

NEW HORIZONS OF NORTH EAST

J.D. BAVEJA



THE BOOK

The author has tried to give in this book a true account of the life in North East. Though the primary object in writing this book is to tell the readers about the customs and manners of the people in the North East, he has also given in the process, his comments on their peculiar problems also.

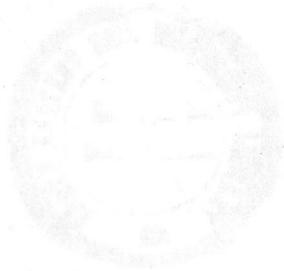
North East cannot wait any more for slow plans. It is only a crash course that can save the day. The area has international borders and we are being watched by many keen eyes. Even now some hands of guerrillas roam about the forests with foreign weapons supplied to them to harm us. We can disarm them but that is the physical side of it. We have to rehabilitate them. This is the real problem. It is not an easy task. There are the problems of refugees, soil conservation and erosion by the fast flowing rivers. There is still need of quick communication links and also with rest of the country. In the North East we are sitting on oil which is the life-line of the Nation. We have to protect this area with all our might besides preparing the people to stand as sentinals of the freedom of India.

Rs. 195.00

THE AUTHOR

Shree J. D. BAVEJA is a broadcaster who stayed in the North East for a considerable period of time. An inquisitive mind, he has travelled throughout the length and breadth of this Zone and studied its problems. He has first hand information which is the result of his own travels and brush with the history of Assam in its formulative years. He also worked closely with Dr. Verrier Elwin, an author of world fame who ended his life in the then NEFA administration as an Adviser to the Governor of Assam on Tribal Affairs. Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru loved tribal life and the then North East Frontier Agency was looked after by the External Affairs Ministry which was under his personal charge. Jawahar Lal Nehru had also created the Indian Administrative Frontier Service to serve the special needs of the frontier areas of India. The 1962 episode on the borders of the then NEFA and Assam had changed all that. Shree BAVEJA was there during this period of transition. His personal knowledge of men and matters would certainly help the readers understand the North East better.

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OF
NORTH EAST



J.D. RAVEJA

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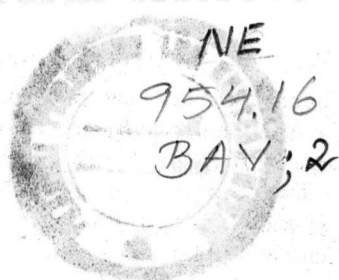
J.D. BAVEJA

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OF
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Preface

I was in Assam from 1950 to 1970. When I returned in 1980 as an old hand to tackle new problems in the realm of media, the old Assam had given way to various States and Union Territories after the North Eastern Re-organisation Act, 1971 came into existence. A new generation of people had come of age with whom I had to renew my ties. B.P. Chaliha, my friend and philosopher, was no more. Dr. Verrier Elwin with whom I used to discuss tribal problems over endless puffing of Tiruchi cigars had breathed his last even before I had left Shillong. Tribal stalwarts like J.B. Hagjar from the N.C. Hills and Soi Soi Terang from Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) had kicked the bucket. Many top ranking journalists with whom I had the privilege to work had left for other assignments. Men like Bishnuram Medhi who held sway over Assam for decades also passed on. Now there are the newly carved out areas of North Eastern Region, with Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram as Union Territories under Lt. Governors. There are the States of parent Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura under different Governors and administrators shaping their own destiny. At one stage or the other each area had broken away on ethnic and other economic grounds from Assam. Nine years is a very short time in the existence of an area. The new region is still struggling to re-shape its destiny along its own genius. My only regret is that the mother state has not changed much in spite of its oil, tea, jute and timber. Gauhati is still its dingy self with old pot-holes on the roads. The rains choke its drainage system every summer. Brahmaputra has not been tamed so far and eats away large chunks of land like the good old days. Schools and colleges have come up even in villages like summer rain producing a large number of boys and girls for the desk in government offices. Assam is self-

sufficient in rice and seasonal fruits but it has not become the affluent valley which I expected to see after a gap of ten years. In fact, a friend remarked jokingly that if I had thrown a cigar butt somewhere in 1970 in a corner of Gauhati I could still look for it in 1980 ! Of course it is a fantasy.

It is not the role of a friend or a scribe to fix blames for the tardy growth of Assam. All I can say is that unless the people rise themselves to better their lot and take advantage of various development plans, they cannot achieve much. The refugees of the Punjab are a living example. They have built a new industrialised Punjab with a luxuriant agricultural growth within a span of thirty years of independence. North East needs industrial and agricultural revolutions on the same lines. There is a vast scope of agro-based industries which can feed the entire eastern India. The oil residue can be used for hundred and one projects for marketing throughout the country. The entire North East has got only one English daily, which comes out regularly from Gauhati. There are other one sheet dailies and weeklies in different areas which have not yet matured. I had left Assam in 1970 and I found myself back to the pavilion in 1980. Indeed it has been a home coming with new affairs to study and new horizons to map.

