



ARUNACHAL PRADESH
THE HIDDEN LAND

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MAMANG DAI



ARUNACHAL PRADESH THE HIDDEN LAND



M A M A N G D A I



Dedicated to my parents for their love and support

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PREFACE

Once known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Arunachal Pradesh became the twenty-fourth state of the country in 1987. In the early years of its history the pace of change in the state was slow, somewhat cautious. We did not suffer displacement. The land was our birthplace. We worked the land and where we were was our home.

Today change has come like a steam roller. The transition from unknown frontier to modern state has been sharp and rapid and the question of direction and destiny has become one of great complexity and soul searching. On the one hand, in keeping with the national agenda, the state is forging ahead with goals for progress and development. On the other – the history of our people, our origins and routes of migration remain a matter of speculation, based purely on the few recorded documents left by early explorers. There are also specialized niches in our tribal heritage that may be erased forever if change is not assessed and negotiated carefully. This is the current backdrop that is emerging as the basis for writing the modern history of the state. And the question is 'where do we begin and what is the most important thing to start with?'

It is true that due to geographical and historical reasons the region has succeeded in keeping itself as one of the last bastions of the tribal world. But tribal society in the deep interiors is not entirely the innocent, romantic picture that we might like to imagine. Life is very hard. Though the state also still enjoys the distinction of being one of the greenest parts of the country, the mountains offer little food. The isolation is like living in perpetual half light, prey to the elements and the unpredictable fury of nature. Yet with faith and patience, a way of life was established that enabled the different communities to survive in a harsh terrain for centuries with very little contact with the outside world.

This book is an attempt to record that way of life that I perceive as a miracle of faith. This is a faith that did not appear like a bolt of lightning or as sudden enlightenment, or through the letters of an inherited text. On the contrary it was a faith arrived at through a process of trial and error spanning centuries. I have drawn on oral narratives to illustrate this substance of faith in the art of the storyteller, the medicine man, the priest, where stories are linked to ritual and vice versa.

The book is based on a collection of travel notes. Also included are accounts of some of the first explorers who stepped into this remote frontier and provided the first glimpses of this hidden land, but the true inspiration for this book are the words of Arunachal's villagers who revealed to me that beyond the image of a rugged landscape and the aura of tribal life there is a highly ordered and organized system of functioning in the villages, a serene and solemn reconciliation with the environment and a deeply ingrained respect for human values evident in all tribal systems.

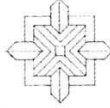
It offers but a small glimpse of this life-world, but one that I hope will open a link with the reader. However hard one may try, any attempted portrayal can never be the complete picture. Nor can it be over, or finished. These words and stories are presented here as markers that a reader might draw on and expand, and perhaps rediscover a mysterious landscape and imbue it with new insight and meaning.



THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

The earth and the sky are husband and wife.

Formerly, Sedi, the earth, and Melo, the sky, lay close together and from their union every kind of tree and grass and living creature came into being. But, so close was their union that there was no room for mankind to live. Then Polung Sabbo was born and wandered over the hills. His horns hit the clouds and in his anger he tossed them away, far above the earth. After being thus separated from her husband the sky, Sedi, desired to return to him, to be one with him again, but as she was raising herself towards him the sun and moon appeared, and she was ashamed and could go no further. That part of her which was reaching towards her lord became fixed forever as the great mountains.¹

