

ASIM MAITRA

PROFILE OF
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LITTLE-KNOWN
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This book is a purposive, exhaustive and altogether new ethnography on the Lisu, a little known ethnic group of the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. Through synchronic and diachronic description this volume tries to understand the culture and the problems of the Lisu in terms of historical perspective, linguistic affiliation, folklore, material culture, economic organisation, life cycle rituals, social organisation, social control, religious organisation, world view, etiology and medical system and transformations. This ethnographic study aims at constructive Lisu culture as a whole. Lisu culture, like every other culture, primitive or modern, is a complex whole. This culture is not without inner contradictions or contrasts, which, in fact, designs its own colourful tapestry.

This ethnographic knowledge on the life and culture of the Lisu may be fruitfully utilised by the administrators, political leaders and the policy makers of Arunachal Pradesh for the efficient functioning of its government, because this book not merely raises the basic problems of the Lisu but also offers practical solutions to them which are common to many other ethnic groups of the present state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Besides it will stimulate the interest of the anthropologists, sociologists, economists, linguists, folklorists, historians, geographers, political scientists and the students of religions.

Rs. 375

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The area of his research interest is ethnographic, religious and linguistic studies, and his present field of investigation is Arunachal Pradesh.

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**PROFILE OF
A Little-known Tribe**

*(An Ethnographic Study of Lisus of
Arunachal Pradesh)*

ASIM MAITRA



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INTRODUCTION

With her enormous diversity of cultures and vast heterogeneity of ethnic groups, India presents a fascinating field for anthropological research. But, ethnographic information are lacking in respect of many ethnic groups. In other words, there are still some ethnic groups or communities such as Niji, Aitonia, Khamyang, Sulung and so on in North Eastern India, particularly in the present state of Arunachal Pradesh, who are changing fast, but no ethnographic studies from the view point of social and cultural anthropology have been made yet. The Lisu are such an ethnic group amongst whom no systematic full length study has been conducted. According to Dr. Danda's categorisation of Indian ethnic groups, the Lisu are primarily an unstudied ethnic group, more precisely, this is a scarcely researched ethnic group. British anthropologists switched to problem oriented studies and theoretical anthropology when they gathered a fair insight in the social system by ethnographic studies of a number of societies or communities in Africa and Asian continent. The same is the case with American Anthropologists. Hence, it is desirable in the Indian context to gain a good ethnographic coverage of different ethnic groups or communities before venturing upon the theoretical understanding of the structure of their societies or culture. From this angle, this ethnographic Silhouette of the Lisu sketching various aspects of their life is of immense importance. It provides the basic ethnographic materials for further analysis or research and building theories.

Aims and Objectives

It is a pre-requisite to delineate clearly the aims and objectives of a research study. Firstly, this study aims at to provide a body of scientific knowledge on the culture of the Lisu. In other words, it aims to contribute to the growth and refinement of anthropological knowledge on the Lisu. This basic scientific knowledge may, ultimately, lead to the precise understanding of the problems of regionalism, ethnic isolation, regional characters and the different elements and broad patterns of Indian civilization.

This treatise on the Lisu will differ from the traditional monographs written by the missionaries, administrators and the tourists in that it intends to cover all the major dimensions of the Lisu culture—following a research methodology. Moreover, this study will try to conceptualise some of the notions on family, clan, kinship, religion, tribe and culture.

Besides, under the broad framework, the study will centre around the following enquires: (1) who are the Lisu and what their origin? (2) how they interact and differ with other ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh? (3) how they adjust with the ecological setting? (4) what are the distinctive features of their culture and its integrating aspects? (5) what is their world view and how they communicate with the supernaturals? (6) what are the problems or constraints—economic, social, political and religious for their all round development? (7) what are the etiologies of diseases and its treatment? (8) what are the changes that have come about? (9) what are the features of their language and folklore?

Methodology

In the collection of information on the Lisu, the standard anthropological methods and techniques such as observations—participant and non-participant, individual and group interview (structure and non-structure), genealogical method, case study, and life history have been employed. For documentation of the various phases of their life cycle and other activities

photographic aid is made use of. As a method of ethnoscience, the ethic and ethical views of the culture have been delineated. The systematic approach and the field techniques, the scientific analysis of the data giving theoretical significance by explaining how the data support, modify or contradict the various concepts and theories in anthropology go to constitute the research methodology of the present treatise.