Gauhati

J.D. BAVEJA

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1

My Advent to Assam

When I landed up in Assam in 1950, nearly thirty one years ago my first contact was with the Assamese people. I had just turned twenty three and full of life. I had started official life in All India Radio at Delhi, the then Deccan Radio Aurangabad, Vijaywada in the South and Jullundar in the then East Punjab. I was a restless soul always in search of a new adventure, which was in my blood stream. In 1948 when I was at Delhi, the department was in search of Urdu knowing hands who could handle the affairs of the Deccan Radio, Aurangabad. I raised my hand to join the venture. After a short spell I was pushed over to Vijaywada in the then Madras State in spite of the fact that I had no knowledge of the language at all. I packed a suit case and shot out to the hot city. I stayed there couple of months and was sent to Jullundur in the then East Punjab. Those were the great days of tension with an imminent danger of a new conflict with Pakistan across the border. I was dreaming of getting back to Lahore where I did my first year of Law when the partition of India came. Amidst all this I was given marching orders to the then Assam. Usually people who make much noise in the official life are pushed across to such far off postings. I was a disturbed soul. Before joining Law I had toyed with the idea of joining Air Force. The blue uniform did attract me, but the thought of carrying a gun on my shoulder was repugnant to me. I have always preferred a pen to a pistol. While at Lahore I used to go round the film studios to find out if there was any scope for a film career. I nearly succeeded in landing up a major role but I had to leave Lahore after partition to find myself in

Delhi via Karachi and Bombay. My father who was a Police Officer in the NWFP had already left with my mother for Delhi where due to the good offices of Sardar Patel he was re-employed on a top post. His job was to re-organise Delhi Police Force most of which had left for Pakistan. I joined the Law College at Delhi. I found Law terse and boring to my youthful ways. I knocked at the doors of All India Radio, with which I was associated since my Peshawar days as a student and got a job as a programme man. My parents did not like trying my luck in the films at Bombay. My father wanted me to be a member of Parliament while my mother thought I was too naughty to be trusted and wanted me to be near her in Delhi. But that was not to be. I stayed hardly six months at AIR Delhi and was on my way to Aurangabad in the then liquidated Hyderabad State.

Assam had never been in my itinerary, though I had heard about the beauty and legends of Shillong from a school master who used to coach me at Peshawar. Once there was a B.T. College at Shillong where teachers could get admission easily when they failed to secure one in rest of India.

One evening when I was asked to proceed to North East for a fresh posting I did not bat an eye-lid much to the surprise of the man who gave me the marching orders. Usually people not only resist such offers but manage to get them cancelled through some un-official channels. I had a strong channel at Delhi with my father at a top post in Delhi. I refused to use that channel. There had always been a vacuum in my life—a quest for the unknown which haunted me since my days of childhood. Being a frontier man I have never been afraid of deserts, hills, rivers and deep valleys. I remember I used to roam the forests of Abbotabad in the NWFP all by myself from dawn to dusk just for the fun of it. I asked my wife to get ready for the North East and together with our ten months old toddler we took a tedious train to Assam from Delhi via Lucknow. The experience while touching the shores of Assam was interesting. There was no bridge at Brahmaputra. You had to detrain at Amingaon and then cross over by a ferry to Pandu. It was not a novel experience for us. I belong to Dera Ismail Khan which was in the North Western Province of

India. We used to get into a ferry to cross the river Sindh and catch a train for the Punjab.

At Amingaon and Pandu I had then found the Bihari labour who transported our goods on their heads. When I reached Assam I was quite non-plussed. Where was I to go? There was no one to receive me and my family. There was none from my office to greet me since I was comparatively a junior official. I had of course written to a Sindhi gentleman whom I had known earlier at Hyderabad, Sindh. He did turn up. He said he was living at the Borjar air field and whether I would like to live there. I said okay and went by his jeep to share his hut. I had the first taste of sleeping on built in Bamboo cots with low thatched ceilings. After having settled down I assembled my dismantled cycle and rode to Gauhati to report for duty. My wife and son used to come along with me to office and would sit in the waiting room till we went out for lunch and after an afternoon spell at the office back to Borjar. This lasted for about fifteen days till a kind man found a house for me in Uzan Bazar. I was young then and life was gay. I made friends quickly and before anyone could imagine I had picked up the Assamese language. My wife did not lag behind. The little one too started mumbling short words in Assamese.

Gauhati then was a dingy little town with dark evenings. Street lights were few. City Buses were out-dated even then. The cycle rickshaw was the popular transport. The Gauhati Civil Hospital was ill equipped. Cost of living was high even then when compared to rest of India. Fruits like banana, oranges and pine apples were cheap in season. It was considered economical to buy everything in bulk like eggs and dry rations. Fancy Bazar even then was in the solid grip of the sweet smiling Marwaris who traded in, right from match boxes to oil from Digboi. I found the Assamese quite content with their easy way of life in then loose fitting kurtas and dhotis with a never ending habit of chewing tamul pan (betel nuts and the green leaf). The elite looked to tea gardens for jobs and petty distributing concerns. Most of the people preferred government jobs. The various pan shops provided a forum to the Assamese intellectuals to discuss science and literary traditions. Drama was then in its infancy though a few Assamese films had done well in the market. I met

intellectuals like Late Principal Hem Barua, Playwright, Prabin Phookan and novelist Jogesh Das at these centres to learn a lot about Assamese life and culture. It was good fun. But each personality that I met talked about the beauty and charm of tribal life. Their personal experiences were limited to visits to Khasis in Shillong and tribal forms of expression in various folk songs and dances performed in Gauhati on festive occasions. Hem Barua later on went to various hill areas to see things for himself when he became a member of Parliament. Late B.P. Chaliha was then an emerging figure on the social and political horizon of Assam with his deep love and respect for the tribal people. He was considered to be a progressive in the field of human relations. Much to the anger of some people he had visited the then Naga Hills to establish contacts with the local people.

