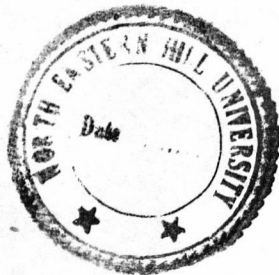


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Alluring Frontiers

Bhattacharya

TARUN KUMAR BHATTACHARJEE



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Foreword

Arunachal Pradesh, the mountaineous land spreading over 84000 square kilometres in India's North East, her picture-sque beauty—verdant forests, humming with wild life, tumultous rivers and rivulets, her manifold Tribal population—their culture, custom and way of life allures many a scholars, journalists and travellers.

Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee has been writing on the Land and People of Arunachal Pradesh for the last three decades. His present book on his Memoirs is about the Land inhabited by the fascinating, colourful Adi Tribe and life in that area during the period when this territory was little known to the rest of the country and was called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The book is a treatise on Adi Tribesmen's Socio-economic life, their food habits, religious beliefs and practices interspersed by some interesting anecdotes of the officials who served in this difficult land in those days.

Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee is one of the pioneer Administrative Officers of Arunachal Pradesh. His intimate knowledge about the people helped him to portrait a candid and searching account of the Land and the Colourful Tribes and those Government officials who served in early fifties and sixties. His treatment of the subject and simple expression have made this book an absorbing reading.

I am sure that this publication will be of immense interest for all sections of the readers both inside and outside Arunachal Pradesh.

(Gegong Apang)
Chief Minister

A.P, Itanagar.

Preface

Jutting out in shape of a kidney in India's North East is the vast mountaneous territory of 84000 Square Kilometres area called Arunachal Pradesh—the land of the dawn lit sun, the erst-while North East Frontier Agency.

I entered this region in early 1952 when it was still a mysterious, foreboding land inhabited by fierce Tribesmen who were believed to be fond of maruding raids on head hunting spree and lived in the world of their own where spirits reigned supreme.

Very little information was in the school geography as the vast territory shown in the map an empty space beyond the realm of settled Administration. This was an excluded area directly under the charge of the Governor of Assam who had political officers who lived in foot hills garrison towns and exercised a loose control over the two dozen tribes by mounting periodic expedition with a platoon of Assam Rifles who dazed the tribesmen by spectacular demonstration of fire power. Except this the Administration has little else to do and development either in road communication or Primary Education were only limited to fringe areas of garrison towns.

The first move to survey this unexplored territory started soon after the massacre in 1911 of two Englishmen and their followers at a place called Komsing 40 miles from Pasighat. The brutal murder jolted the Government from the policy of isolationism and a punitive expedition under the command of Major General Bower with several hundred troops marched to the hills to crush the resistance.

Though the policy of least interference was followed but for Administrative expediency the area was divided in two regions—the Balipara Frontier Tract and Sadiya Frontier Tract each under the charge of a Political Officer. It was in 1948 when six districts were carved out and named as Sela Sub Agency, Subansiri Area, Abor Hills, Mishmi Hills, Tirap Frontier Tract, Tuensang Area with headquarters at Charduar, Kimin, Pasighat, Sadiya, Margherita and Tuensang respectively.

The massacre of troops and officials in October 1953 at Achingmori in Upper Subansiri opened a new chapter. Government realized the imperative need of reorienting its Frontier policy by overhauling the Administrative set up with formation of a new cadre called Indian Frontier Administrative Service. The men of the service were mostly drawn from Defense who were thought to be more pragmatic and could vigorously pursue the twin objective of consolidation of Administration and development.

Dr. Verrier Elwin, a distinguished Scholar was brought in as Adviser to the Tribal Affairs. It was Elwin who became the architect of the New Policy and his 'Philosophy' for NEFA spelt out in details on how to approach and appreciate the tribal problem. The new policy had visible impact as the existing socio-religious institutions of the tribes were least disturbed and there was no social tension in the society on the wake of developmental activities. For the first time in the history of the Frontier the Government reached every corner of the vast territory and exercised remarkable control without resorting to force or coercion.

Yet Dr. Elwin has been criticized for enunciation of a policy of keeping the tribal people as 'Musuem specimen' thereby denying them to come closer to the main stream. It was not surprising therefore that after his death there was gradual shifts in the policy and his 'Philosophy' for NEFA' remained only an academic interest.