I collected the data on material culture by direct observation and direct question. Since I was living with them I observed everything done by the Lisu directly or indirectly. I used to pick up any domestic article then enquired its functions and utilities. Manufacture of hunting implements, domestic utensils, weaving of cloths and construction of houses were carried on before my eyes. Data on social organisations were gathered following genealogical method, the rules of inheritance, descent, succession, and kinship terms were collected with the help of genealogies. For collecting information on the life cycle rituals I had to depend entirely on structured interview, though I was fortunate enough to participate in the marriage ceremony and festivals. Similarly, for information on religious beliefs, world view, mechanism of social control, medical system, changes and language, folklore and economic system I had to depend mostly on individual as well as group interviews. I participated in finishing, collection of fire wood, dance and music and pounding paddy grains. My informants were mostly old men and women; side by side, young and middle aged persons were also interviewed. To know the past happenings of their life, the most suitable techniques were interview and life history.

Language formed the greatest stumbling block on my way of data collection. Fortunately, I found one undergraduate Lisu boy named Phusa who taught me Lisu language, who also acted as my interpreter as well as informant. I used to communicate my question in Hindi and English to my interpreter. The informants replied in the Lisu language which was translated into Hindi and sometimes in English by interpreter. At a sitting, interview was carried on for four or six hours

which was cross-checked by another group of informants. For verifying relevant information non-Lisu school teachers posted at Lisu area i.e., Gandhigram village were also interviewed.

Duration of Field Work

The data on which this ethnographic study is based were collected in three terms between 1981 and 1986. Total period of stay in the Lisu village called Gandhigram was nine months for three different occasions (1981, 1982 and 1986). Owing to inhospitable climate and communication problem (see Chapter 12) I could not cover all the months of a year which is of immense importance for a scientific ethnography. The selection of the unit of universe of the study was guided by the principle of major concentration of the population. Long stay helped me to win the confidence of the Lisu which made the collection of data more easier. The Lisu took me as a well-wisher of their society, but the local administration looked at me with an eye of suspicion. They told me that "The Lisu are ferocious people, no one can dare to move in the Lisu village in the evening. It is advisable not to go and stay there." My stay in the Lisu village proved that statement wrong. The Lisu have a poisonous sorrow, they use it for killing wild animals, and not for killing human beings.

Organisation of Data

Every scientific research study has a purpose or goal. Through systematic organisation of facts or data collected this goal is fulfilled. Behind the accumulated facts there is something more important and revealing than the facts themselves. That well-marshalled facts or units when organised systematically and related to the whole study have a significant meaning from which valid interpretation can be drawn. The information attributed to the different aspects of the study have been organised as follows:

1. Language
2. Folklore

3. Material culture
4. Economic organisation
5. Life cycle rituals
6. Social organisation
7. Social control
8. Religious organisation
9. Etiology and medical system
10. World view
11. Transformations
12. Problems of development.

I have tried to arrange these chapters systematically and to maintain a sequential link with the chapters. As a result, this has provided regularity and continuity in the study of life and culture of the Lisu.

Previous Studies

As the title of the study indicates, the Lisu are a least known ethnic group of the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. In India, anthropological literatures on the Lisu are not available. It is Shri D.K. Datta who for the first time published (1979) a short note on the mythological origin of the Lisu. That is all about the Indian scholars who studied the Lisu. I came to know through personal communication with the Director, Tribal Research Institute, Chiang-Mai, Thailand that Dr. E.P. Durrenberger of Illinois University made a study on "The Ethnography of Lisu Curing" in 1971, and Dr. A.Y. Dessaint studied the "Economic Organisation of the Lisu" in 1972. Both of them conducted their field investigations in Thailand where about two millions Lisus are living. Unfortunately, I could not get those materials for consultation and comparison.