I in this interval had struck friendship with Mohiuddin Ahmed a professional photographer who was fond of chess and reject even customers if he happened to be in a critical position. He and I spent nights together in his studios at never ending chess games. He introduced me to photography and helped me buy my first sophisticated camera at easy instalments. This new possession of mine fired my imagination. I began to look for subjects. I photographed the flooded Palasbari and Rangia towns and many scenes of the Brahmaputra river at dawn and dusk. The pines and water falls of the then Khasi and Jaintia Hills became the target of my lense. My excursions into the tribal areas were also years of hectic activities in the then tribal areas of Assam. Sixth schedule to the Constitution of India had been provided for autonomous tribal districts with the institution of district councils which were given a complete administrative set-up including district council courts to decide local tribal issues. The district councils had a complete sway as far as customary laws were concerned. Land and forest disputes were also looked after the district council. In fact the then Garo Hills district council under its energetic Chief Executive Member, Captain Williamson Sangma even went to the extent of introducing a district council bus service which linked the hills and plains areas. The Khasis, Jaintias, Mikirs, Dimasa Kacharis and Mizos had agreed to run the district councils, but the Nagas under the leadership of Phizo had

struck a note of discord. Phizo wanted a separate identity for the Nagas and would have nothing to do with the Constitution of India. Many unpleasant scenes were created in Nagaland when an entire mob of thousands in the football ground at Kohima walked away when they were about to be addressed by India's Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru in the presence of Burmese Prime Minister U. Nu.

There are many versions of the story. The Nagas wanted to read out a memorandum in support of their demand for independence. A section of the officials who apprehended trouble was in favour of allowing them to read it, while the hard core would not allow such a venture. The result, a walk out by the multi-coloured dressed Nagas much to the astonishment of the visiting Prime Ministers. This was a deteriorating point in the Naga-Assam Government relationship till in later fifties, the Naga Hills became Naga Hills Tuensang area and then the State of Nagaland within the Indian Union. There were many Naga conventions to cull out a future for Nagaland. The Mokokchung convention in later fifties was the final one which under the leadership of Dr. I.Ao opted for statehood within the Indian Union with sufficient safeguards for the ethnic and cultural identity of Naga people. Dr. Ao did not live to see the outcome of his efforts. He was assassinated shortly after the convention. However the work continued and the shocked Nagas to a great extent went along with the decisions of the Mokokchung convention. It is strange but true that all unfortunate events are ushered in by an assassination. The Naga trouble had begun with the murder of Sakhri, an Assam Government employee who was reported to be opposed to Phizo's ideas of independence for Nagaland. Phizo is reported to have put forward his views to the then Fazal Ali Commission also which was formed to set up linguistic states. It was a promise the Indian leaders had made during the hey day of independence movement. In spite of a large number of Nagas who then were willing to follow Phizo, he had found things hot for him in then Assam. He had managed to slip out of the country and is now living in London as a British citizen. He is even now a father figure of Nagaland but he does not have the same amount of influence which he used to command. Late B.P. Chaliha, Jai Prakash Narain, Rev. Michael Scot

together with the help of Rev. Longri Ao and other church leaders had succeeded in bringing about a ceasefire in Nagaland in 1964. Later on in the seventies Governor L.P. Singh has signed a Shillong accord with the Nagas wherein the Nagas agreed to a settlement within the Indian Union. I had the privilege of watching the Naga affairs from a close range. As a broadcaster I had to meet several leaders of thought in all areas of the then Assam.

I was also present at the Mokokchung convention where very important decisions on the future of Nagaland were taken. Nagas are a fine people who speak out openly whatever is there in their minds. The Naga mind is like an open book which can be read at a glance. He can be convinced if you can offer him a superior idea. He is not afraid of bullets and guns. He is a strange mixture of toughness and tender love. I have seen a Naga warrior stand firmly by the dead body of his young son who lost his life in a conflict. I have also seen a Naga eating his heart out in grief over the demise of his daughter but who still had the courage of carrying her by himself to the grave. Nagas have walked through turbulent times. In the initial days of settling down in the present hills, there were inter-tribal feuds which had led to much head hunting and petty wars. The advancing Ahoms from Burma in the 12th Century had inflicted many wounds on them. Even some Nagas were roasted alive in punitive actions by the Ahoms. The Naga has developed a firm mind and tough steps. He rarely falters. The tradition of bravery continues. He can drink gallons of rice beer but still maintain a steady head. He does not want anyone to ridicule him. He is a good friend but a terrific enemy who would pursue you to the farthest corner. Peace has now descended on Nagaland but there still are some men in arms on the India-Burma border who dream of an independent Nagaland and keep on getting into the news. Majority of the Nagas however have settled down to the peaceful ways of life. The Mizos later on picked up the Naga path in March, 1966 with Laldenga as the fountainhead of independence movement. He repeated the same ethnic ideas put forward earlier by Phizo. The Mizo insurgency is still on. There was a suspension of operations from first August, 1980 to January, 1982, but the talks between the Central Govern-

ment and Laldenga were not fruitful. The MNF was declared once again an unlawful body since it failed to respond to the peaceful overtures of the Government.

The Mizo insurgency had also begun with murder of Laimana in January 1966 at Aizawl when it was still a district of Assam.

