

TRIBES OF INDO-BURMA BORDER

*(A Socio-Cultural History of the
Inhabitants of the Patkai Range)*



S. N. BARUA

Foreword by
Bipin Borgohain



MITTAL PUBLICATIONS
NEW DELHI-110059 (INDIA)

NE
301.451095416
BAR; 3

First Edition, 1991

© 1991 by Surendra Nath Barua
All rights reserved

ISBN 81-7099-308-3

Published by K. M. Rai Mittal for Mittal Publications, A-110,
Mohan Garden, New Delhi-110059 Phones: 5552070, 5592070

Printed in India at J. N. Printers, Delhi-110007, Phone: 522067

BHU LIBRARY

Acc. No. 210.837

Acc. by

Date

Class by

Sub Heading by

Enter by

Revised by

F232
152

CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Preface	ix
PART I—THE PATKAI	
1. Historical Prelude	3
PART II—THE GEOGRAPHY	
2. Natural Environment	11
PART III—THE RACIAL ACCOUNT	
3. Inhabitants	37
4. The Two Brothers (Namchangia and Barduarua)	96
5. Ethnological and Cultural Perspective	111
PART IV—THE SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	
6. Aspects of the Religious Beliefs and Practices	141
7. Two Important Rites of the Past and Present	160
8. Seasons and Superstitions	178
9. Birth, Death and Marriage	185
10. Adornment	214
11. Arts and Crafts	225
12. Songs, Music and Dance	230
13. Festivals, Sports and Games	233
14. Food Habits, Drinks and Drugs	237
15. Health and Hygiene	241
16. Crimes and Punishment	245
17. Head Hunting	251
18. Economy and Utilitarianism	260

PART V—TOWARDS STABILISATION AND
NATIONAL INTEGRATION

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 19. Relations with the Plains | 279 |
| 20. Political Aspiration and its Growth | 288 |
| 21. External Relations and Border Problem | 321 |

PART VI—THE ADMINISTRATION

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| 22. Administrative History | 329 |
|----------------------------|-----|

PART VII—THE EVENTS AND THE IMPACT OF
THE WORLD WAR II

- | | |
|---------------------|-----|
| 23. The Hell Gate | 373 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 396 |
| <i>Index</i> | 402 |

FOREWORD

I am very pleased to write a few lines and associate myself with the publication of this very interesting and informative book. I know the author Shri Surendra Nath Barua as an extremely efficient and hard-working young office assistant who had just joined as my (I was Political Officer, Tirap) confidential assistant. He evinced a knack for going into the connected past records of all matters and this particular natural aptitude in him would seem to have been well rewarded through this scholarly book. We parted, to be exact, twenty seven years ago. It was very kind of Shri Barua, indeed to remember me after such a pretty long time and ask me for a Foreword for his book.

Tirap is inhabited by four distinct ethnic groups of tribals. They are the semi-Buddhist and river-and-flower loving peaceful Singpho (=person), the once subjugated but now liberated and resurgent lovable Tangsa (Tang=Mountain, sa=person), a word which was specially coined by the under-signed and accepted by the tribe and the Government for official use the once-up-on-a-time head-hunting but today a devout Vaishnaba Noktay (=person) and the not-long-ago awe-inspiring head-hunting but today as gentle as a dove and as courageous as a lion Wangcho (=person). They have transformed Tirap into a paradise for sociology scholars and dilettanti both. Shri Barua's work is definitely far from being a formal dissertation. But, for beginners it should be found as a very valuable and dependable hand book. Various views and opinions expressed by the author are, of course, his own. From my own experience, however, I can vouch for the truth of most of the facts as stated by the author. Of the rest, do not know.

Foreword

Before I conclude, I must congratulate the author for the intelligent selection and the skill with which he collated and assimilated all the information from various old records which would seem to have already gone into oblivion.

I hope the book will receive wide acclaim.