Land and Location

Before peeping into the world of the Lisu, let us have a glimpse over the physical topography and natural condition

of the land and location of the Lisu which have a direct bearing upon their way of life or culture. The Lisu are located mainly at the present Vijaynagar Circle (Daodi) in Miao subdivision in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA), the fascinating land of rising sun. Vijaynagar circle is situated in an altitude of about 8000 feet in the extreme east of the Tirap district rather Arunachal Pradesh. Vijaynagar circle is the home of the Lisu. Almost the entire area of this circle is hilly and mountainous. The land region is covered with evergreen forest. High mountains and peaks are somewhat dry, rocky and snow-clad. Its valleys are covered by the long corridor of plain grassy land. There are rivers and rivulets that flow the land of the Lisu. Noteworthy of them are Noa-Dihing and its tributaries, Burma Nala etc. Inhabiting this part of the sub-Himalayan region, the Lisu have gained varied experience of life which have enabled them to foster a life-style of their own. Nature in this part of the planet is vigorous and hostile. The rugged terrain, the high hills, the rocky mountains, sky piercing peaks, incessant rainfall, dense forest, slippery slopes, etc. stand against smooth sailing of human life. Killing of life by snow storm, rolling boulders, sliding land, falling trees, poisonous snakes, ferocious animals, dashing current of rivers etc. are the common happenings in the day today natural life of the Lisu. Nature reigns supreme here. One requires to live a life of adjustment and with the vigour of nature, otherwise, living becomes very hard and often miserable.

The Name as an Identity

The name of this ethnic group is apparently controversial. They are identified with different names like Lisu, Lisaw, Yobin, Lishifa, and Khinu. The original name of community, is Lisu and by this very name they introduce themselves to the outsiders. But the neighbouring communities (in Burma) such as Singpho, Khamti, Rawang never use the term—Lisu to call or identify them. Instead the Singpho use the term—Yawyin or Yoyin to designate the Lisu, similarly, the Khamti

and the Rawang call them Khinu and Lishifa respectively. Likewise, the Lisu have their own terms to identify these communities. The Lisu term for the Khamti is Assamupha, for the Singpho is Afupha and for the Rawang is Chopha. It is said that the Lisu came in contact with the Britishers or British administration first through a Singpho interpreter who introduced them (the Lisu) as Yawyin or Yoyin, but not as Yobin as written in Census of India 1971, which is a bonafide scheduled tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Incidentally, it was again a Singpho interpreter who introduced the Lisu as Yoyin to the Indian Military Officers who first visited or made an expedition to the present land of the Lisu i.e., Vijaynagar. The term—Yobin is simply a spelling mistake or a mistake in the pronunciation of the word Yawyin or Yoyin. The word—Yawyin or Yoyin is derived from the Singpho language. The Lisu do not know the meaning of this term. But they conceive its meaning as something derogatory, something not worth-mentioning which stands against their traditional social status. The Lisu do not like them to be called Yoyin because of its derogatory implication. Actually, the Lisu and the Yawyin or Yoyin are one and the same ethnic group or tribe. There is no separate community or tribe as Lisu and Yoyin as thought of by the public.

The literal meaning of the term Lisu is like this. *Li*—means four and *su* means fold or folding of clothes round the waist or belly in Lisu language. As per literal meaning, the people or the persons having four folds of a cloth around the waist are designated as Lisu. According to their myth, a male person adorned with sword (straight scythe), bow and arrow, foldings of a piece of cloth around the waist, who came out from the mythical pumpkin or gourd is called Lisu. Another line of interpretation of the term is this '*li*' means four and '*su*' means person gossiping or quarrelling. Hence 'Lisu' means four persons gossiping or quarrelling. This indicates that the Lisu had the inherent tendency to gossiping or quarrelling. This tendency is not extant among the present day Lisus of Arunachal Pradesh. Rather they exhibit or display an opposite character. According to my informants or current investigation,

this line of interpretation of the term—'Lisu' is vague, and has no historical evidence or connection to the present day Lisu of Arunachal Pradesh. Again, it is said that the word for leather belt in Lisu language is also *Lisu*. The Lisu used to wear leather belt prepared by themselves, and as a result of which they have got the name—Lisu. In other words, this ethnic group might have derived or assumed the name Lisu from that peculiar custom of wearing belt. The Lisu have also got a nickname—'monkey-people'. The Lisu are laborious, audacious and intelligent people. They can easily move or negotiate with the difficult hills, terrains and forest like a monkey, and that is why they are also known as 'monkey people'. The Lisu of Vijaynagar specially Gandhigram have recently acquired the names like Halipha, Mahalipha and 'Hindu-Lisu'. The Lisu following a particular religion or the Lisu who follow strictly the rules of Christian religion, and do not indulge themselves in drinking liquor are termed Halipha. The opposite group of Halipha is known as Mahalipha, 'ma' means no. That is the Lisu having or following no religion, the Lisu who do not follow the rules of Christianity and indulge themselves in drinking country liquor or rice beer are named Mahalipha. According to Halipha the position of the latter group of the Lisu (Mahalipha) is such that they neither follow the norms of Chistianity nor the traditional Lisu religion as such. And because of this peculiar social or cultural position, the Mahalipha group of the Lisu are also termed 'Hindu-Lisu'; though they have no link either cultural or religious with the Hindu. Nepali Hindus of Vijaynagar circle are also habituated to drinking rice beer, and for this semblance in drinking, the Mahalipha are called 'Hindu-Lisu' by the Halipha.