Earlier to that the Mizo National Front had established contacts with the then East Pakistan Government for money and arms. Three stalwarts of MNF, Laldenga, Lalnunmawia and Sainghaka had crossed over to East Pakistan for negotiations with the Pak agents. Laldenga and Lalnunmawia had been apprehended while returning from Lungleh while Sainghaka had vanished into the forest. Laldenga and Lalnunmawia were set free after they had given an assurance that they would confine themselves to legal activities and remain within the Indian constitution. Anyway the promise remained only on paper and the MNF struck throughout the hills on the midnight of 28th February, 1966. The area was almost lost but for the Assam Rifles pockets which held out and quick arrival of the Indian army which had to advance and gain the territory inch by inch. Within a month the MNF was driven out of the district into the forests and neighbouring East Pakistan. Some fled to Burma and some to China to seek help. Chaliha, who was the then Chief Minister of Assam was an unhappy man. He knew about the MNF activities, but he was in favour of weaning away the MNF leadership from the path of violence. Laldenga later claimed that his intentions were honest but he was under a great pressure from the hot heads to strike. With the insurgency on, the development projects announced in 1965 by Chaliha and later on by Tarlok Singh, Member, Planning Commission were shelved. In the cross fire many innocent lives were lost on both sides. Laldenga moved over with his family to East Pakistan from where he went to China for arms and ammunition. He got some but not enough help to take over Mizoram in a single sweep. Till seventies a strange stalemate continued with broad day-light murders of high police officials and many Mizos.

The Mizo villages and towns were infested with the MNF insurgents who ambushed convoys and military patrols at their convenience. The church made many attempts to bring about a

peaceful atmosphere but their efforts were not fruitful. On one occasion Lalnunmawia, the then Vice President of MNF had himself come to the Aizawl town for peace talks. During his stay he was admitted to hospital for some ailment. At night some one stabbed him to death.

After the 1971 conflict between India and Pakistan, East Pakistan turned into Bangladesh. The MNF had found the area too hot to stay there. Most of them left for Arakans a tri-junction of India, Burma and Bangladesh. Indeed a no man's land where armed bandits roam about and where arms are available as freely as fish in the river. The Arakans have a set of international smugglers who can get you anything right from an American .45 revolver to a Chinese rocket launcher. Laldenga fled from East Pakistan but landed up in Rawalpindi. He was unhappy there too and left with his family for Europe. There was a contact between him and Government of India and he came over to New Delhi. On 1st July, 1976, there was an understanding between him and Government of India officials that there would be a settlement of the Mizo problem within the constitution of India. However the MNF is still on war-path. By the way the status of Mizoram had undergone a complete change since 21st January, 1972 when it got the status of a Union Territory with Ch. Chhunga as the first Chief Minister. The Mizoram also saw the birth of a new leader in the figure of Brig. T. Sailo who floated a party called Peoples' Conference. Immediately on retirement he plunged into Mizo politics. At that time his son was underground. Brig. Sailo soon got into trouble when he gave "human rights" statements. He remained behind bars for sometime but was soon released. He led his party to victory and became the new Chief Minister of Mizoram. There were defections and came the President's Rule under the Lt. Governor. He fought back again and is in saddle as we go to the press. Many underground leaders of the past like J.F. Manliana, Sainghaka and Mal-swama Coloney are now overground. Brig. General Biakchhunga of MNF and Brig. T. Sailo's son have given up arms and are overground. Laldenga was given all facilities to meet his underground group in Arakans twice but the MNF came up with impossible demands which have led to the end

of suspension of operations. What I have stated above is pure contemporary history. I had wide contacts with many factions who came into and went away from my life. For sometime at Shillong I was a newsman for the News Services Division of AIR. A correspondent does get opportunities to see both sides of the coin. My fate has also led me to all the trouble spots due to my unending spirit of adventure. I was present at the Mokokchung Convention of the Nagas. I danced wild dances with the remote Nagas in Tuensang and I was there to help open a Radio Station at Kohima. I happen to be in Cachar when John F. Manliana, MLA, who was a founder member of the MNF, gave up arms with his bodyguards. I was also asked to rush to Mizoram to start a low power station of AIR at Aizawl right in the midst of flying bullets. And interestingly I happened to be at the residence of the then Late Chief Minister Chaliha when Laldenga and Lalnunmawia were ushered into his office after they were released on parole. The then Chief Secretary A.N. Kidwai was rushing in and out of CM's room with a draft agreement which was signed by the MNF leaders. I was in Chaliha's house for recording a message on family planning for broadcast. Late Chaliha was a man of progressive ideas whose ideals were Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru. He was soft-spoken and sincere to the core. He had genuine love for the tribal people. He was a constant and a steady broadcaster who believed in the power of the media. We developed a keen friendship. There were many occasions to discuss the tribal problems of Assam which always occupied his mind. In 1962 in the wake of Chinese aggression, Chaliha had come for a special broadcast to the Shillong Station of AIR. He was quite calm in spite of the fact that the Chinese troops were advancing towards foot hills and Tezpur was being evacuated. He read out his speech with the following words which I cannot forget "whatever may be the end, we have been born in this land and we will stay here". He had asked me for my plans as many Central Government servants were either leaving or sending away their families. I was pulsating with youthful vigour and quite clear in my mind. I had been a refugee once in the wake of Indian independence. I was in

Assam for the last twelve years. I told him, I and my family would stay on till the last. I said I won't desert my post. That was the beginning of a deep friendship between him and me. He was a happy man though occasionally he was dogged by one disease or the other. He was fond of sweets which he was not supposed to eat. He liked his cigarettes but he had to give up smoking when there were some complications of heart and lungs. Chaliha knew his end. One day he jokingly told me that he had built a house at Gauhati where he would end up at last. He was referring to the burning ghat in a corner of the city. He was not afraid of his end which he knew in early seventies was approaching fast. Till the last he talked about the beauty and culture of hills and valleys of Assam. He was indeed a great admirer of tribal life. Chaliha was also concerned about the destiny of Assam. He was a keen student of history.