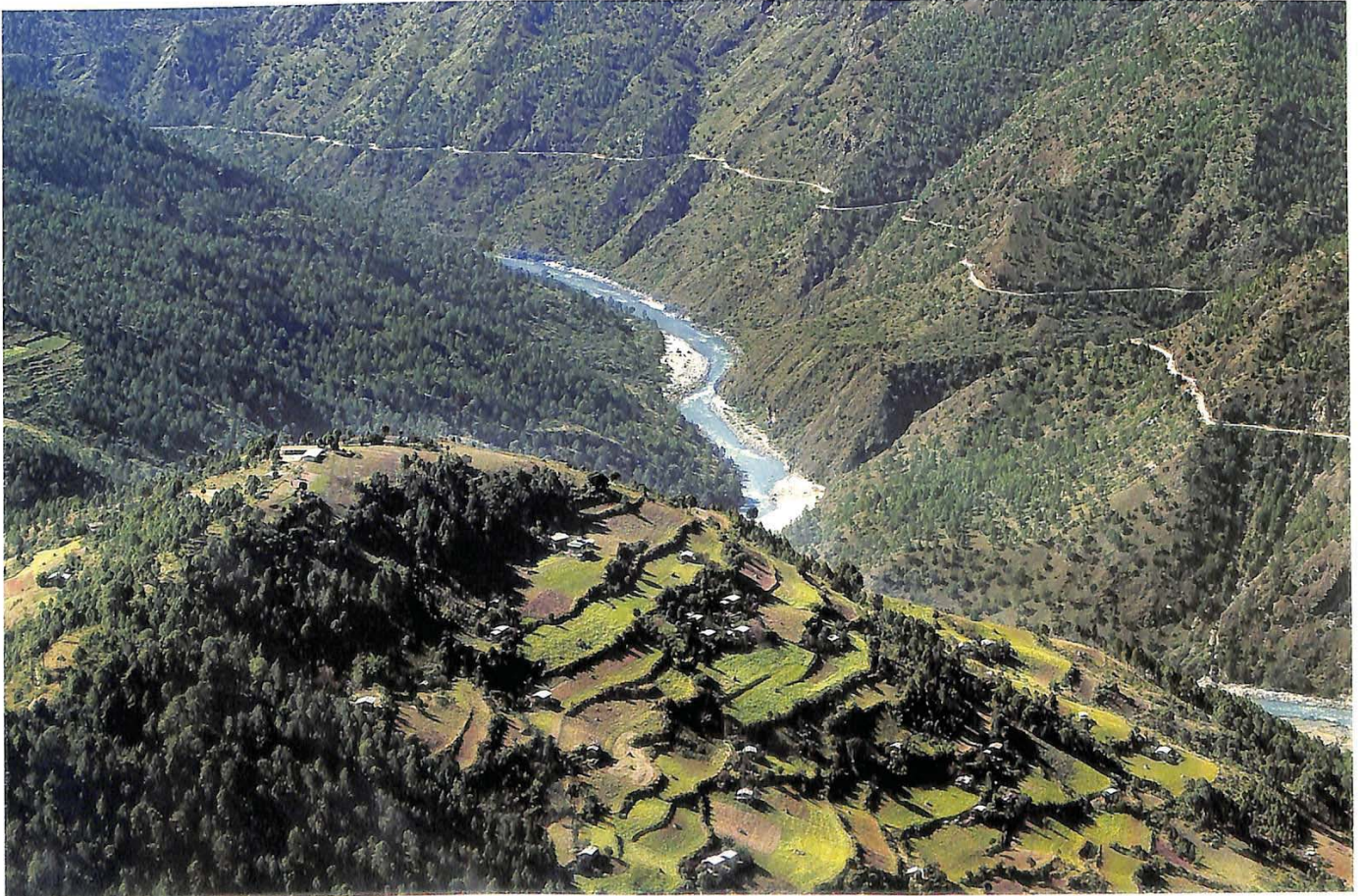


A HIDDEN LAND

The Mountain Dwellers

From where the mountains rise from the plains of Assam, stretching northward to the boundaries with China, lies India's furthest north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

It is a vast land. A land of austere grandeur and loveliness, covering 83,743 sq. km that straddle the eastern Himalaya like an intervening belt of green shadowed in perpetual rain and mist. From its meeting point with Bhutan in the west, the state stretches 1,030 km eastward, descending



The Tawang Chu river



Tribesmen of the Frontier days

from the northern boundary into the thickly forested slopes of the Patkoi hills forming a triangular border with Bhutan, China and Myanmar. The area's remote geographical location, its inhospitable terrain, and the reported ferocity of its people left it outside the sphere of early exploration and evoked a very mixed press from those who first gazed on this wild confusion of hills. It was 'the land of unknown savages, rugged, grand but uncultured', inhabited by 'strange shy creatures' who were 'very averse to receiving strangers'.¹