The story un-folded in this book describes the situation in those early days of North East Frontier particularly the Siang Frontier Division which at the time was known as Abor Hills District inhabited by the colourful tribe—the Adis.

It was soon after the great Earth-quake of 1950 and I saw the devastation which bared the hills and changed the course of the Siang river—the main stream of Brahmaputra.

The narrative details include the life in Adi villages yet untouched by outside influence, the social system, food habits, religion of the people, belief in supernatural, domination of spirits in every day life and important function of the shamans.

I am grateful to my well wishers especially the officers of the Research Department of Arunachal Pradesh, who always encouraged me to write and taken keen interest in my works.

My thanks are also to Ramesh Kumar of Western Book Depot, Guwahati, for promptly arranging the publication of the Book.

Lastly, I acknowledge the help of Hira Das, M.K., Radhakrishnan, K. Sidhardhan who made painstaking efforts to type out the manuscript.

Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee.

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Prelude

I was born in a hill station of North East India. As I grew up amidst the surroundings of sylvan beauty my boyhood days were full of romanticism. Near the house was a sprawling pine forest through which a stony path meandered, a stream flowed by the side continuously chanting the sweet melodies. In the distance a long range of blue hills clothed in evergreen forest presented a fascinating sight.

I along with the boys of my age stole time to ride to the forest to get lost in the wilderness for few hours. During rainy season the town was soaked in frequent downpour, the rain dripping through the pine needles, the water gushing in narrow streams in ear splitting roar. In winter heavy frost enveloped the surroundings with a thick white sheet.

Beyond the pine forest was the climb to the hill range to a height of six thousand feet. It was an adventure for a day when we strapped our tiffin box and went to the peak from where ranges of distant Himalayas were unfurled in magnificent splendour. Far across the spur of the hills was the vast vista of flat land about which we had only a faint idea.

My town was beautiful at that time calm and quiet despite the seat of the provincial Government and nascent commercial activities. There were patches of green every where

elaborately nursed and nurtured. The brute hands did not dare to uproot them. The officials who were mostly English had their spacious lawns trimmed with flowers among which forget me not was a special favourite.

I remember the day when the big church was gutted in a devastating fire and the gloom and despair fell on the people. There were hush and hush talks among us the children the world is coming to an end so it has been told in the Bible.

An event of far reaching consequence overtook the town. A monoplane driven by a daring pilot flew over the housetops and landed in the polo ground. The entire town went mad on the sight of mysterious machine perched quietly on the grassy land.

A year later the German army marched to Poland and the war clouds gathered in the European sky.

Near our house was the cantonment where one of the Battalion of the Gurkhas had their camps. Small and stocky hill men in their khaki outfit drilled every morning in the parade ground and practiced musketry to the astonishing gaze of us young children. We tried to imitate them; offering salutes to the officers leading the platoon. The bugles sounded every evening:

Tuttu Tuturu Tuturu Tu

Tuttu Tuturu Tu Tu -

We imitated the refrain by playing the tune in our improvised flute and nurtured a sincere wish that the day when we grow up we too will enrol in the army.

Many legends surround the gurkhas but one incident which happened in the cantonment had a sad note.

Gurkhas were known to be stickler to rigid discipline and command. One particular night to the sentry post approached an old man. The sentry as a routine shouted a halt. The old man could not understand a word of English and continued his approach. But the sentry did not budge an inch from the regulation. The bullet from his musket went off killing the old man on the spot.

Later to his terrific grief found that he has killed his own father.

We had exciting moments during the days of Dussera in

the cantonment when gorkhas celebrated their festival with great pomp and gaiety.

On the third day of the festival a buffalo is led in before a bare chested strong man clad in a dhoti. Sea of festive people thronged in every side. The tension rose and crowd sunk in deep silence. Suddenly the man raised his khukri and in a single blow severed the head of the buffalo amid the roar of the frenzied crowd.

At the time of the war came another band of soldiers all drawn from the Mountains of North East. They were the men of Assam Regiment who appeared to our wide eyes as total strangers. Later the regimental centre was shifted to the outskirts of the city and we had but occasional meeting with them.

One day an astrologer came to our house—a widely known person reputed for forecast of future events. My mother sought his help to predict my future. Most of the time I was supposed to be moody dreaming of events far removed from reality.