He was aware of the fact that fertile Assam had always attracted the peasant since time immemorial who were destroying the forest wealth of Assam. He knew the virgin forests of Assam would vanish if this process continued. In 1964, the Garos of East Pakistan were pushed over to the then Garo Hills. I myself had visited Garo-Pak border and seen the plight of the Pakistani Garo refugees. They used to arrive in batches with few earthly possessions. Most of them had to be rehabilitated.

Well, let us get back to the hills. I began my first real trip to the tribal areas by visiting Tura, headquarters of the then Garo Hills district of Assam in the year 1956. All this time I was either occupied with my official life at Gauhati or busy studying all the available literature on Assam and tribal areas. I also made a point to refresh my memory about my experiences in the tribal areas of the NWFP. As charity begins at home, I thought my study should also begin about my home. I must say, my knowledge of tribal life in the North West helped me a lot in understanding the tribal people of the North East.

I had left for the Garo Hills in summer. I was able to manage an old car, which had almost outlived its utility. Though I could reach Tura in a single day I shall never forget

to this day my miserable journey. Garo Hills lie a hundred miles South West of Gauhati. The journey from Gauhati to Goalpara was comfortable as the road is tarred and our Ford did not give any trouble on the way. Our real ordeal began after Goalpara, from where the usual hill road with red earth on it begins. This red earth is the biggest enemy of motorists, for the car can skid at any moment. Brakes are of no use. My driver was also new to the area. Once the car almost slipped into a ditch. But for the timely help of a police jeep, we would not have been able to take it out.

The real hill journey begins from Phulbari, which is about fifty miles from Goalpara. The Goalpara-Phulbari road is generally flooded during summer, as it passes through low-lying areas and is flanked by water-logged fields on both sides. However, as one enters the Garo Hills area the misery of the uncomfortable journey is forgotten. Almost the entire route is full of villages. Vast paddy-fields with Garo tree-top cottages welcome you. I was fascinated by these tree-top houses. I stopped my car many times on the way to visit these cottages. They look like nests fixed between the two main branches of a tree. The Garos use a bamboo ladder to climb into these cottages. This was something very new for me. In the Pathan area I came from, the shikaris make such shelters on the tree-tops, but nobody can ever dream of living there for days together. I was told by a Garo, that these houses were generally built on the Jhum lands. Besides enabling them to watch the fields, the tree-top cottages also saved them from the wild elephants. Garo Hills are well-known for its wild life. Herds of elephants roam about the area after dusk. I was also told that though the elephants could easily upset tree-top cottages, they never bothered to look up. The Garos generally sleep in these cottages at night. They even cook their food there. Living up also saves one from heat. I had myself spent one night in a tree-top house. However, I neither saw any wild elephant nor heard any sounds. These cottages are mostly built with bamboos, which are found in plenty in the Garo area.

From Phulbari onwards one had to proceed then by gate system. As the road was narrow, only one way traffic was allowed. The cars were allowed to proceed to Tura only at fixed

timings. A number of hotels providing the usual lunch of rice and chicken curry, had sprung up at Phulbari. I had reached Tura late in the evening. The entire town was enveloped in complete silence. As my bones needed some rest I decided not to call on my hosts. I proceeded straight to the Inspection Bungalow where a room had been reserved for me. But I was wrong about the capacity of my hosts. As I was about to retire, a messenger from the District Council had arrived with a chit. I was wanted by the Chief Executive Member of the Garo Hills. I did not bother to change and proceeded to CEM's bungalow, which is about half a mile from the IB. In fact I was happy to go, because I was preparing to go to bed without any food. My orderly was too sick either to eat any food or to prepare some for me. I was met at the entrance by a thin young man, with bold eyes and a worried face. I at once identified him as Captain Williamson Sangma, the youthful and energetic head of the Garo District Council. His drawing room was full of villagers who had been invited to meet me and help me in listening to Garo songs. Sangma impressed me with his informal behaviour and I almost fell in love with him for he too was in pyjamas like me. Our conference ended at mid-night with songs and demonstrations of Garo dances. I had tasted the Garo Chu for the first time in Sangma's house. I returned to my bed with a full belly and a light heart.

Next morning I visited the District Council offices. I was surprised to see a fine pucca building with modern furniture. I saw hundreds of Garo men and women in the compound waiting either to appear in the Council courts or to meet the officers. I saw young Garo boys and girls attending to the problems and needs of their own people. I was impressed by the informal behaviour of Garo officers and other office bearers. I saw many villagers in the office rooms, pouring out their complaints and demands. I even visited the Council workshop.

I spent the whole day in making new friends and contacting artists who could sing for me. I was asked to get ready in the evening to proceed to village Bolangiri, where a big reception had been arranged for us. As I was a new man to the area, Capt. Sangma decided to come with me. My visit

to the village coincided with the celebration of Wangala. Wangala is the main festival of the Garos, which is usually celebrated after harvesting. The village is situated about half a mile from the main road. A few villagers met us at the roadside with burning torches and crude paper lamps to take us to the village. From a distance I could hear the sound of Garo drums. The villagers welcomed us with folded hands and salams. They were in a merry mood. We were led to the dancing ground, where boys and girls were dancing in single rows opposite each other. A love sequence was in progress, where each male dancer tries to find a partner for himself.

Coming from the land of traditional purdah this naturally had surprised me. The young boys and girls were dancing with complete freedom with innocent smiles lighting up their faces. We were led to decorated chairs. On seeing us the dancers at once changed the number and turned their faces towards us. While the boys stood at their places, the girls moved towards us. Each dancer saluted us to the rhythm of drum-beats. Copying my friend Sangma, I also tried to return their greetings in the same rhythm. I was told that this was the usual manner of welcoming visitors during Wangala. Nearly all the village girls greeted us in this manner. I had to use both hands so that I could take and give salutes to the entire company. This was also something new for the Garos and I could hear innocent laughter echoing from the girls in the back rows.