The veil began to lift in the early part of the nineteenth century when interest in the region began with the exploration of the great river systems of the subcontinent and the subject of the source of the river Brahmaputra. At the same time the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824 opened up the entire north-eastern region of the country for the first time. Agents of the East India Company along with surveyors and cartographers began to push forward to explore this territory where no outsider had set foot before. The commercial success of tea cultivation in Assam furthered this interest. It was now felt that the tribes inhabiting the hill tracts were showing themselves to be dangerous neighbours whose marauding forays into the plains endangered the plans of the



Mountain dweller



A Nocte chief from Tirap

government to turn the rich Brahmaputra river valley into an immeasurable garden of silk and fragrant tea. The first recorded encounters between the hill people and outsiders date from around this time.

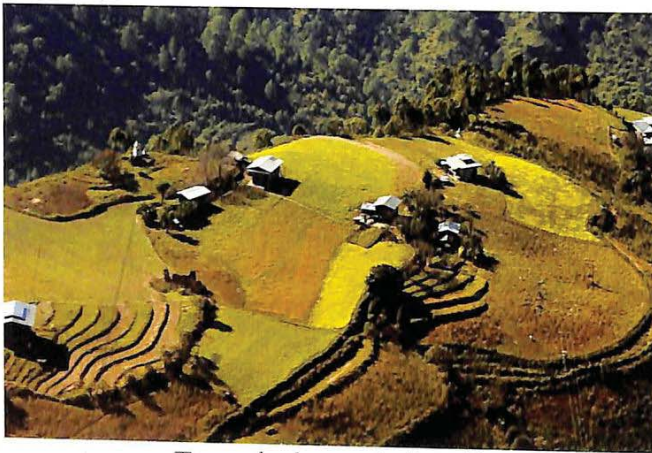
However, despite these early attempts to penetrate into the hills the British Policy of Non-Intervention and the Inner Line Regulation Act of 1873 excluded the hill areas from proper administrative jurisdiction. The land continued to guard its mysteries well up to the time of India's independence. In terms of its unique cultural variety, scenic beauty and unexplored ecological wealth, Arunachal Pradesh remains, till today, a last great frontier of traditional culture.

Once known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Arunachal Pradesh became a union territory in 1972 and a full-fledged state in 1987. Arunachal Pradesh is the largest among what is grouped as the seven North-Eastern states or 'the seven sisters'. It is four times the size of Manipur, Mizoram, or Meghalaya, and 500 sq. km larger than the state of Assam. It is twice as big as Switzerland, Belgium or Denmark. The state is home to twenty-six tribes spread across 3,649 villages, most of which, are located in remote valleys and hilltops along the international borders with China, Myanmar and Bhutan.

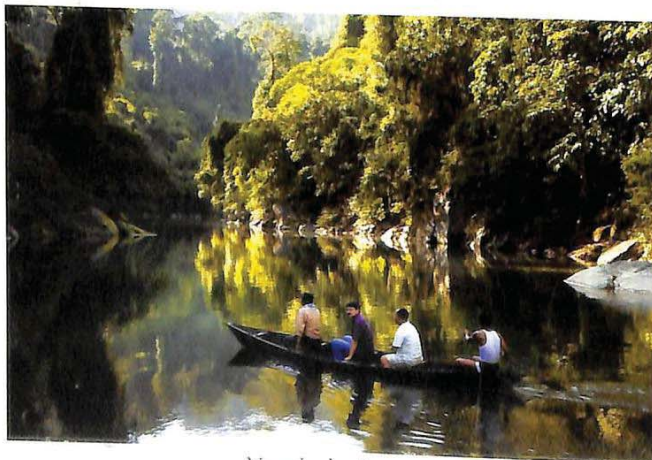
The state is divided into sixteen



The Monpas of Tawang



Tawang landscape – barley fields



Namdapha Reserve

administrative districts, moving west to east these are: Tawang, West and East Kameng, Papum Pare, Kurung Kumey, Lower and Upper Subansiri, West, East and Upper Siang, lower Dibang Valley, Dibang Valley, Lohit, Anjaw, Changlang and Tirap. For practical purposes the area may be divided into three distinct cultural and artistic zones:

THE WESTERN AND NORTHERN BOUNDARIES of high jagged peaks and lakes of ice. Here, in the districts of Tawang and West Kameng, the *Monpa* and *Sherdukpen* are predominantly Buddhists of the Mahayana sect. West Kameng is also the home of the *Bugun (Khowa)*, *Miji-Sajalong* and the *Hrusso (Aka)* tribes. 'Aka' means 'painted' and this was the name given by outsiders to the Hrusso because of their distinctive tattoo marks. Further north in the district of Tawang, the famous Tawang monastery established in the seventeenth century is the largest in the country controlling several gompas (monasteries) in the region. It is said that Mera Lama, the founder of the Tawang monastery had a sister who became a nun. Any girl desiring to become a nun may enter the nunnery as a novice and there are three well known nunneries, or Ani gompas in the Tawang area – Brama Dung Chung, Gyangong and Singsur Ani gompa.

EASTERN ARUNACHAL PRADESH in the uplands of the Patkoi mountain range

bordering Myanmar and Nagaland. This part of Arunachal is lush with rainforest and is the land of the *Nocte*, *Wancho*, *Tangsa*, *Tutsa* and *Lisu* (*Yaobin*) tribes in the districts of Tirap and Changlang. The Tangsa have several sub tribes, like the *Muglom*, *Longchang*, *Mossang*, *Longphi*, *Kimchin*, *Tikbak*, *Pontbai*, *Lungri*, *Sangbal*). The famous biosphere reserve of Namdapha is located here and through this part of eastern Arunachal runs a portion of the famous Stilwell Road built by the Allies during World War II, linking Ledo in Assam to Kunming in the Yunnan province of China.

In this belt the south bank districts of Lohit, Lower Dibang Valley, Dibang valley and Anjaw on the Sino-Himalayan border are renowned for their spectacular scenery. Home of the *Idu*, *Taraon* and *Miju Mishmis*, the *Khampti*, *Singpho*, and the *Meyor* tribes who inhabit a few remote villages along the international border, the area was highlighted when the unknown village of Dong in Anjaw district was identified as the country's sunrise village receiving the first rays of the sun in the new millennium.

THE CENTRAL BELT spread over an extensive area covering the districts of East Kameng, Lower and Upper Subansiri, Papum Pare, Kurung Kumey, and East, West and Upper Siang. The major tribes living here are the *Nyisbi*, *Tagin*, *Puroik*, *Hill Miri*, *ApaTani*, *Nab* (*Nab Tagin*), and the *Galo* and *Adi* tribes of Bori,



Mishmi women dress their hair in an elaborate chignon held by silver pins fitted with fine metal chains. A silver headband is used to hold the hair in place.



Tapu is a ritual Adi warrior dance performed during the festival of Aran in March. It is performed to ward off evil spirits. Also performed for a friend or relative suffering from some inexplicable feeling of fear. Women who were childless or had no sons could also don male attire and join the Tapu in the belief that this would ensure the birth of a son.



Donyi-Polo Nyedar Namlo at Rono Village, Doimukh

Bokar, Khamba, Memba, Padam, Pasi, Minyong Ramo, Pailibo, Shimong, Komkar, Milang, Panggi, who, except for the Memba and Khamba in Upper and West Siang districts practise varying traditions yet are culturally akin due to the similarity of environment and the animistic nature of worship, and follow the belief of *Donyi-Polo*, the sun and moon. Known collectively as the *Tani* group, the tribes living here claim common ancestry from a legendary forefather known as *AboTani*, the first human being on earth.

The Origin of Tribes

The origin of the tribes of Arunachal is still shrouded in mystery. No conclusive data about their early history and progress of migration has been ascertained. It is, however, believed that they came from the triangle of Burma, where numerous Mongoloid tribal groups of similar culture lived in a widely dispersed area between the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers.

