

TAWANG

The Land of Mon



Neeru Nanda

This is the first published account of a remote Indian border subdivision which was claimed by the Chinese during the border dispute of 1962. While Ladakh and Bhutan have been opened to tourists, Tawang still remains a strictly restricted area. Hence the particular value of this book. It vividly describes the life, loves, customs; and the fears and foibles of the Monpa tribe who inhabit Tawang.

The author who belongs to the Indian Administrative Service had the unique opportunity of observing Monpa society at close quarters during her long tenure as Additional Deputy Commissioner, Tawang.

Against the background of the village community and its socio-economic structure has been woven a fascinating account of mountain graziers, travels along remote Himalayan tracts to hidden shrines and mysterious, snow-bound lakes.

While describing Buddhism in Tawang, particularly the incarnate lamas and the Tawang Monastery, the author has highlighted remnants of the pre-Buddhist era; in particular, legends of primaevial gods and goddesses and the ancient arts of black magic and ritual poisoning which are still extant in remote pockets of Tawang.

Jacket Transparency: Brigadier R.K. Gaur

ISBN 0-7069-1300-0

NEERU NANDA was born in New Delhi on 3rd April, 1948. Her father was in the armed forces. During his postings in the north-eastern region she acquired her love for tribal society. After her post-graduation from the Delhi School of Social Work, where she secured a first division with first position in the University, she entered the Indian Administrative Service in 1971 and opted for a posting in Arunachal Pradesh. She was posted in April 1974 as Additional Deputy Commissioner, Tawang, where she remained till June 1977.

From August 1977 till March 1980 she served as Director, Estate Management, Delhi Development Authority, and is at present with the Delhi Administration as Registrar, Cooperative Societies.

Miss Nanda is a keen trekker. She has qualified in Basic Mountaineering from Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in Uttarkashi and led an all-girls team to Kuari Khal under the auspices of the Delhi Mountaineering Association in October 1978. She has also specialised in a study of border affairs and has lectured in the National Defence College on Himalayan frontiers. She is fluent in Assamese and has a working knowledge of the Monpa language which has enabled her to collect and translate Monpa folk songs and poems which figure in this book.

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Regd. Office: 5 Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002
H.O. Vikas House, 20/4 Industrial Area, Sahibabad 201010
Distt. Ghaziabad, U.P. (India)

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ISBN 0-7039-1300-0

1V2N3313

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Printed at Dhawan Printing Works, 26-A Mayapuri, New Delhi-110064 (India)

FOR
GURUDEV

*Only a few moments now
Before silence sets in.
My life overflowing the edge
I smash before you
Like an earthen vessel.*

Acknowledgements

But for earnest and industrious Charu Dutt Mehta who deciphered my handwriting and typed out the manuscript, this book would never have seen the light of day. Shri R.C. Dua has also been a pillar of strength in this task.

I extend my thanks to my boss, Shri M.N. Buch, previously Vice-Chairman, Delhi Development Authority, for the introduction to my publisher and also for turning the Nelson's eye when I was busy writing my book within the covers of some important-looking government file.

I am grateful to my mother who read my first scrawls with great patience and said, "I know you are an I.A.S. officer but must you say it in every other line." After which I went over the book with an eraser, assiduously rubbing out all references to the first person.

My thanks also go to my sister, Reena who has done her best to make the text resemble the English language and to my father who gave me his strong, silent support over the two years I spent on this book. Though he is my greatest ostensible critic he is still my loyal admirer (much as he would hate to admit it).

Shri Rashid Yusuf Ali, of the Indian Frontier Service had a deep scholarly interest in the Kameng region, some of which he bequeathed to me. Lama Tsering Dorji, loyal companion in all my tours, related most of the ancient legends recorded here. My debt to both is invaluable.

To my faithful Doka, my Extra Assistant Commissioner Shri M.R.L. Rao, my staff and all my Monpa friends who made my stay in Tawang a delight, from which this book was born.

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Prelude

You ask me why I dwell in the green mountains;
I smile and make no reply for my heart is free of care.
As the peach blossom flows downstream
And is gone into the unknown,
I have a world apart that is not among men.

—Li Po

On Sunday mornings, when I am alone, I sit chin on knees, on the warm wooden planks of my little verandah and watch Tawang. The silence is honeyed and golden in the November sun. A few calendulas and marigolds make splashes of orange and yellow in the dried garden.

The first range of mountains in front of me is smooth, moulded and many-coloured. On the Tawang plateau the colours are yellow and green—yellow of the sun and yellow-green of dying grass. Further behind to the north, the second line of mountains is sharp and craggy, black and bottled-green peaks covered by cotton clouds streaked with sunlight. The pointed peaks of the range from Bumpala to Geishila stand in a sweeping line—angels' wings transfixed in dance. It is the golden season, all is turning to gold before the snow sets in and the country side starts gleaming again in its winter colours.

