

# NOCTE

## CHIEFTAINSHIP

### OF TIRAP

**Wang-Pha Lowang.**

In the light of the Panchayat Raj, which is going to be introduced in NEFA and so in Tirap district, it is necessary to examine the traditional Chieftainship prevalent among the Noctes and the Wanchoos of Tirap. While the idea of introducing local self-government or the principle of democratic decentralisation in NEFA is appreciable, it is always wise to take into consideration the existing traditional ways of life and the sentiments of the local people. In Tirap, there are still many people who cannot simply think of elected representatives without the Chiefs. There are again people who think that they should be led by the Chiefs but they should not dictate. In any case, representation of the Chiefs in the Panchayat is essential in Tirap and some provision have to be made for the representation of the Chiefs, at least in the initial stage.

According to the Nocte legend the forefathers of the Noctes came across the Patkoi Mountains from the Hukong valley of Burma and the Chieftainship is as old as the Noctes themselves.

Under the Nocte Chief system, every Nocte village has a village headman called 'Lowang' or 'Luang'. Nowadays these village headmen are nominated Gaoburas. A number of villages with several village headmen constitute a village unit. Such village unit has also a Lowang or Chief. But such Lowang has certain influence over the village or Lowangs under his village unit. Many villages, where there might exist several village-units, form greater village unit with a supreme Lowang or Chief at the head. The Supreme Lowang or Chief is the over-all head of all the villages and

the village units under the Chieftainship. Such a Chief is known as CHOWPHA or LOWANGDONG, and his wife—WANGCHADONG.

The Chief of Namsang and the Chief of Borduria are the two CHOWPHAS, viz. Chiefs in the Nocte Chieftainship. Both the Chiefs are descendants of the same parents. It is only about hundred years ago that the two Chiefs had for some reason or other become completely alienated from each other and formed two separate groups of people namely, Namsang and Borduria. About 40 years back a noble man from the Chief family of Namsang settled down at the present Laptang village taking some families from the subject villages under the Borduria Chief. Thus, the clan-thread of the present chief of Namsang, Borduria and Laptang is the same.

Besides these, there are two other subordinate Chiefs, namely, the Chief of Khette and the Chief of Lazo. They are subordinate to the Chief of Namsang, but have certain control over the villages under their own village-unit.

#### **Functions of the Chief :—**

The main functions of the Chief are (a) to guide and lead the people in all matters ; (b) to settle village disputes and (c) to protect the innocents

when any serious case or inter village dispute arises and if it cannot be settled mutually, the matter is brought to the notice of the Chief, say, to the Chief of Namsang if the villages, involved are under Namsang. The Chief then calls for a general meeting (NGONGTHUN) of all the village representatives or leaders to settle the case. In such NGONGTHUN the Chief acts as the Chairman as well as a judge. Normally, the Chief should not exercise powers arbitrarily. He should consult this council, NGUANG-AW-ANG, which means Chief and Council, and consider the traditional customs of the land before arriving at any conclusion. In the words of Dr. Verrier Elwin, "the Nocte village councils are functioning almost like regular Panchayats and undertake all sorts of activities for development and welfare of the people, besides deciding their disputes. The Chief of the village, who is called Lowang, is the head of the council and functions as its Chairman. It is he who gives the final decision on any affairs, after consulting the other members". Nowadays, officials of the Administration also attend the council meeting in major cases.

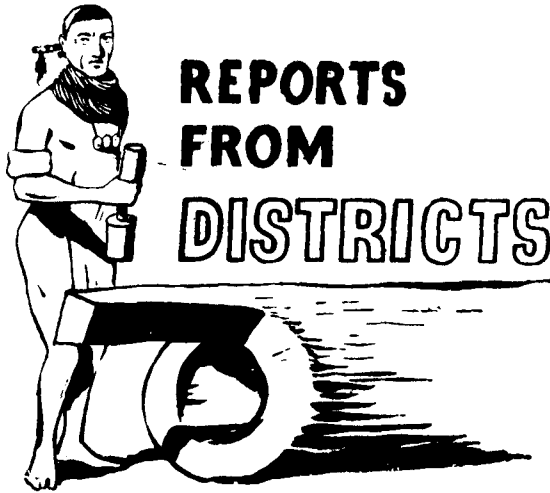
SE :—The Chief gets some commodities from his own group or subject villages annually as tribute known as SE in Nocte. The quantity of SE

varies from village to village. While some villages contribute rice and rice-bear in certain quantity according to the rates that had been fixed generations ago, others simply give a local made Naga-spear, or a goat or a dao in a year. Besides this SE' the people are not bound to contribute anything materially or otherwise to the Chief. The Chief has to face his own family problems in the day to day, life. The Chieftainship then becomes rather a burden on him. The SE' or, in other

words the system of paying is nothing but a token of loyalty to the great Raja. For the Chief, it is a matter of prestige.