The tribes may have dispersed due to population pressure, inter-tribal feuds and natural calamities. In the course of migration in search of better land, constant fighting, fear and feuds

among rival groups reduced their numbers and further separated them from one another. Most of the migratory routes of the tribes are largely traced through the oral literature of each tribe, though very often the names of places recorded in memory in the form of legends cannot be identified with anything recorded in the maps.

In the Anini region of Dibang Valley, the Idu believe they had their origin in a place called *Inni-la-pon* to the north. In the course of their southward migration, they settled for sometime at a place called *Kabbui-bui-Anda*, which means 'a place where the river flows backwards'. Perhaps this is a reference to a great bend in the river as it flows southwards from the Tibetan highlands. The Idu people also named the place *Jabiwi*, which means 'a place where the water snakes live'.

In Lohit district, the Khamptis claim Shan descent from the *Bor-Khampti* or 'Great Khampti', following a migratory route from a high valley in the mountains between the eastern extremity of Assam and the sources of the Irrawaddy river. The word Khampti means: *Kham* – to stick, to adhere to, *ti* – spot, place. In another interpretation, Khampti means 'golden locality' (*Kham* – gold, *ti* – place).

Legend has it that a tree of iron, which yielded golden fruit, grew in their country. Their enemies, fearing that the Bor-Khamptis would become inordinately rich by means of this tree, sent a demon to devour them, but this demon took up his abode in the gold-yielding tree and as he



The mark of a great warrior was tattoo on his chest and necklace of symbolic metal beads. In the days of head hunting in Tirap such insignia were meant only for those who had taken human heads. A young man could not be tattooed until he had taken a head. And he could not wed until he was tattooed.

threatened to annihilate them they were compelled, in self defence, to fell the tree in order to kill him. Legend says that the tree was felled by fire and the demon was then destroyed.²

Another story tells about an enormous bird that used to haunt the Bor-Khampti country, preying on children. This bird grew so rapacious that at last the whole country took up arms against it; but the bird was too clever and whenever it seized a child, it now began to fly off to a high hill called *Noi-Kham* (the golden hill) in the *Nam Yun* valley, on which grew an enormous tree whose branches were of silver and gold and which was held sacred by the Khamptis.

The bird would perch on the topmost branches, where it would devour its prey in safety. No other trees in the country were strong enough to bear the weight of this bird. So a general consultation was held and it was decided to sacrifice the sacred golden tree and cut it down so that the bird would leave the country or perch on some stone or rock where it would be easier to destroy.

So the tree was cut down. The bird tried in vain to perch on the branches of other trees, but they



Siang-Siyum suspension bridge



The popular maroon cloth of the Monpa and Sherdukpen

gave way under its weight. At last, in desperation, it perched on a huge slab of rock at the mouth of the Sada stream where it was killed. It is said the imprint of a child's foot and a bird's claw can be seen on a large rock at the mouth of the Nam Yun.

The tree of gold disappeared but a small lake formed around it, overgrown with weeds, which in the cold season, when the water dries up, annually catches fire by spontaneous combustion.³

Among the Adis it is presumed that their original home was somewhere in Tibet. In their narrations the village elders often speak of the Taro Mimats, which is the name for the Tibetans, whose chief was known as Deba Lama. Although the Adi group trace their origin and migration to Tibet, it is not clear as to what events compelled them to leave their original home. Some scholars have pointed to important events in Tibetan history in the seventh century AD that might have proved to be the turning point for many of the tribes that live in Arunachal Pradesh today. During this period Tibetan power was consolidated under the Yarlung dynasty and Buddhism was introduced as the state religion. These two events caused uprisings in central

Tibet. The territory of Myang or Nyang was conquered by King Shrong-Tsan Gampo and annexed to the kingdom of Yarlung.