Cultural History

No systematic written records are available on the Lisu except the impressionistic views given by commodore R.N. Pareek, and Dugene Morse, an American missionary, who lived with the Lisu. The Lisu were first sighted in the present

Vijaynagar circle (Daodi) by Major Sumer Singh of Assam Rifles on the 7th May, 1961, when Chaukan pass expeditions were made by the Indian Military. Then around November, 1961, Major General A.S. Guraya visited Vijaynagar as a part of reconnoitering duties. It is said that Major General Guraya named Daodi as Vijaynagar after his only son Vijay, and a village Yibidi as Pritnagar after his only daughter—Priti. Major Sumer Singh named Sidhi, the old habitation of the Lisu as Gandhigram, because he occupied or brought the area under control without any confrontation or vendetta. Similarly, the area of the present Ramnagar was known as Achidudi, the present Phaparbari as Gamidi and Gahrigaon as Nwanale.

According to commodore R.N. Pareek, the Lisu originally lived on the both sides of the China-Burma border—with the Kachin group of tribes—Singpho, Rawang, Tanche etc. A large migration from there took place towards the Putao plains of Burma in the third decade of 20th century during the struggle between the Chinese communists and the Nationalist forces. Putao lies about 1200 K.M. north of Rangoon and 100 K.M. away from Indian border. For long, the Lisu were concentrated there.

In 1965, General Ne Win took control of Burma in a coup and set up the 'Revolutionary Government of the Union of Burma'. To consolidate, he tightened his control over the tribal people in the hills of Burma as some of the tribes including the Lisu had formed the Kachin Independence Army and frequently raided Putao. The Government of Burma therefore carried flushing out operations against them. This led to the Lisu movement or led migration from Putao on the eastern bank of Irrawaddy, down south through hills of Burma when they diverted their course to the west around the present district of Arunachal Pradesh, in the region below the foothills of Patkai range of mountains.

Long before their migration to India, most of the Lisu had already been converted into Christianity by the American missionaries, in the first two decades of the 20th century. Afraid of the military oppression after the coup in Burma in

1965, the Morse family together with many Lisus left Putao in December, 1965, in a stream of refugee till their exodus figure rose to about 5000 men, women and children. It is said, due to the spread of an epidemic and difficult terrain, about half of the number of the Lisu returned to Putao. It is again said that Eugene Morse tried in vain to get the permission from the Government of India to enter India. Already by this time in 1970-71, India and Burma were busy in negotiations to mark the Indo-Burma boundary. So the Morse family together with the Lisu continued their march around the Patkai hills till they reached the zi-yu-di valley in north-west Burma. Long before this march, some of the pioneering Lisus from Putao had already migrated across the Himalayas into India sometime between 1950 and 1959.

The history of their migration does not fully tally with the oral history or the views of the majority of the Lisu living at the present village—Gandhigram. Although it is generally believed that the Lisu were the last batch of the mongoloid people who entered this part of India through Chaukan Pass during the time of Second World War. According to Lisu informants they are the original settlers of this place and living there from the time immemorial which was till recently an unadministered territory. It is only around 1961 the authority of the Government of India was established as per the interpretation of the Lisu. But the Lisu agree that this area (Vijaynagar circle) was first inhabited by the Khamti, then by the Singpho who later on found the place unsuitable for living and left it. Then after a considerable lapse of years, the Lisu came and settled there permanently. But that, as they interpretate, the natural and ecological conditions of the area were change completely, and the Lisu found the place suitable for living.