The present Chieftanship in Tirap is based upon the traditional custom and a belief of the society. But society changes along with time, and a change is essential for the good of the society, if it is not accompanied by bitterness and frustration on any body's part.





### **Bomdi La**

According to a report received from Bomdi La, the Union Deputy Minister for Food and Agriculture, Shri D. Ering, visited Rupa, Bomdi La and Dirang areas of Kameng district from 22nd August to 25th August, 1968. He met the public of Rupa and visited Government institutions and organisations there.

At Bomdi La the Deputy Minister visited the Bomdi La General Hospital, Co-operative Stores, Craft Centre, School, Gompa and local Sera village. After the visit to institutions, Shri Ering addressed a gathering of local officers and discussed various problems with them. In the evening a cultural show was organised by the students

and staff of the Bomdi La Higher Secondary school in honour of the Deputy Minister.

On 24th, he visited Salari farm and then Dirang where he visited the Dirang M.E. School, Hospital, Army Development group and Dirang village.

In the morning of 25th August, the Deputy Minister participated in the Namkirtan organised in connexion with celebration of Mahapurush Shri Sankar Dev's Tithi in the Kameng Club by the local staff. He also took the salute given by the N.C.C. cadets of the Bomdi La H.S. School on the eve of his departure.

Bomdi La has also reported that the Teachers' Day was observed there amidst great enthusiasm. The township and its outskirts were divided into five sectors for the purpose of collecting fund for the National Foundation for Teachers' Welfare. In the afternoon a symposium was held at Kameng Club. After the symposium all the teachers of Bomdi La were entertained to tea by the local officers and then after a free cinema show was arranged for them. An amount of Rs.517.14 P. [was collected in Bomdi La for the Teachers' Welfare Fund.



# GLIMPSES OF EARLY HISTORY OF NEFA

L. N. Chakravarty.

*In the first part of the article appearing in the last issue of this journal, references on the subject as available in contemporary literature were quoted. At this stage it is intended to give some ideas about the people inhabiting the area for the benefit of the readers.*

The major tribes inhabiting the Kameng district are :

- (1) Sherdukpens and Bhutias.
- (2) Akas (Hrusso).
- (3) Mijis (Ddammai).
- (4) Daflas (Bangni).
- (5) Monpas.

## **Sherdukpens and Bhutias**

To the east of the Kuriapara lies the extensive division of Char-duar or the four passess beyond which are the Rooprai Gaon (Rupa) and Shergaon - the two important villages of the Sherdukpens.

There are other temporary and small settlements round about them. In our early records these people have been mentioned as Rooprai Gaon and Sher Gaon Bhutias.

From Sherdukpen traditions we learn that they originally came from the north-west and had very close relations with Bhutan. They narrate that a certain Tibetan prince married an Assamese princess and had three sons by her. The first one remained at Lhasa, the second was given the Kingdom of Bhutan and the third one was given the area now occupied

by the Sherdukpens. The present day Sherdukpens are the descendants of the third son and his followers.

The Sherdukpens tell us that the Tibetan king sent his third son to this area with the intention of checking the depredations of the warlike Akas. Coming here, the third son decided to keep the hill tribes in good humour by giving them a sort of present of six cows every third year and this was continued by their descendants also till the time the British Govt. stopped it. Even up to these days descendants of the third son of the Tibetan king are called 'Raja' by the neighbouring tribes. The Dirang people call them 'Bapu' and the Akas and Mijis call them 'Thongli-thongcheng' meaning Raja or King.