The astrologer took my palm, looked at it intently and then said something ominous to the great grief of the family especially to my mother. The boy will not stay in the house—the destiny has bound him out ward to the far east. The astrologer who was also an occultist offered his help to appease the wandering star to forestall the tragedy.

Later event proved his forecast nearer to the truth. Except to far east I actually landed in mountains of North East far removed from the house and the family.

During my school days the town received a jolt from the increasing march of troops from all over the world. There were Americans, Australians, Canadians, Chinese and host of African Negroes. The sprawling pine forest became their regular rendezvous and sound of boots on the pebbled streets broke the quietness of the nights.

We became friendly with Amrieans who were always jolly and cheerful. Once while returning from winning a game of football we broke into rhythm of popular music which annoyed the British tommies who hurled us filthy abuses. We were then of young blood and more so returning from a victory match could not tolerate the slander and replied with equal invectives. The Tommies then rolled up their sleeves and

doubled up. It would have been a bloody mess as we no were where a match to them. An American MP who watched the scene quietly, suddenly sprang up, unfastened the batton and charged the enraged Tommies who retraced their steps to march off to barracks.

We profusely thanked the American in our pidgin English—OK Jonny, Bye Bye!

To us British and Australians were far too proud and arrogant.

The incident however blown out of proportion when cautioned note was served by the local police and our guardians took us to task for misbehaving in public.

The Headmaster of our school was a serious person—strictly academic. He seldom spared his rod to teach the errand students. The discipline in the school was rigid—never yielded to pressure. Once a boy failed in the test examination. His father came to plead for him but the witty Headmaster replied, 'If I allow your blessed boy then why I should not be generous to the tables and chairs too!

During the war years the town was agog with intense drill on air raid precaution. Trenches sprung up everywhere, window panes glued with papers, street lights hooded. There were underground bunkers with telephones, food and dressing.

We had frequent practice on ditching to bunkers. The sirens hooted with ominous shrill. The real bombing however did not come though a straggler Japanese Zero was spotted in the high sky.

Once a suspected spy was apprehended near our house when he was found observing the movement of troops. The man we were told was a Japanese disguised as pedler.

Before the war the Chinese hawkers used to visit our houses. We had deep compassion for them and offered double the price for ordinary merchandise. We saw in the newspapers the horror picture of Chinese being dragged and slaughtered by Japanese and young children boyonated before their mothers by the savage soldiers.

But the Chinese solders whom we saw later only aroused our derisive laughter. They were no where near any of the troops stationed in the area. Lousy lot—wrapped in baggy

trousers they often broke the line only to be brought back by hard task masters.

In later period of war years rumours were afloat on Subash Bose's liberation Army. Bose only once visited our town in 1937 as President of Indian National Congress and we had but only a faint vision of him. I was too young then to know of his political ambition but my elders spoke very high of him. Four years later he escaped from India for the freedom of his country. We used to spend several hours during the night to catch his voice in the radio. Only once did we succeed to hear the announcement, 'This is free India Radio calling from Saigon'.

After the war a few released persons of Azad Hind Fauz returned to their homes. One of them still thought liberation can come only through the barrel of the gun. He began to motivate us with fiery speech. We enthusiastically responded to his call and had a thrilling exercises on guerrilla warfare in the sprawling pine forest. Local Police eventually got a wind of our nocturnal activities. Many of us ran from the house to escape arrest.

The year 1946 brought the news of impending Independence. We thought freedom meant discarding anything linked with British. Sizeable English population then slowly started thinning out. One by one we saw familiar faces vanishing. Particularly sad was the departure of an old man whom we met every time on our way to school. He used to drive an old model vintage car and smiled at us while passing by the road.

A year later the country became free. Tri colour fluttered over the Secretariat Building.

Suddenly the peace and slumber of my favourite town was shattered by the roar of the bull-dozer and gnawing sound of the cross cut saws. Thousands of trees fell to the ground. Over night the sprawling pine forest the play ground of my boyhood days vanished and gone for ever. In their place rose the buildings—an ugly manifestation of encroaching civilization. The scene also repeated in other areas and first casualties were the beautiful trees so meticulously preserved by the earlier rulers.

Independence Alas ! did not bring cheers to me. After two years stint in the college I opted for higher study in distant Allahabad. In my old college the laboratory facilities were meagre. We had only spirit lamps not the bunsen burner. Later at Allahabad I was laughed at when I could not show the demonstration on oxidizing and reducing flame.

