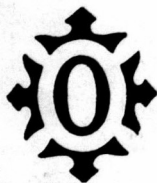


ENCHANTED FRONTIERS

SIKKIM, BHUTAN AND INDIA'S
NORTH-EASTERN BORDERLANDS

NARI RUSTOMJI



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TO MY MOTHER



On the heights is peace — peace to serve.

Beethoven

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Prologue

MANY years ago, during Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi's historic trek to Bhutan, somebody referred to the fascinating, sometimes even scholarly, narratives by frontier officers of former days, and deplored the lack of initiative of their successors in office of more recent times. I felt, suddenly, the eyes of the entire company, and more particularly Nehru's, focus sharply on myself. For six years my field of work, as the Assam Governor's Adviser for Tribal Areas, had been the Naga hills and the colourful people of India's north-east frontier. And, as if that were not enough, it was now in Sikkim and Bhutan. Nothing more was said, but the Prime Minister's reproving look clearly signalled that, if, with such a wealth of opportunity, I had not been inspired to creative effort, something must be seriously wrong! And that was how I was first provoked to write this book.

I have been slow in making a start, as I do not write easily and have no shining message for the world. But it has been my happy lot to have found myself, through most of my service, in exciting places and exciting situations, meeting exciting people. People have always interested me, even more than places. I like people, all sorts of people. In my friendships I am quite incorrigible, which can be embarrassing for the aspiring Civil Servant! I have enjoyed the trappings of high office, but, thankfully, am no longer attached to them. If I am saluted in the streets, well and good. If not, still well and good. But I cannot shake off old allegiances and my friends are, as a consequence, a widely-assorted, motley crew.

Everybody today has heard of Assam, with her capital at Shillong. Yet it was not so long ago that a young police officer, on reaching Bombay from England and receiving

his posting orders to Shillong, was merrily shunted off to Ceylon! Everybody today knows of Sikkim and her capital at Gangtok, but it was only a few years back that the postal authorities were in a state of perpetual confusion over letters intended for Gangtok being addressed to Bangkok. Thimphu is, of course, Bhutan's capital, but, for the man in the street, it is still Punakha, as shown in the maps — if, indeed, he knows anything of Bhutan at all. And so it goes on. My work has taken me to little-known places and little-known people. And I have been happiest in little places, away from the crowded, clanging city. But much of the magic and mystery of the places I have known is fast vanishing. If an echo of it can be recaptured in these pages, I shall feel more than repaid.

Of exciting situations I have had my ample share — the civil disobedience movement of the Mizos in 1948; the Chinese entry into Tibet in 1950, with its repercussions on India's north-east frontier; the massacre of an Assam Rifles column by NEFA tribesmen in 1953; the Naga rebellion; the visit of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas to Sikkim in 1956; the Chinese incursion into Longju in NEFA in 1959, followed by their full-scale attack in 1962; and the tragic assassination, in 1964, of Bhutan's Prime Minister and my very dear friend, Jigmie Dorji. My difficulty in writing is that my relations with the actors in the drama have, more often than not, been on a personal as much as on an official basis. We have shared confidences which we hold as sacrosanct. My embarrassment is that I know too much! And I value my friendships too dearly to be prepared to abuse them.

This is to be no compendium of facts and figures, and the reader who is looking for population statistics and geographical information must seek elsewhere. It is not possible, within the compass of a single volume, to give even a summary description of the numerous and fascinating varieties of people inhabiting the Himalayan and

Indo-Burmese borderlands. My interest, in writing this book, has been not so much in the collection and presentation of factual data as in the study of situations, in evolving, from my years of experience among the tribal people, not only a personal philosophy of life, but a practical philosophy of work. If I have contributed at all to the shaping of the future of the tribal people of the frontier, I have myself been shaped and re-shaped in the process. My influences in early life had been Plato and Beethoven. My ideal, in those fresh and exciting days, was of the Philosopher-King, manifesting, in the exercise of his sovereignty, the identity, the indivisibility, of 'the good' and 'the beautiful'. The Adagio of Beethoven's Choral was my strength and consolation when, alone in a distant corner of Assam, I received news of my father's death. And as, with life's joys and sorrows, my experience widened, I won entry into the hallowed world of the last quartets.

It was through Beethoven, I think, that I was prepared, made ripe, for receiving the Compassionate Buddha's message. And my years in the Buddhist milieu of Sikkim and Bhutan affected and influenced me as profoundly in my later years as had the study of Plato in my youth. It was a traumatic experience during the Chinese invasion in 1962 that created a dividing-line in my life, and it is at this point of time, therefore, that I have thought fit to bring my present story to a close. For there has been a change, since then, in the quality of my life, in the direction of my purposes, with which I have yet to come to terms, and, until this is accomplished, I feel I have little more that is worthwhile to offer.

The problem that faces every administrator in tribal areas is that of 'acculturation'. Much of the confusion and frustration that troubles tribal people today stems from the difficulties of adjustment that follow their contacts with a more materially advanced culture. I have found in myself much of this same confusion and frustration, but by a

reverse process. Mine has had to be a process of adjustment to people of, materially, more backward patterns of culture. Here too, the problem of acculturation arises and the solution is not always easy. We are rightly concerned that the tribal, in adopting an alien dress, language and code of behaviour, does not lose his identity, his 'soul'. We do not often realize that the administrator who identifies himself in thought, spirit and action with the tribal people can be faced equally with this same problem of 'losing himself', with all its consequential conflicts and frustrations. If my story has to have meaning, therefore, and come to life, something must be told of the origins and shapings of its most constantly recurring player.

Epilogue

It was shortly after the tragic assassination of the dearly respected Naga leader, Dr Imkongliba Ao. The times were troubled and I was touring the Naga hills. Military encampments, armed convoys, barbed wire — I thought, nostalgically, of my first visit to Mokokchung, over ten years back, when, though there were stirrings of unrest, the pervading note was of friendliness, peace and good cheer. I was glad to be done with the noise and dust of the convoy and break journey for a while in the house of our District Officer. Hmingliana was a tall, chubby Mizo, and it was not long before his equally chubby helpmeet had spread out for us a sumptuous high tea. We were lustily doing it justice, when I happened to notice, neatly embroidered and framed over the mantlepice, St Francis's beautiful prayer:

'Lord make me an instrument of Thy Peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love'.

Two years later, at the height of the Chinese aggression, I visited Hmingliana again, but this time at Along in NEFA, where he was posted as our Political Officer. There was no high tea, no sumptuous feasting, everywhere there was only confusion and disorder, but the lovely prayer was in its place over the hearth, with its message of strength, hope and love.

And it has been pursuing me ever since.