<sup>26</sup> Verrier Elwin. *A Philosophy For NEFA*, New Delhi, 1957, p. vii.

depending on interpreter on the subject is somewhat of uneven quality. L. N. Chakravarty's *Glimpses of the Early History of Arunachal* [Shillong, 1973], H. K. Barpujari's three Volumes of study, *Problem of the Hill-Tribes: North-East Frontier* [Guahati, 1981], and J. N. Chowdhury's *Arunachal Panorama* [Shillong, 1982]; and *The Tribal Culture and History of Arunachal Pradesh* [Delhi, 1990] deal with the causes and consequences in shaping the British policies and different measures adopted towards the Nyishi of North East India at some length; but all these studies are very brief and have failed to see the facts in unified historical perspective. Only book, which deserves some attention, is Lakshmi Devi's *Ahom-Tribal Relations* [Gauhati, 1968]. This study is exclusively based on secondary sources and deals with extensive narration of the Ahom rulers' conciliatory policy adopted with the Nyishi with a sole objective to protect their inhabitants along the foothill-plains from the Nyishi raids. Sachin Roy's *Aspects of Padam and Minyong Culture* [Shillong, 1966] has discussed about the culture and political system of the Nyishi but as a general approach.

Besides, the above studies, we have also some other important work like M. L. Bose's *British Policy in North-East Frontier Agency* [Guahati, 1979], which presents a detail historical account of the Nyishi with different events that took place during the British period in a comprehensive way. But this study has been confined only to the Anglo-Nyishi relations and no other aspects are being discussed. P. T. Nair's work *Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh* [Gauhati, 1985] and Subid Chatterjee's book *A Comprehensive History of Arunachal Pradesh* [Calcutta, 1991] describes the society, marriage system and culture of the Nyishi. The traditional life styles and subsistence economic practices in some details have also been studied.

Thus, the historiographical survey of the literature shows that a considerable number of studies have been done on the Tribe. Some of these studies generate basic data pertaining to the historical events and ethnographic sketch of the Nyishi. While others analysed the social, cultural, economic and political aspects, some others have assessed the impact of the various factors of planned change. All these studies, irrespective of nature, seem to have devoid of cross-examination, critical evaluation and an empirical study based on first-hand data. They followed comfortably the same tradition and formulations and miss the significant aspect, that they did not study

the close understanding about the Nyishi situation. In the process, these works somehow try to justify the misnomer nomenclature being used on the Tribe as an ultimate accounts and facts. So there is a much-felt need of further research in the subject by scholars to correct the erroneously used terminology and rectify the wrongly recorded account on the Tribe for clear understanding and comprehensive knowledge about the Nyishi of North East India.

The present study is scientific by nature. The research intends to represent the first attempt at a scientific handling of all available primary and secondary sources. Hence, a systematic and planned procedure is followed for undertaking this research work. All categories of primary and secondary sources on the theme are traced out which are hitherto *untapped* or *undertapped*. This work is an ethnohistorical study and is mainly based on collection of primary data through extensive field study, such as, observation, interview schedules, questionnaires, participant- observation and sound recorders. The researcher used uncontrolled participant observation technique by participating in the important social occasions like institutional functions, marriage, rituals and festivals, social ceremonies, community social gathering, group discussion and household schedules. Thus, in view of the nature and the objective of the present study, the researcher has to become as much a part of the political and cultural world of the community as is ethically possible and essential to achieve the minute most facts of the subject. In order to maintain objectivity and reliability the researcher has tried to keep himself free as far as possible from biases, excitement, hurriedness and prejudices and thus to evaluate fair judgements with conscience to remove the errors of non-observation and mal-observation. Hence, scientific measure has been carefully taken into account and structured analysis has been made to escape from disappearance. The researcher attentively, painstakingly and consciously has collected the data with the scientific method, so that the facts can be validated as the worthy of ethnohistorical facts for analysing the study.

In this study, the researcher tries to make a systematic attempt to throw as much light as possible to attain some degree of structured thematic approach and scientific interpretation, so that they may appear in their true historical facts. And for this, other than the conventional material sources, some non-conventional material

sources are also used like genealogy, myths, legends, ancient tools, place names, dances, music, traditional calendar art, folklores, folktales and embedded customs and traditional practices. These information and data are collected from different individuals who are the custodians of oral tradition accounts from the various parts of all the Nyishi inhabited districts. Collected information and data are critically examined and analysed scientifically through checking and cross-checking and interpreted in structural functional approach.