The ceremonial welcome did not end here. A few dancers brought gourds full of Chu and offered these to us. An old lady had caught hold of my neck and poured a lot of Chu into my mouth, straight from the gourd. I was touched by their hospitality and love. The village chief tied on my head a huge turban with lovely feathers in it. I was then invited to dance. A huge drum was hung around my neck and I joined the boys in the harvest dance. Garo dance is very simple. One must know how to hop to the rhythm of drum-beats. After two rounds of the dancing ground I decided to retire, as the Chu had already started going to my head and I did not wish to make a spectacle of myself in front of my hosts. The Garo Chu is very sweet and mild. But it can make one sick also. As it was getting late, we were asked to go to

the Chief's house for our meal. I had a hearty meal of rice and roasted meat, with plenty of chillies in it. The Garos are very fond of chillies. After food we were led once again to the dancing ground.

This time another number was in progress. Two Garos, dressed up as warriors, with swords and shields in their hands were engaged in a mock duel. They were shouting at each other "Sangma. . . Marak. . . Come on" etc. The dancers were also narrating the tales of their bravery. I took the village chief aside to ask him about the significance of the dance. He couldn't tell me much because he could speak his mother tongue only and knew neither Hindi nor Assamese. Luckily I had caught hold of an old Garo who explained to me everything. I was told that at one time the Garos had to struggle a lot for the land they occupy today. They had to fight with many local Rajas who did not like the Garos to settle in their area. Many Garo warriors had been killed in the struggle. They still retained those age-old swords and shields. As they no longer needed war implements these were maintained for the victory dances, like the one I had the privilege to see. He also told me that the entire Garo history was available in the legends and folk songs of the Garos. I requested him to interpret to me some legend about the origin of the Garos. This is what he had told me : "We, the Garos, were once living in Tibetgiri (present Tibet). Our lands became dry and cattle started dying. There was no other way for us, but to leave Tibetgiri. We had heard of the beautiful hills of Assam and we decided to move there. We started moving in small batches, with our wives, children and household goods. We also brought with us our own rice seeds for cultivation. First of all, we settled near the Cooch Bihar kingdom. We had to leave that place as the local Raja would not let us settle there. Some of us went to settle in Sibsagar also. We had good relations with the Ahom kings, with whom we entered into marriage pacts. The Ahoms married Garo girls and the Garos Ahom girls. We lived together for many many years in peace. We ate and drank together and we also hunted together. Then we fell out with Raja Bijni and fought many times against him.


We beat him and his friend, the Raja of Cooch Bihar many times on the battle-field. But there was no peace for the Garos now. Some of us had settled down at Kamakhya Hills also near Gauhati as that was a nice place. Somehow there also we had to face strong opposition from the local people, so that we had to push forward to the present site to live in peace and lead our own lives without interference."

This was an interesting account. However, no written records are available in the Garo area to confirm facts. The accounts also vary from village to village. It is not known as to when the Garos came to North East. The songs simply say "we came many many years back". I think we can accept their legends and consider Tibet to be their original home. I noticed that the Garo swords were decorated with Yak tails and Yaks are not found in Garo Hills. The Kacharis also, who have a linguistic affinity with the Garos, claim Tibet to be their original home. Both the tribes belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. In fact, Tibet is the traditional home of many many tribes in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. An educated Garo, Mr. D.S. Nengmenza, who is the author of several books in the Garo language, has found out many common Tibetan words used in Garo language. He has also done some research into the history of the origin of the Garos. He is convinced that once the Garos lived in Tibet. Mr. Diwan Singh Rongmati another Garo author also gives an interesting account of the Garo history and the migration to Assam. He published a paper on the subject in the July issue of "The Journal of the Assam Research Society" in the year 1933. Besides giving details, he has also translated a Garo song, which speaks of Garo settlement at Kamakhya Hills¹ in the present Assam District of Kamrup. I shall quote him in original.

Garo Song

"Asong Kameka,
Chiga Chironggi,
Ganntini ringringram,
Cheronggini Jingjingram."

1. Temple of goddess Kamakhya, also known as temple of Devi or mother.



Translation

"The land of Asong Kameka, the water of Chironggi, that is, the portion of river near Kamakhya Hill; the land where shrill voiced flying insects sing, the water where myriads of black water insects leisurely float about."

I visited the Kamakhya temple several times. No Panda¹ there could tell me if they had any record of the Garos being the original worshippers of the Devi. But it is commonly believed that at one time they were keen Devi-worshippers. Many historians believe that the institution of matriarchy was introduced by the Garos under the influence of Mother goddess Kamakhya. In fact, they are reported to have passed on this institution to the neighbouring Khasis and Jaintias also.

The song about the history of Garos also contains a reference to their matriarchal system. This is what the old villager told me. The song says "that once there was a big war conference between the Khasis and Garos. At that time both of us were being pushed out of our homes, while we were struggling to hold out. Many Garo and Khasi warriors were dying on the battle-field and property was changing hands quickly. It was decided therefore to make the women heirs to the property, so that the warriors could be free to go to the battle-field and fight with an easy mind. It was also decided to introduce a system, whereby a man's nephew (son of his sister) could marry his daughter. This was done to see that the property did not go away to a different clan".