I enrolled myself in Agricultural Institute run by American Baptist Mission. The Professors were dedicated and good task Masters. I had particular liking for Professor Warner who taught us Animal Husbandry. He was very much punctual in attendance and seldom missed a class. Once during a wild cat strike in the cattle farm—the Professor along with his wife attended the milking of the cows.

Across Jamuna in the Ewing Christian College, I used to pass my week days with Dr. Edwin Harper—an erudite scholar with charming personality.

My days in Allahabad however not happy. The cruel heat of the summer months was almost unbearable. The temperature often shoot up beyond 116° F. Coming from a cool place the atrocious climate proved too much for me.

Once during visiting friends in Manauri Air base some miles away from the City the heat struck me on the face and I rolled from the Bicycle. A kindly passerby took me to a shade. Next day, I boarded a train to Nazibabad from where I motored to Pauri—perched over a hill of 6000'ft where the temperature under shade was 70° F.

The hills again beckoned me. There was no place beautiful than Garowal Himalayas. I got a mutual friend and hitch hiked to the places hallowed by travellers. Thus I saw the place in Rudra Prayag where Jim Corbet shot the Leopard, Dancing Alakananda, Deba Prayag—the confluence of Ganga and Alakananda and Risikesh where fish swarm the river but never allowed to be trapped. We made the journey to Dehradun and finally ended our trip at Mussouri.

After my career ended at Allahabad, I returned to my home again only to face the grim reality of finding a job.

When I was on look out for employment, a kindly man suggested me to apply to the Agricultural Officer, North East Frontier Agency.

I hurriedly prepared a draft and despatched. Some days later a call card arrived asking me to appear in person before the Agricultural Officer.

I had but faint idea about the North East Frontier Agency. These places were excluded areas and not elaborately mentioned in our school geography. We knew only of Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts inhabited by fierce tribes—Aka, Daffa, Abor, Mishmi. None of them were seen in our town.

A sign board large enough hung on the wall of a double storied building proclaiming the office of Agricultural Officer, North East Frontier Agency.

It was May 1952. The air was laden with heavy moisture. I approached the building in a queer feeling what to say if I am asked some odd questions. A door swung apart. A man called my name. In rapid stride I entered the room to confront a man who was reclining on a chair before a large oval table. He was passed middle age, baldish with deep piercing eyes. Obviously I found him a shrewd man with cunning disposition. A staff was standing nearby with note book and a pencil. The sharp eyes focussed on me and remained stationary for few moments. Then he began the dialogue as to whether I was ever been to a hill.

To him the place where I am born is not a hill neither high lands of Kumaon and Garowal where I moved. The real hill is the North East Frontier Agency. Did I ever heard the name of the place?

I had to reluctantly admit my profound ignorance of the geography of the land.

To my surprise he suddenly changed the topic and asked would I accept a job if offered rupees one fifty a month.

This sum was big enough at the time. I have asked for a job and here it is. Why should I refuse it.

He dictated a note to the fellow nearby and directed me to the Head Clerk for the appointment letter.

I sighed a relief and immediately left the room lest he call me again to test my nerve by asking odd questions.

Head Clerk called Barababu was deeply engrossed in the files. The big table was littered with papers obviously waiting for his attention.

He had a thin feature with protruding nose, bald head and rather a narrow chin.

As soon I introduced myself Barababu pushed his spectacles far on the bridge of the nose and looked at me intently. His owlish face suddenly spread with mischievous smile as he spoke.

'So you are the new aspirant for the job. Do you know what an enormous risk it is?

Frankly I did not know how it is. It must be an adventure to explore the unknown Territory.

Barababu was least satisfied with my answer and persisted with greater vehemence.

'Could I differentiate between the mountain and the hill ?

Silly question—I thought but this time Barababu did not wait for an answer instead he proceeded to narrate his own story.

Fifteen years already passed in the service—three fourth under the British. But those were the days of golden era when Stroner, JP Mills, JFD Walker were his boss. They knew their job, never did wrong and not like us. We people no good. 'See how many files I am dealing now. Is there any appreciation? No, never. My boss will not lookup, knew only bragging. But Mill Saheb? Have you heard his name? Well he is no more but read his books on the Nagas. He had all the qualities under the sun. What he did for me do you know? No one believed nor you will believe. I put up a draft to him on something of importance. Next day he called me. I thought my fate is now sealed—a call from the Adviser to Lower Division Clerk must be ominous. In great trepidation I entered the room and saw him fiddling with my note. I was in a dhoti and half sleeve shirt, shabbily dressed one may say. He looked at me and asked why I cannot have better dress. I never lied and so I spoke the truth. Poor pay so could not afford.