For the study of secondary sources, different categories of documentary sources of information are used for the study. These are archival records, manuscripts, letters, tour diaries, memoirs, published documents and accounts prepared by administrators, ethnographers and philologists, explorers and military reports on the Tribe. The other documentary sources are gazetteers, records of the Anthropological Survey of India, and Geological Survey of India and Archaeological Survey of India. Contemporary regional, national and foreign journals and other research papers on the subject are extensively used for our study. Along with these sources proceedings of the *Indian History Congress* and *North East India History Association* [NEIHA] are used for updating the old historical accounts.

All the collected oral historical accounts and field data sources are scientifically analysed and interpreted by corroborating with available written documents on the subject. This study is largely of interdisciplinary approach in nature to understand the theoretical framework and to construct the ethnohistory proper of the Nyishi. In order to attain the reliability and objectivity of the study, a systematic delineation of the study problem, the research procedures, techniques of data collection, sources of data, analysis of data and critical interpretation of research findings are presented in this work.

This work is to study the ethnohistorical aspects of the Nyishi tribe right from the earliest time to up to the period of Independence of India [1947]. This book is divided into eight chapters for a critical and comprehensive analysis of various historical events by focussing on the ethnographical outline, political, social, economic and aspect and the relationship between the Nyishi and the plains people.

In the introduction chapter, the structure of the study is to present the general physiographical features of North East India and geographical setting of the Nyishi inhabited areas in Arunachal

Pradesh. It also deals with the different ethnic groups of the State in a bird's eye view. Chapter two tries to examine critically the myths and legends relating to migration and settlement pattern of the Nyishi in the North East India. An attempt has been made to bring out the linkage between the oral traditions and the available written documents to establish the historical fact relating to ethnographical situation of the Tribe in question. In this chapter, emphasis has been given to understand the nomenclature of the Nyishi as is situated within the cultural, social and political history of the period and the region.

While in chapter three the detail study on the different constituents of socio-cultural organisation and indigenous institution is given emphasis with possible analytical approach based on *hard* and *soft material* sources. A close scrutiny on the dominant phrase like 'bride price' and institution of marriage system of the Nyishi is examined based on the comparative study of that of the other ethnic groups of the world. In chapter four focus has largely been concentrated on the traditional political ideas, institutions and customary administration of justice of the Tribe, since the earlier writings on the traditional political institution is more or less repetition of fixed prejudicious notion and theory. Such writings are being reviewed with an attempt to offer a plausible new dimension of interpretation based on rich oral historical study, which has been substantiated by the available studies on various communities of the world. In chapter five, an attempt is made to understand the traditional economic base. It also deals with the various economic activities in which the family is the unit of production. Simple industry and metallurgy technological knowledge like *ryumo Nyub* [blacksmith] and pottery making have been given a fair treatment. While other supplementary food gatherings methods and integral interrelations of different traditional economic activities, ultimately culminated as the basic subsistence technology of the Tribe has also been outlined in this chapter.

In chapter six the process of interaction and mutual relation that existed between the different rulers or chiefs of the plains with the Nyishi has been studied from an objective vantage-point. Attempt has also been made to discover the main features of political and cultural relations between the Nyishi Hills and the plains people in an interrelated way. It is a well-known fact that during the *Ahom*

period the Nyishi was given considerable references in most of the *Buranjis* relating to political, economic and cultural relations. These aspects, which possibly became a determinant factors that interplayed in the *Ahom*-Nyishi relations in different phases, are studied specifically event wise. Detail analysis of evaluation, the protestation and aspiration dichotomy with regards to events and incidents occurred during the *Ahom* monarchs have been discussed intensely. Chapter seven elaborately deals with the relationship between the Nyishi and British imperial power in the North East India, and transformation of this relationship under British colonialism. The particular focus is on the study of different historical events and outcome of such events. Early contact and adoption of the *Ahom* administrative measures towards the Nyishi Hills by the colonial power has been examined analytically and critically. The chapter further deals with the policy of 'armed diplomacy rather than by force'<sup>27</sup>. The policy of stopping *posa*, economic blockade and military expeditions against the Nyishi also find an exclusive attention in this chapter. The historically significant contact with the British authority, with its newly developed technologies of warfare, transport and communication, marks a major change in Nyishi political and cultural outlook and social values.

Every age rewrites its history. Every generation, besieged with new issues, problems and questions, looks back to its history and interpretation and renews its past. This is why ethnohistory is not only contemporaneous but also futural. Human life actually knows no separative wall between its past, present and future. This process continues consciously or unconsciously. Present researcher has tried to represent this complex and fascinating ethnohistory of the Nyishi as summarised one in the conclusion chapter. Our systematic focus on different themes is positioned to unanimous summary of conclusion analysed in broad framework of ethnohistory proper.

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<sup>27</sup> Political Proceedings, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1873, No. 23.