BIPIN BORGOHAIN

Formerly Political Officer, Tirap

PREFACE

India is a country of diverse societies possessing different languages and cultures. Persons of one State do not know the tongue and the culture of another, particularly of the hill States of the North-east. Admittedly, it is not possible also to know them easily. On the other hand it requires zeal, interest and willingness besides scope to a person if anything is sought to be known. Take for example the Arunchal Pradesh. How many persons outside Assam know this land. The languages and the cultures are mostly heterogenous. The workers even do not know them. Lack of interest seems to be the cause. Government officers from outside the State are coming and going. How many of them had the zeal or interest to know the languages and the cultures of the people, other than a few pioneers, though ample scopes were available to them? What did the British Officers do? They studied and recorded everything while exploring and administering the areas. No doubt their purpose was different, yet they made history for us. We have to depend and rely mostly on their books and reports now for a reference to our own land and the people. A tour diary of a British Officer was a mirror where every bit of information of a place visited was reflected. They have gone long back. Everything rests on us now to be explored. Time is fast changing. Time is oblivious. A society is versatile. Every opportunity, therefore, should be availed of to undertake study and record whatever is possible for the interest of the people themselves besides the Nation, if much desired social progress and national integration have anything to mean in this most backward region. Nothing should be thought as incomprehensible. Efforts in right earnest are essential. It will pay off. A sociologist has a greater role to play in this direction.

To develop human relationship between each other racial group, study of socio-cultural pattern of life, technically social science, of these most backward people possessing distinctive cultures hitherto unknown is, therefore, vital. It would certainly bring out interesting material to light about the history of the past and its effect on the present, as it is the means to develop knowledge for social relationships and progress. Such being the case it was thought that an account of the aspect of the socio-cultural history of the several tribes inhabiting for several hundred years on the Patkai range, the northern slope of which forms to Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, leaving the southern slope to Burma, and our approach towards them in the context of the fast changing world, might be useful one day, if any body at all is desirous to know the history of the land and the people of this mountaneous country even though it has been recorded by a lay man what he had stored through the years of long association with the people. This was the object in view that the author had ventured to undertake such a study for the first time, but in his own way of choice, without a guide. The work was hard enough for a unqualified person which might be appreciated. Taken the risk, it is with humility the work is placed before the learned readers. The author does not know how they receive it, with pleasure or bitterness, but he believes the readers may at least pick-up something of an isolated human society how the history of the past generations of these oriental people shapes the present for the future.

This volume projects its concentration on the study of the tribes of the mountaneous country called 'Patkai' spreading over an area of about twelve thousand square kilometers on the Indo-Burma border east of the Assam plains. The history of the origin of its nomenclature and the natural environment are contained in the next two parts, namely, Part I—The Patkai and Part II—The Geography followed by other five parts with respect to III—The Racial Account, IV—The Social Behaviour, V—Towards Stabilisation and National Integration, VI—The Administration, and the last Part VII being the Events and the Impact of the World War II. The book is a collection of twenty four topics.

With pleasant climatic conditions here live a number of colourful people of diversity which are grouped as the *Wangcho*, the *Nokte*, the *Tutsa*, the *Tangsa*, the *Singpho*, the *Lisu* and a few others as would be found in the text. The *Wangchos*, the most colourful of all, have become the latest attraction to the anthropologists. From naked, semi-naked to modernist, head-hunters to an administrator, politician to a minister, educationist to a businessman are all a *convert* and thrilling as the book opens. No proper study on the socio-cultural history of all these aesthetic people (other than the Konyak group by Prof. Haimendorf), the environment in which they live and the administration has been made and recorded in one place. Only a reference here and there is made on specific issues. Publication of a district gazetteer was undertaken by the Administration decades ago, but one has yet to wait and see its result. Shri Parul Dutta, now Deputy Director of Research (Later Director) has long back published a book on the *Tangsas of the Namchik Valley* under the guidance of late Dr. V. Elwin, former Adviser for Tribal Affairs. I understand he has brought out another two books—one on the *Noktes* and another on the *Wangchos* which will undoubtedly be a valuable contribution. Anyway, his line of research is technically anthropological and my attempt is a layman's one. But I believe this work having laid emphasis on wider field covering all the tribes would also supply valuable basic materials for comparative study of social anthropology. We may have racial differences, we may have differences in social structures, mental attitudes, living conditions and food habits. Nevertheless, field study of social anthropology with a deep insight helps us all to broaden the understanding of human relationships between one group and another.

The internal and external pressures in the face of modern technology and civilization have already put a strain in the socio-cultural structure of the people. Many changes have already taken place; many more are bound to come. Thus past traditions will be forgotten in the mist of the unknown horizon.