"Their chiefs like those of the Kuriapara Bhutias, are called 'Sat Rajahs' the principal one having the title of Durji Raja. In common with all the other tribes of this frontier, these Bhutias claimed a tribute or payment from the plains which they collected annually. In February, 1826 an arrangement was made with them by Captain Mathie, by virtue of which the Darrang authorities resumed the right of direct collection and paid the Bhutias Rs. 2526/7/- as compensation on that account. In 1899, however, this payment was stopped in consequence of their having murdered

one Madco Sykech, a British subject. The Durji Raja with the rest made in the usual inconsistent way the most earnest protestations of innocence of in guilt and promise to behave better in the future, and as usual they were eventually pardoned, and a reduced allowance of Rs. 1740/- guaranteed them. The boundary line of the Charduar Bhutias was laid down in 1872-73 from the Rowta river on the west to the Ghabroo river on the east. The Bhutias here put forward extravagant claims to lands on the plains, which were rejected by the officers demarcating the boundary. At a meeting with the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang in February, 1876 their chiefs expressed themselves satisfied with this decision. They have come down regularly every cold season to trade, establishing themselves at a place called Darmara, two miles north of our boundary".\*1

It is learnt from G.A. Nevill, Political Officer, Western Section, North-East Frontier, that during the early part of the century Rupa and Shergaon were ruled jointly by a council of 20 headmen, of whom seven were hereditary, who were originally called the 'Sat Rajahs' by the Assamese. Their whole trade was with Assam and they followed a trade route different from that of the Tawang Moupas.

They are good farmers and know the use of ploughs. The Sherdukpens are a quiet and law abiding people. Once they told the Political Officer to have never heard of a murder committed by their people.

\*1 File No. 39 J, 1885, pp 18-19

The Sherdukpens complained about the high handed activities of the Akas who claimed them as their subjects and exacted heavy tolls from them. The Mijis also visited the Sherdukpen country occasionally to realise tribute. The amount of tribute thus realised by the Mijis depended on their sweet will as there was nothing settled about it. Of course, they also gave something to the Sherdukpens in return.

During 1934-35 the Sherdukpens had some trouble with Chanzu of Towang-dzong who was claiming a third part of the annual Posa received by them from the Govt. But after the death of Chanzu the next year no further demand of a part of their Posa was made. It may be mentioned here that the Sherdukpens paid a nominal tribute to Tawang-dzong once in every three years.

In the last part of 1938 an expedition went to Nakhu and several other villages of the Bichom valley when the chief of Nakhu Kujjalong and other raiders were warned not to take tributes from any one as it was

forbidden by the Government. But inspite of this warning the Mijis continued to oppress the Sherdukpens and exact tribute from them. As a result a temporary outpost was established at Rupa for about a fortnight in 1939 and thereafter periodical patrols of Assam Rifles were sent to Rupa and Shergaon to prevent the Mijis from troubling these people and also to arrest any Aka found trying to realise tribute from them.

After the above mentioned warning a party of Mijis visited the Sherdukpen villages to exact payment of tribute but unfortunately for them the attempt was not successful. Next, two Miji Chiefs tried to realise tribute from Shergaon and Rupa but being detected were heavily fined by the Political Officer in 1939-40.

In view of all these it was felt that some effective steps should be taken for stopping these raids and realisation of taxes. Accordingly the Political Officer (called a Mel Meeting) at Kudum in 1940 which was attended by the Sherdukpens, Monpas, Mijis and Akas. The meeting was presided over by the Political Officer. After prolonged discussion the Mijis agreed to stop taking tribute from the Sherdukpens.

In 1940-41 a quarrel took place between the Rupa and Shergaon people, who are usually so placid. The quarrel

was consequent on the death of the leading king of Rupa who was an able ruler but whose place was filled by inefficients, unable to control their villagers. However, ultimately the quarrel was settled peacefully with the help of the Tibetan Interpreter (a Govt. Official).

At that stage it was decided by the authorities to take some more effective steps to stop these depredations by the Mijis and Akas and accordingly a permanent Assam Rifles outpost was established at Rupa in 1941 to protect the Sherdukpens from blackmail and raids by their neighbours. But paying of taxes (House Tax) by the Sherdukpens along with the Monpas of the Digien valley and some khowas (Buguns) started from 1945-46 and this practice has been followed till to-day.

With the beginning of shifting of the Headquarters from Charduar to Bomdi La in February, 1953 the importance of Rupa from the point of

administration came to be diminished as all the official establishments started moving to the new Head-quarters at Bomdila.

The Thebengeas living to the north-east of the Sherdukpens are the last of the Bhuteas living to the east of the Bichom valey. They formerly used, in conjunction with the Sat Rajhas, to levy contribution from the adjacent plains. A feud however, sprang up between them and for years they entered Assam for trading purposes only by the circuitous route of the Kuriapara Duar. Their annual visit to purchase goods was made to a mart called Mazhat in Charduar. Again from 1839-44 these people were excluded from the plains by the British Government as punishment for outrages committed by them. On their submitting and executing a formal agreement to refrain from aggressions, they received annual pensions of Rs. 145-13-0 only.

(to be continued)