Thus when a Sangma marries a Momin, the children are Momins and property will pass to the Momin girl. But she in turn is supposed to marry her father's nephew, a Sangma. Thus the property of the Sangmas remains with the Sangmas, though in an indirect way. Both men and women retain their clans and titles.

I must say, this is a clever device to balance matters and relations between the two sexes. I was told that the Nokma²

1. Priest.
2. Village Chief.

is the head of a Garo village, but he holds his rights in the name of his wife. This was something quite new for me and I asked my friend whether they were not afraid of their women, who could dominate them in various ways. My friend was shocked and insisted that the relations between men and women were so balanced that no conflict could ever arise. He felt sure that all the Garo women knew as to why they had been made heirs and they never misused their superior position. He further said that women never disposed of their assets without the consent of the male members of the family. I also questioned many Garo women, who gave similar replies. Indeed in their homes and everyday life, the Garo women don't have more rights than the women in a patriarchal society. Thus it is not correct to call a matriarchal area "the land where women rule".

It is, however, a fact that after marriage the husband has to live with the wife's family. I was also told that it is the womenfolk who compose all love songs in the Garo area. A Tura host when asked, insisted that it was his wife who first liked him and invited him to her place through her parents. The girls on such occasions take great pains in preparing the food themselves to impress the boys. Men and women in the Garo Hills, as in most other tribal areas, share equal responsibility in all spheres of life. They work together in their homes and Jhum lands. A Garo woman can work as hard as a Garo male and the women don't demand any concessions. The Garos have a very high regard for their women. Even at mid-night young girls can go from one village to another without fear of molestation.

By the time my friend had finished telling me all about the Garos, the dances had come to an end. It was very late and my limbs were stiff. I decided to sleep there for the night. In any case I had to get back to the village next morning for listening to Garo songs. I was given a separate cottage reserved for the guests. I had left my bedding at Tura. I went to sleep on the soft straw in the right royal tribal fashion. I woke up late in the morning. As the cottage was pretty dark, I thought the night had not passed off yet. I saw a few villagers in my cottage who had brought me my morning tea, eggs and the inevitable Chu. My head was still

heavy from the effects of Chu taken the previous evening. I firmly but politely refused the fresh dose. But I was advised to take it as my old friend understood me and said "You drink thi son, Chu cuts Chu".

I understood this and drank a glass of Chu. It did really help me and I was ready in an hour's time for my work. My servant was given the same treatment as myself and he was ready with my cameras, waiting for me on the dancing ground. I spent a couple of hours listening to rare Garo folk songs. The Garo folk songs are sung in low and melodious tones. I liked the Garo love song sung by a boy and a girl, in which they expressed their love for each other. Each stanza ended with a rich and melodious cooing "Aya O' Aya O". The Garos at Bolangiri sang their favourite song "Nangorere Gosseram" which speaks of their beautiful land. This song is full of rhythm. I sang this song to many other tribal people. They not only appreciated it but were able to sing it after listening to it carefully. I myself had started humming the tune while listening to the song. This simple song is very popular with all the visitors to the Garo Hills and nearly all of them can sing at least a few verses, without knowing its meaning. Now this song has been taken up by Tura boys and girls and a local composer has considerably improved upon its original version. The song is sung in nearly all the tribal and village conferences. The entire audience stands up and joins in the community singing.

I also decided to go round the village. I had not been able to see it properly, as I had arrived at night. I found the village encircled by shady trees. There are no more than thirty cottages in the village. A Garo cottage is built high and fairly large. It is further divided into many parts to accommodate all the inmates as well as agricultural implements. Outside one cottage I saw a few bamboo poles stuck into the earth. The structure was covered with a straw umbrella. Someone had tried to paint a human face on one of the poles. I was told that this was a memorial to a dead elder. The Garos have great faith in life after death. They follow their own tribal religion and have their own gods and goddesses who look after the human beings. They believe in spirits that dwell in every form of Nature and protect human rights. This interested me

and I sat down in a cottage to hear all about the Garo religion. I was fascinated by the story of Goera, the god who causes rain and thunder. This is how the story was related to me : "In the early stages of Garo settlement once there was a very beautiful girl amongst the Garos. Her beauty was praised throughout the Garo-land. She finally married her own cousin. She became pregnant in due course. But she carried the child in her womb for seven summers and seven winters. The village priests failed to prescribe any medicine, as this was something new for them. Then a voice came from the mother's womb. "I will not come out till a giant he-goat is sacrificed for me". The relations of the lady were surprised but agreed to do so to relieve her of her misery. After a terrible labour lasting seven days and seven nights, Goera was born. All the villagers assembled to see him, for he was born with a shining face. Within two months of his birth, Goera started walking. One day he went to the village compound and started dancing and beating drums. The mother was surprised and hurriedly took him away to her house. The maternal uncles thought the child was behaving in an abnormal manner, because they had not yet sacrificed the he-goat promised to the child. So one fine morning they left for the nearest market. But they were not destined to reach the market. On the way they were devoured by a huge monster and in due course of time all the villagers forgot about them. Goera was now growing up fast and emerged from his adolescent awkwardness into a very handsome man. All the girls of the village liked him, but he did not make love to any one of them. He was interested in sports and chasing wild animals. He could easily beat all the village boys and no one ever annoyed him. One day a village boy taunted him thus: "You claim to be Goera whom no one can defeat, but what about your uncles who were devoured by a monster. You have not done anything to avenge them". This enraged Goera, who at once started getting ready to combat the monster. His mother was very much worried and tried to stop him from this adventure. But Goera would not listen and one fine morning left for his unknown journey, for no one was sure as to where the monster would be found. First of all he went to a nearby market and ordered a huge bow, which could shoot out many arrows at one time. He then tried his