A smile writ on his face. He drew up a paper and scribbled something and handed over to me. What more he said you know? The draft which I prepared is excellent and I deserve a promotion.

It was raise indeed. I was promoted to Upper Division Clerk within such a short time.

But then those were the glorious days. Alas, Never to come back again.

Barababu became emotional. His voice rose above the din of the office as he drew comparison of two system.

Suddenly the door swung open, outcame the orderly, 'Saheb Bolata Hai'—Saheb is calling.

Barababu's face fell like sunken plum. The old man must have heard all that has been said. In a huff he made a dash to the room of the boss and never seen for the rest of the day.

I was given a salary of rupees one fifty and was directed to report to District Agricultural Officer Abor Hills District, Pasighat.

A young man was bending over a big sheet of paper apparently busy in drawing a map. The caption read--'NORTH EAST FRONTIER AGENCY—ABOR HILLS DISTRICT'. Near the bottom of the line a large letter written in read ink PASIGHAT.

The slim fellow of medium height introduced himself as Ranjit Mukerjee who has been appointed as an Officer in Agricultural Training Institute, Pasighat. He had just come out from the University with a post graduate degree in soil science.

I developed an instant liking for him for his friendly and affable nature. He had a persuasive sweet voice and drawn me to the intimate conversation as if we were known to each other. His neat handwriting must have impressed the Agricultural Officer who found him good enough in drawal of maps of the unexplored Territory.

Mukerjee had not been to Pasighat nor to any place beyond the Brahmaputra. Yet he knew much of its geography. He gave me the startling information that no vehicle run beyond the great river and every approach is by air. Air means aeroplane in NEFA.

I reached Dibrugarh—the terminal station of the Railway in Upper Assam. A porter took me to a hotel which had an imposing signboard, 'The National Lodge'.

A man with enormous fat in his belly was sitting on a chair in the portico. Seeing my approach he sprang up, extending the hand in a familiar gesture.

'The National Lodge is a refuge for all those who need it'.

He turned to be the Manager-cum-Proprietor of the Lodging house. His clients are mostly the travellers to the Frontier. He himself never been to any place but knew the area as if how often he had been there.

When I mentioned my destination Pasighat the Manager beamed with smile. 'Oh, How lucky you are to go to a place of abundance. No worry for you that I would take care. Tomorrow morning sharp at 8O' clock just stand near the Char Ali, the four road crossing. A bus will take you to Mohanbari, where a plane is already positioned to fly you to Pasighat.

Manager's rhetoric had convincing touch. I felt most assured at least the man has given me the comfort.

I went to the river side to gather a view. Across the vast expanse the Sillouette of mountain range presented sensational impression, mysterious and foreboding. A thrill of an adventure suddenly possessed me.

The river front has not been the same which I saw fifteen years earlier as a child. It was far away at least a mile or so. A sprawling park known as company garden was a favourite haunt of town folk. The steamers from far away land lined the jetty.

Berry White medical school with its imposing buildings, planters club and the court, a long drive along the narrow but clean road, tea gardens dotting the fringe of town and above all the river with its steady course left an indelible impression on my young mind.

The Dibru Sadiya Railway—an adjunct of the Assam Bengal Line had its bogies painted blue. The Railway ran upto Makum further up to North East to serve the tea garnens.

Alas, what I see Dibrugarh now tragic and beyond imagination. An angry river roaring all the time, fuming and fretting. Its innumerable whirlpool coming nearer to the bank. The waves lashing on the unstable soil biting it away inch by inch. A desperate attempt being made to stem the onslaught by erecting spurs, the huge wooden crossed structures jutting to the water to stem the current.

A formidable exercise against the rising tide.

A river so placid' calm and serene beauty only a few years back now so ugly.

It happened due to devastating earth quake of 1950 when river bed rose, land slides and massive erosion blocked the outlet. Trees uprooted from own habitat, hills torn apart and water chartered a new course.

The expanse of the river is now several miles, from north to south bank. In winter it is in many channels. A ferry would take several hours to cross, negotiating number of sand bars.