Distribution and Population

Opinions vary on the distribution of the Lisu. But according to present investigation, in India, the Lisu are mainly distributed at the Vijaynagar circle in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, as stated early. Before 1961, the Lisu were

scatteredly living in the places called Sidhi (Gandhigram), Daodi (Vijaynagar), Achidudi (Ramnagar), Yibidi (Pritnagar, a proposed village), Gamidi (Phaparbal) and Nwanalo (Gahirigaon). In 1962, after the establishment of circle office at Vijaynagar for easy administration, the Lisu were asked to live in one area—the present Gandhigram, and the places vacated by them were distributed free among the ex-armymen in different phases. The majority of the exarmymen are Nepali-Hindus. Table 1 shows the distribution and population of the Lisu in India.

TABLE 1: *Distribution and Population of the Lisu*

| <i>Place</i> | <i>Families</i> | <i>Population</i> |
|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Gandhigram | 154 | 1016 |
| Hazolu | 18 | 114 |
| Vijaynagar Proper | 13 | 86 |
| Pritnagar | 4 | 25 |
| Ledo | 8 | 52 |
| Total | 197 | 1293 |

Except Ledo, all other places in Table 1, are situated at Vijaynagar circle in Arunachal Pradesh. Ledo is a coalfield in Dibrugarh district, Upper Assam. At present only one Lisu family resides at Ledo, and the rest have shifted to Miao and Kharsang in Arunachal Pradesh. One family of the Lisu also resides at Mawlai in Shillong. The Lisu are said to be living in Bhutan. The main bulk of the Lisu live in the Kachin and Shan states in Burma. They are said to be living also in China, Thailand and Japan.

In 1971 census, the numerical strength of the Lisus (Yobin) at Gandhigram was 929, the sex ratio was 908 females per 1000 males. In 1981 census, the recorded number is 971, but according to the household census of the present author, the figure is 1016. The difference is due to the fact that census investigator counted heads or persons present only during the period of investigation or census. According to current investigation, the total numerical strength of the Lisus is 1293.

Morphological Traits

The Lisu are good looking mongoloid people with prominent epicanthic fold and cheek bone. They have different types of skin colours like dark brown, brown, yellowish, yellow etc. Their stature is medium, with well built body. They possess good health. From their physical appearance, the Lisu seem to be a heterogenous population. Because some of their males and females are having curly hairs, very fine noses, and thin lips. Because there is less similarity and uniformity in their stature, skin-colour etc. although they speak the same language (Lisu) and follow the same way of life.

Language and Literacy

They speak Lisu language. Lisu language has not been studied yet by any Indian linguist. This language belongs to Tibeto-Burman linguistic family (for details see chapter on language). English alphabet (only the capital form) written inversely are used as the script of the Lisu language. It is said some American missionaries intensively studied this language and translated the Holy Bible into Lisu language. The Lisu have some words common with the Singpho. But these common words like *afu*, *achi*, *aba*, etc. do not convey the same meaning. For example, in Lisu language *aba* means father, but in Singpho language *aba* means elder sister. *Achi* means 5th daughter to the Lisu but grandfather to the Singpho. The Lisu address first male issue as *afu*, but the Singpho address brother as *afu*. There may be some linguistic similarities between the languages of the Lisu and the Singpho but they cannot understand or follow each other's language. The Lisu know only the Lisu language, but they are trying to learn English, Hindi, Assamese and Nepali.

The Lisu, both males and females, are highly literate people. The percentage of literacy among the Lisu is 71.54 per cent and the rest are illiterates. This rate of literacy excludes the children upto the age of six years. The Lisu are themselves running a night school to teach Lisu, English and Hindi to the adult illiterates, in addition, there is one govern-

ment M.E. School. There were two matriculates and one under graduate at the time of this field investigation.

Social Composition

The present Vijaynagar circle consists of eleven villages besides Vijaynagar proper. Out of these villages, Gandhigram, Hazolu and Pritnagar are exclusively inhabited by the Lisu, and the rest are dominantly (numerically) inhabited by the Nepali-Hindus (Brahmans, Chetri, Rai and Magar and so/on) which include one Kuki and two Lusai families. During the period of socond phase of field work in the year 1982, the author found no habitation of the Lisu at Pritnagar village, all the four families of the Lisu were compelled to shift to a place adjacent to Miao-Vijaynagar Road. The distance between the main habitation (Gandhigram) of the Lisu and the Nepali settlers is about 16 K.M.