new bow and arrows. The arrows fell like lightning and caused thunder throughout the world. Goera being happy with his performance started roaming the forests in search of the monster. At last he found his quarry sitting under a tree. It was a big monster. The fight between the monster and Goera lasted for seven winters and seven summers. The monster ran from each hilly corner of the area to the other. But Goera pursued it and finally shot it to death. He cut the monster into pieces to rescue his uncles who were still alive in the monster's prodigious belly and were happy to see him. In due course of time they were nursed back to health. Goera went back home and lived for a long time in his village. But he was hot tempered and destroyed anything that came in his way. The villagers forgot all about his brave deeds and asked him to quit. In fact, they were afraid of him. Goera was annoyed at this suggestion and decided to live in heaven. But he told the people, that whenever it rained, he would always shoot his arrows to cause thunder and lightning. Goera also told the villagers that he would never die like human beings, but always live in heaven. True to his word, Goera is still alive".

This was indeed an interesting tale. I, however, noticed that the Garos are very fond of number seven. They consider this to be a lucky number perhaps.

I was also told the story of another god; Gongga, the Garo god of wealth. The Garos believe that it was he who first introduced Jhum cultivation in the area. He was also responsible for discovering the cotton plant. It is said that he too was born after considerable pain to his mother for seven winters and seven summers. He started playing with gods and goddesses at a very tender age. When he grew up he married two of his cousins, which the other village girls did not like. Gongga was an energetic man. He thought Garos should have some clothes to wear. So he started with his wives for the forests in search of the cotton plant. All through their travel, he and his wives lived on wild roots. Finally one day they reached a thick jungle and decided to camp there. His elder wife felt thirsty and went to the nearby pond to quench her thirst. There she saw a huge white plant, with huge branches under the surface of the water. Gongga was at once informed

and he felt sure, this was the plant for which he was roaming the hills for such a long time. But the plant was firmly rooted and the god of wind would not help him to uproot it. Balwa, the god of wind, was interested in his beautiful wives. He desired their company for one night only. Finally Gonga agreed to the suggestion in the interest of the Garos. While Balwa blew off the water, Gonga struck hard at the branches with his implements and succeeded in uprooting the tree. Gonga brought back the branches and planted them in his fields. He himself went to the market to sell cotton. He also taught the Garos, how to weave clothes. But in due course of time, the people forgot about his kind acts and blamed him for allowing Balwa to share his wives. Gonga got very angry at this and left the village and like Goera went to live in heaven. I was further told that if the Garos had not turned out the god of wealth, Gonga, they would have been richer today. They believe, since he was a kind man, he blessed them from time to time, especially when they planted cotton seeds.

The Garos both fear and worship their gods. They offer sacrifices, whenever sorrows overtake them. They consider that all the ills of human beings are due to the anger of gods in heaven. Though many Garos have become Christians, they continue to believe in these tribal gods. Many still offer sacrifices as in the old days.

The Garos don't wear many clothes. Both female and male remain content with a simple lengti round the waist. I asked an old woman, as to why most of the Garo women did not cover their bosoms. I got a very intelligent reply. "We don't do it, because it is not our custom. What is wrong to you is not wrong to us. If your eyes are not bad, nothing is bad." I think nobody has ever given me a better answer than this. After Garo Hills, I moved to many tribal areas, but I never asked this question again. Of course, now, I myself have got used to moving about in that area during the hot months in half pants only.

Both Garo men and women tie huge turbans on their heads. On festive occasions these turbans are decorated with multi-coloured feathers. The Garos are also very fond of

wearing many necklaces and ear-rings. The wealthy Garos use silver ornaments, while others use brass. These are mostly sold to them by Bengali merchants from the plains who attend all the Garo markets and supply the Garos with the articles they do not produce themselves. These merchants have recently introduced black blouses for women, which are in great demand in the Garo Hills. These are machine-made blouses and available at quite cheap prices. I believe this will have an adverse effect on the art of weaving in the Garo Hills. Even the men, instead of wearing the tribal hand-woven lengti¹ have now taken to khaki half-pants, which are easily available in the local markets. During Wangala, blouses and half-pants worth thousands are sold to the Garos. At Tura, many tribal women have stopped weaving and depend upon mill-made cloths.

The Garos are a short statured and a dark complexioned people. Both men and women are strongly built. The men have very little hair on their faces. Many Garo men don't need a shave. They just pull out the stray hair. Both men and women grow their hair long.

When I left Bolangiri, it was nearly evening. The Garo folk taleš had kept me busy for more than five hours. We had another round of sweet Chu before starting for Tura. My new hosts insisted on accompanying me to Tura and we spent another happy night together. The Garos like the other tribal people of North East are a very simple minded people and make friends very easily. I stayed at Tura for fifteen days and on almost alternate days my Bolangiri friends used to turn up to say hullo to me.

My adventures took me to many other Garo villages, right upto the border of the then East Pakistan. Everywhere I came across the same hospitality and love. I have visited Garo Hills at least ten times and each time I come back with memories of my new friends. Though Tura is rapidly changing and coming under the influence of the guitar, the villages still continue to provide me with their lovely and melodious folk songs. Garo Hills area is now a vital part of the new Meghalaya State. Rapid progress has been made in field of education

1. Loin cloth.

and agriculture. A base for the industries has also been set up. One finds now highly educated Garos in every sphere of administration. Life in the villages is still pure and free from sophisticated behaviour. Tura is on its way to become a mini Shillong.