While writing on the Konyaks, Professor Haimendorf in the

Preface of the second revised Indian Edition, of his 'Naked Naga' rightly observed that "in a world of rapidly improving communications and the resultant levelling of local differences, there is no permanent place for archaic, isolated societies. Their cultures, however vigorous and colourful, must gradually give way before the impact of the one or the other of the great modern civilizations. Though occurring throughout the world and recognizable as an intrinsic part of human development in the twentieth century, this process can hardly fail to arouse sentiments of regret in those who enjoyed the pleasure of living with a people as self-contained, happy and attractive as the Konyak Nagas were twenty five years ago."

"The knowledge that the scenes described in the pages of this book will never be re-enacted adds poignancy to the memories of a rich and aesthetically satisfying cultural pattern which is now rapidly fading. There is in human nature an instinctive tenderness for that which is doomed. Just as the archaeologist unearths with infinite care the brittle remnants of past civilizations, the anthropologist contemplates with nostalgic affection the way of life of people he was fortunate enough to know before their traditional world fell into pieces. When the Nagas of the present generation have been gathered to their fathers, there will be no one to remember that world. The great feasts of merit, the ritual dances at the Spring Festival, the gay communal life in men's houses and girls' dormitories, no less than the thrills and dangers of head-hunting, will all be forgotten. No doubt future generations of Nagas will develop as satisfying as perhaps less harsh a pattern of living, but it will be a new creation combining indigenous and imported ideas and elements."

In this book I have made an attempt to place before the readers through those twenty four topics of information touching possibly every aspect of life of the people in a most concise and simple manner with special emphasis to the four major tribes. The book is obviously intended to give only a bird's eyeview to the general readers. It contains information linking history from about the 481 BC, besides reproduc-

tion of facts, some recorded here and there and some unrecorded, but from the memories the author had gathered from the beginning of his career in 1948, as a humble Office Assistant in the earlier Political Administration and later the General Administration of the district, and ending in 1979 on his optional retirement as Head Assistant with a personally satisfying service for thirty-one years in this unknown horizon. Interestingly, he had a forgotten title of 'Ajanti Babu' awarded by the then unadministered Wangchos meaning the man for the unadministered people; others knew or called him popularly 'Suren Babu'. I was fortunate enough to be taken into confidence by these simple, but self-conscious people who believed only in truth. But time has changed and there is now confusion and regret among the older generation which effect us too.

The methodology of field investigation has been followed in spirit wherever the same was considered essential, but not to the letter of the anthropological details. The book is profusely illustrated making it attractive and to leave an impression on the minds of the readers. While reproducing facts care has been taken to incorporate important or noteworthy events of historical value from the pre-British, British and to the post-Independence time up to the first year of the Janata Government after the fall of the thirty years Congress regime in the early 1977. As my main purpose and intention has been to present a true narrative of the facts, as far as practicable, there was hardly a scope for me to provide a literary embellishment to the readers and I believe the latter would forgive me. To the best of my knowledge and judgment nothing has been exaggerated, nor do I anyway intend to hurt the sentiments of those discussed hereunder in the text. Throughout, I have taken everything in good faith. I have even avoided the word 'tribal' as far as avoidable. Any expression of thought appears to be nibbling, I hope, it would be treated in the constructive line; *absit invidia*.

I sincerely extend my gratitude to those informants, to those authors whose information, books and write ups respectively were found to be useful in my work. I extend my thankfulness to my well-wishers, specially to Shri T. K. M. Baruah,

District Research Officer, Khonsa, whom I knew from his early age, for encouraging me to undertake this long cherished work. I am further most thankful to Shri N. P. Hazarika, Director of Information and Public Relations, Government of Arunachal Pradesh for kindly publishing several of my articles and letters, incorporated in this book, in the monthly journal *Arunachal News*, published by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. I am further indebted to Shri D.B. Thapa, Upper Division Clerk who had kindly taken enough pain for me to typeout the manuscript. Thanks also go to Shri P. Gangadharan, then Lower Division Clerk who had extended his hand by typing a few of the articles earlier for publication; Shri Rana, proprietor of Suprabha Studio, Khonsa for most of the selected photographs to my choice without which the book would not have been complete.