Sela Pass is hidden to the south by a poplar and silver fir, both young trees, embracing each other and blocking the view. There is a breeze in the willows. The apple trees have shed their leaves. The red-beaked winter crows have already arrived and are cawing away.

Doka (my ayah) comes and brings me a cushion to sit on, a

cushion for my back. I sip my mug of tea, warming my hands around it.

When the sun becomes difficult to bear I shift inside into the glassed verandah which is suddenly cold, full of bumble bees whose humming distracts me. Doka comes to kill them with the *Illustrated Weekly* before she brings me lunch, as always, on a tray in my room while Drema (my dog) squeals indignantly from the kitchen where she is confined. Sometimes Doka releases her when she comes bounding in, puffing and panting, her pink tongue hanging out, leaping like mad and squealing away to glory. This is her usual way of welcoming meal times which she must share with me, standing with two paws on my knee or on the arm of the chair and giving me a gentle push with them now and again when she feels that I have forgotten her.

Nowadays, the evenings are cold but, when it was not so cold, I could while away in walking, what is, for me, the most depressing hour of the day—half-light when the power house has not yet started the generator and the evening shadows are just spreading into darkness. I have this cloistered walk down a cemented path which is bounded by the eastern wall of my house on one side and a line of apple trees on the other. I often pace up and down this path in the fading light and watch a few stars make their appearance while the sun sets in a flame of orange and red beyond Chongchongma. There is a nip in the air, the trees are very still, the mountains silent and dark purple except (in winters) when a blazing fire lights up some distant grazing ground.

Walking and watching the Bhutan range never fails to cure my black moods and I count each peak and grazing ground where we have sat and camped—Ngorgomche, which can't be seen in twilight, neither Nyngsangla, but Pensar Ganya—yes—and Gudpi.

Who could ever forget Gudpi—over whom I shed so many tears—a few of tiredness after the gruelling climb and so many of defiance and despair? After Gudpi—Chongchongma (the trident god) and Jama Punsum (the three sisters). I have left a bit of myself everywhere in those rough tracks and rocks of the southern range.

Tawang has taken great chunks out of me. Now that the end is near I am somewhat at a loss, like a ship off keel, not so certain of its destination.

This morning I went through my old notes and snippets on

Tawang, beginning with that article I was so proud of on Monpa poetry. Re-reading it now, I could only wince at the laboured pretentiousness of style, but as I started reading my other notes my heart lifted, for I found these rang true, since they were written, rather scrawled, by lamplight or firelight mostly during tours and were not written with any audience in mind.

I have decided now, thinking and mulling over it, that if I am to present a book at all it will have to be a mere collection of these notes. Let these broken and snatched memories—these perhaps totally unconnected anecdotes—form whatever colour, whatever tapestry to which they can lend themselves.

If I wanted to be “learned” about it, I could always call it the “case-study approach” because without it research efforts are mere skeletons, giving as little idea of the people they describe as the picture of a skeleton gives of human beings. But then the Monpas are interesting enough in themselves not to require any portentous justification, so let me continue with my narrative and if there is anything of anthropological interest it will have to be gleaned from the chaff of these jumbled memories. I think more and more, that eventually this book will turn out to be like the Duchess’s pig-baby of whom Alice said, “It would have made a very ugly human being, but as animals go, it made a rather handsome pig.”

SHERPAS THROUGH THEIR RITUALS

Sherry B Ortner

The Sherpas of the Himalayas practice Tibetan Buddhism, a variety of Mahayana Buddhism that has never before been studied in its social setting by an anthropologist. This book is at once a general interpretation of Sherpa culture, an examination of the relationship between the Sherpas' Buddhism and other aspects of their society, and a theoretical contribution to the study of ritual and religious symbolism. A key factor is the dimension of Buddhism that emphasizes the ideal of individual autonomy and social withdrawal.

HIPPIES—*A Study of Their Drug Habits and Sexual Customs*

Tribhuwan Kapur

This is the first serious work on hippies in India. Dealing with the hard-core hippie, the author has identified three typifying characteristics: drug use, sexual customs, and a philosophy of life. Through purposive sampling, wide-ranging interviews and the use of case studies, he arrives at a level of insight which explodes the many myths about hippies anywhere in the world.

A HIMALAYAN TRIBE—*From Cattle to Cash*

Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf

A detailed study of the economy and cultural life of the Apa Tanis, a remarkable tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The development of the Apa Tanis in the past thirty years stands in sharp contrast to the decline of many other Indian tribes. The author describes their unique advancement with the insight and sympathy gained in a life-time's study of Indian tribal populations.

ANCIENT HINDU REFUGEES—*Badaga Social History 1550-1975*

Paul Hockings

In the sixteenth century, the Badagas fled from the Empire of Vijayanagar and settled down in the Nilgiri Massif. Thus began one of the most successful community transplants that South India has ever witnessed. This book lays out in detail the phenomenal success of the Badagas who now occupy 370 villages and number around 120,000 people.