The Lisu term for the village is *Chokha*. *Chokha* is a human habitation consists of minimum five *chohis* (families). The term *Chokha* according to the definition given by the Lisu, is limited to the human habitation of five to one hundred *chohis*. The Lisu habitation to be called *Chokha* must contain a *Chowu* (a leader of noble qualities) with his *zijasus* (helpers), *Nifa* (a kind of priest), *Dashifa* (a kind of doctor) and a burial ground. Human habitation consists of more than 100 *chohis* is termed *Chokhadama* or *Chokhafa* by the Lisu. At Gandhigram, besides the Lisu, few government officials employed in the departments of Education, C.P.W.D., A.P.P. and Assam Rifles, also reside. Two Marwaris engaged in *agar* (a kind of wood used for preparing cosmetics) business have set up a temporary camp at Gandhigram. The officials belong to different states of India—two from Kerala, one from West Bengal, two from Assam, one from Bihar and few Adis from Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. They live in their respective allotted quarters, and only two of them (an Adi and an Assamese) reside with families. At Vijaynagar proper the Lisu are exposed to environment of different communities of India who are posted as government employees. (All maps are shown on pages 14 to 20).

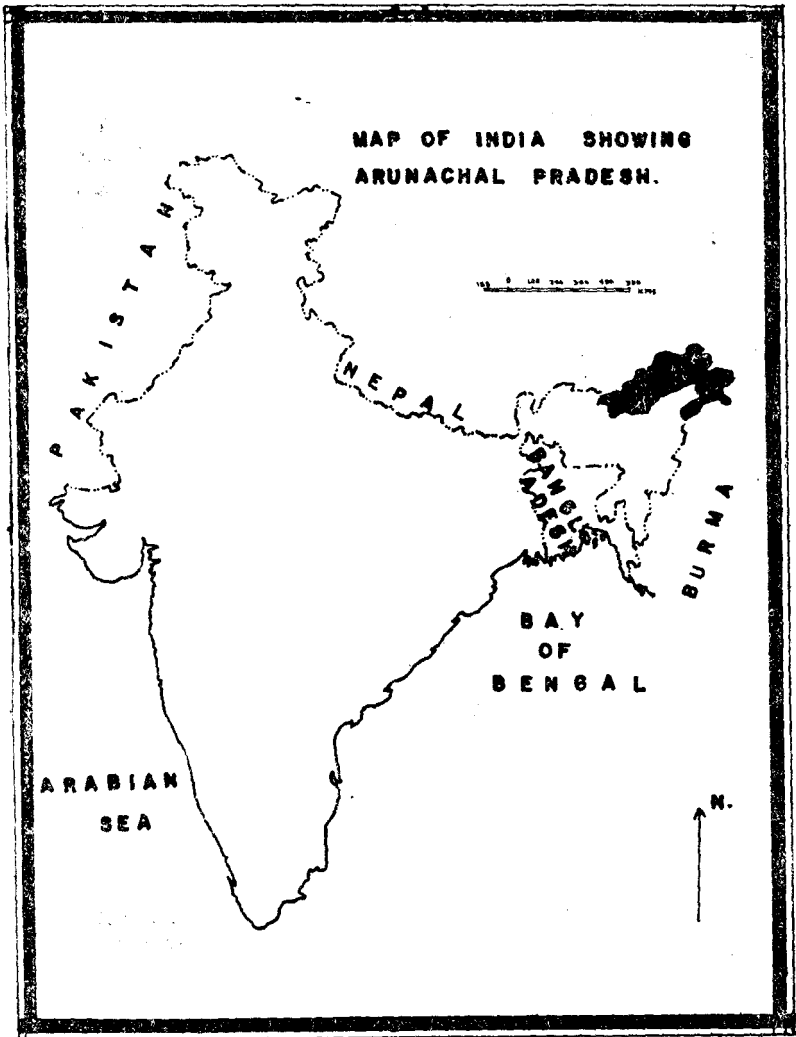


Fig. 1

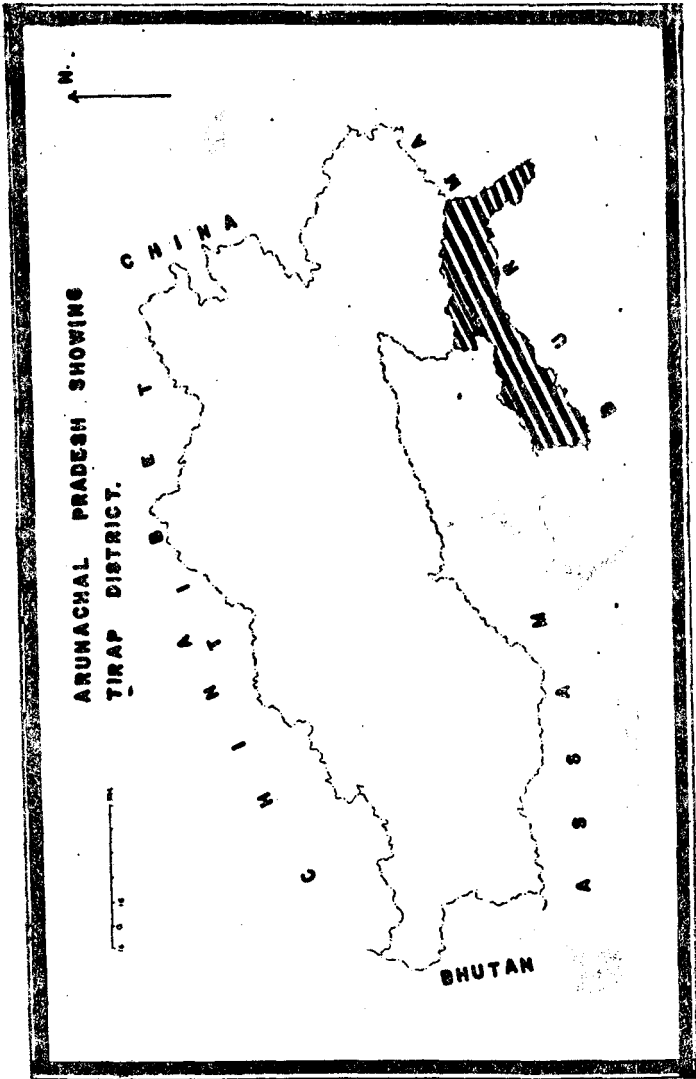


Fig. 2

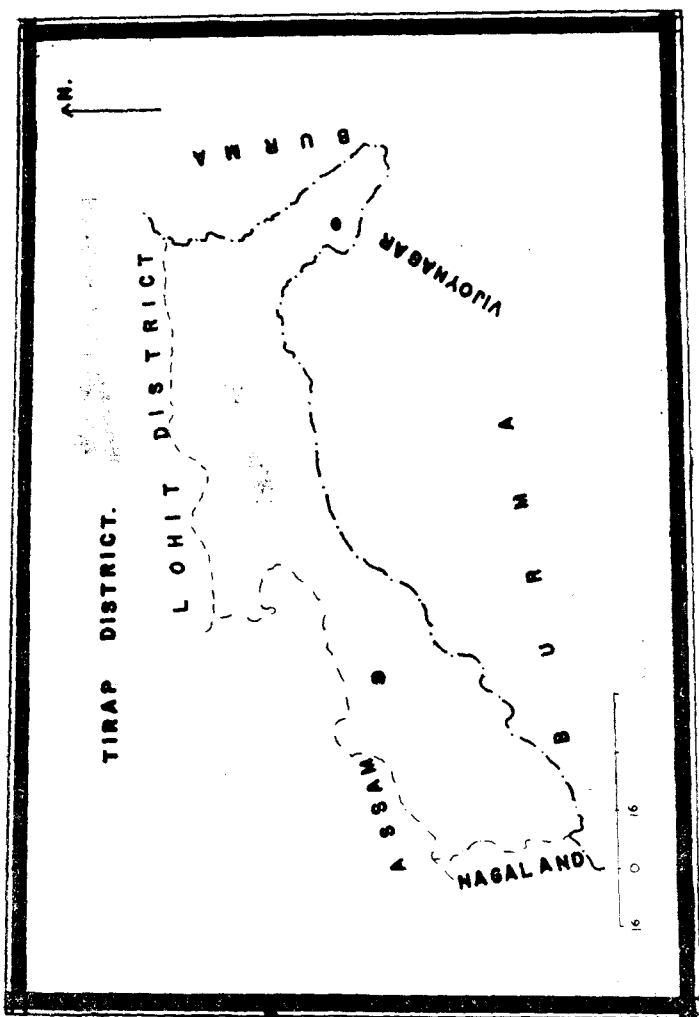


Fig. 3

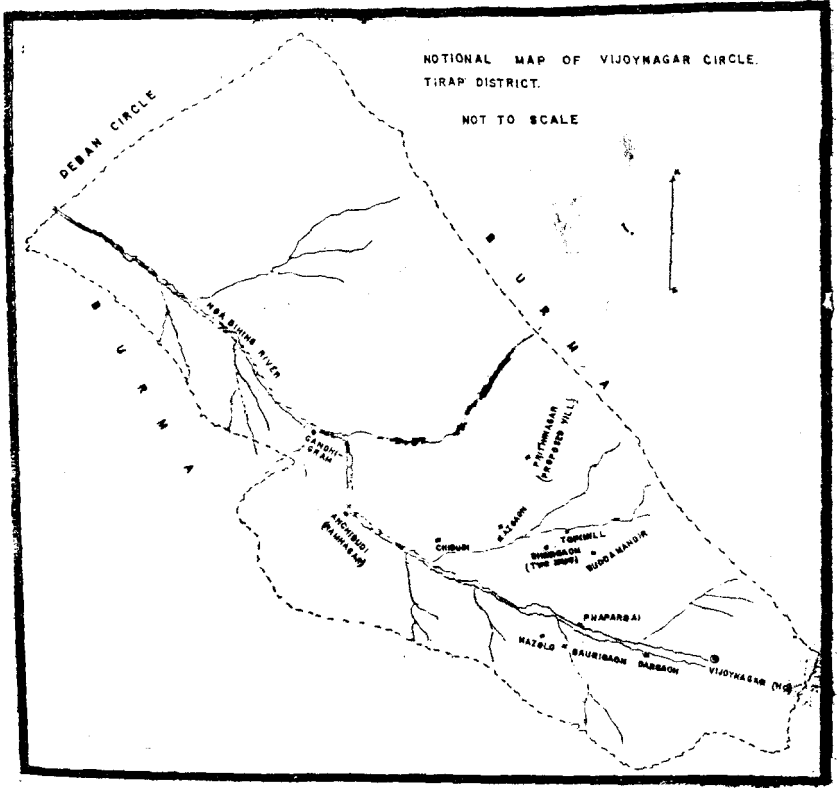


Fig. 4

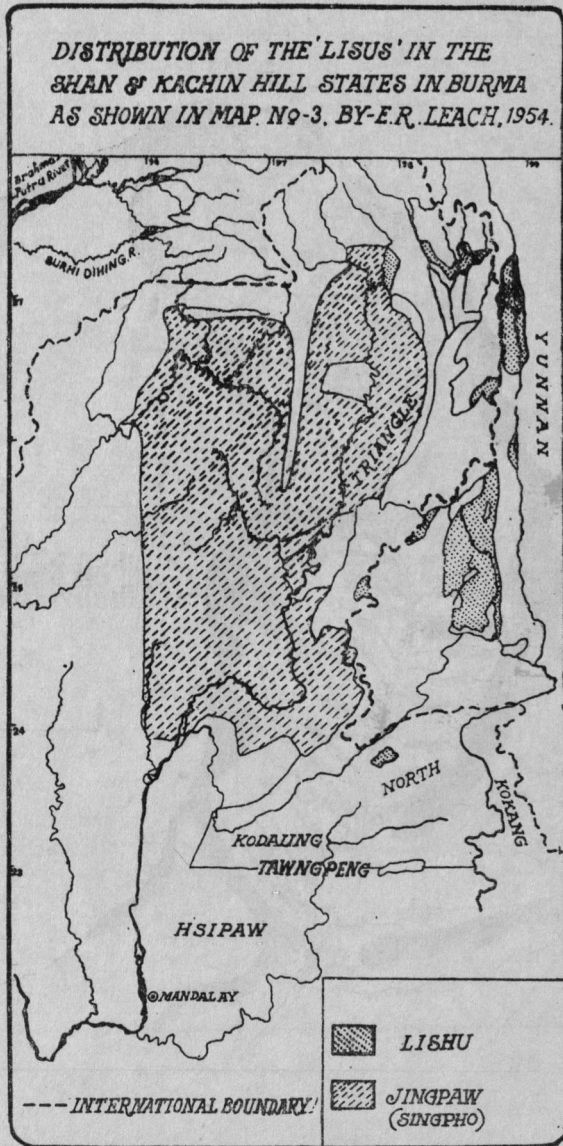


Fig. 7