Above all, I am ever grateful to Shri B. K. Borgohain, ex-Political Officer, Tirap, now a Supreme Court Advocate and a reputed Journalist, Dibrugarh and author of several books on the cultures of such peoples of the North-eastern region, for kindly extending his hand in examining the typed manuscript with his valuable suggestion besides writing the Foreword in spite of his pre-occupation.

Lastly, I admit that I must have missed many other valuable information. Whatever I have produced was a work of hard labour which took me about two years time outside the working hours in the office and other domestic occupations. My wife with the children was away from me since early 1970. This became necessary to afford to give proper education to the children. I had, therefore, to be lonely for these years. We sacrificed health and happiness like many others as the living conditions were very hard beyond imagination in the early stage of the administration. A few rupees of special pay or compensatory allowance could not commensurate the amount of hardship one had to undergo. Those who are in the big towns and the cities would not or could not have understood the living conditions unless they had been in the same position like us in the remote areas of the North East Frontier Agency or NEFA in short (now Arunachal Pradesh). The people outside Assam did not know where was this

unknown horizon. Of course, the conditions are improving gradually and tolerably than that what they were in the early stage. In those early days there was no question of road communication other than a few leech infested jungle tracks one had almost to crawl through up and down hills to reach a destination blood running down from all over the body losing between fifty to hundred c.c. in a single journey. There was not enough food, no proper shelter and various other amenities of life when the people themselves had to depend on jungle products during the major part of the years. To get a few seers of rice (now kilos) or some other essentials one had to collect the same from the plains markets through human porters on headloads. This took about a week to ten days up and down the hills and even greater distance in other districts. The position came to an improvement only when some jeepable communications were opened up in the sixties besides airdropping operations in important locations. This was done through a Central Purchase Organisation specially established with headquarters at Rowrah Air Field with two sub-depots one each at Mohanbari and Lilabari Air Fields in Jorhat, Dibrugarh and North Lakhimpur respectively. These Air Fields luckily were there left over by the World War II. With the coming of the good road communications to the district, sub-divisional and circle headquarters as at present, the conditions were further improved, but in the interior places conditions are still the same.

Unfortunately, the pioneers who suffered mentally, physically and socially, but for their spirit of dedication towards the progressive development of the territory as it stands now, besides creating gainful avenues for the people and the present setup of the Administration, have no value in life in the eyes of the today's opportunists save alone Almighty God. Be that as it may—their happiness is the happiness of ours; their sorrow is the sorrow of ours. Let the people be happier, looked after properly by the new emergents, henceforward, under the newly formed Ministry of their own to enable them concentrate for their mutual benefit. And we, who were destined to sacrifice our personal health and happiness should, with least concern, treat ourselves as emeritus.

The book describes, in a lucid and simple language, the variegated and fascinating social system, particularly, of four major distinct ethnic tribes of the Patkai range, some of which once-upon-a-time, indulged in human sacrifice and, till recently, in head hunting.

Its salient points are—the historical prelude, geography, racial account, social behaviour, stabilisation and national integration, administration and impact of the World War II on these tribes. It is a gripping narrative covering twenty-three chapters with a foreword by an eminent academic in the field. This work is definitely far from being a formal dissertation. But, for beginners it should be found as a very valuable and dependable hand book.

It is indeed an excellent and meticulous work on a sophisticated culture of the Tribes of Indo-Barma border under the impact of our fast changing world. It is for the first time that such a valuable history, was collated and brought out in a comprehensive and concise manner in a single volume. Administrators, researchers, historians, educationists, social scientists and general readers interested in the subject may find the book, both useful and enjoyable.

Rs. 375

Mr. S. N. Barua (b. 1923) was a Government Officer who served in the Patkai range in Indo-Burma border. While still a student he joined the "Quit India" movement (1942) and suffered politically. After spending some eventful years, he joined, as a subordinate, the Administration of erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) in 1948. While serving, he mingled with the tribes of the Patkai range of the Indo-Burma border for over three decades, became their friend and studied their socio-cultural system in their natural environment. He served in different capacities until his retirement. During this period he wrote on the socio-cultural history of these tribes, which ultimately took the shape of this book.

The author is a recipient of Independence Day award (1978) from the Lt. Governor of the Arunachal Pradesh for his meritorious services.

ISBN 81-7099-308-3