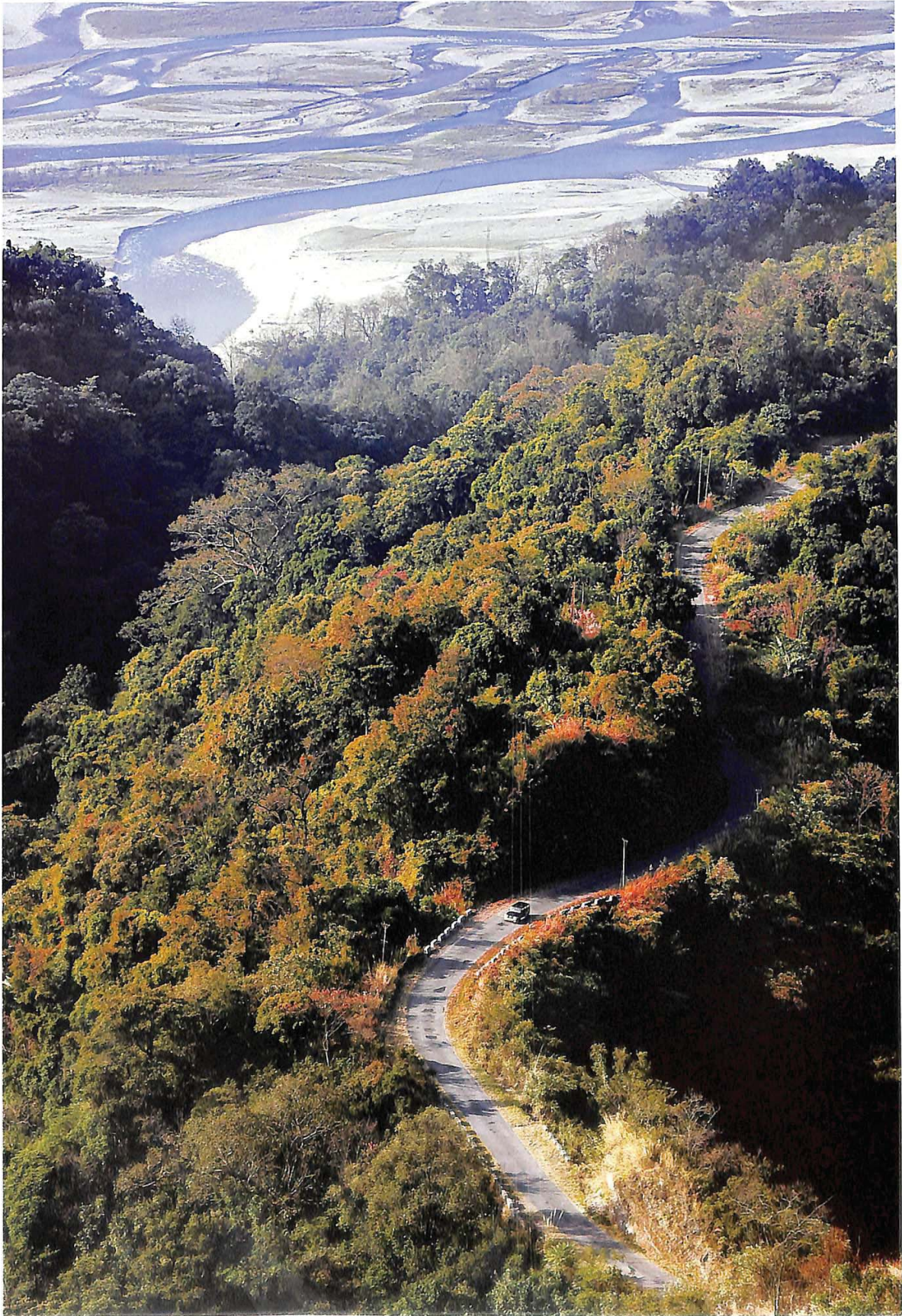
The Adis mention a land of *Misum-Miyang*, which, considering its geographical proximity, may be the Myang territory. The annexation of Myang and the conversion to Buddhism might have provoked the migration of groups of tribes who were caught in the struggle between Buddhism and the old shamanistic faith of Bonpo. Out of compulsion some stayed back and became Buddhists while others left, heading south group by group and at different times, sheltering in big caves and wandering like nomads before fanning out in different directions through the valleys of the Siang and Siyom rivers. Even today it is believed that there are Adi villages across the McMahon line where they speak the same language and observe the same festivals.⁴

In February 2000, tribes and clans across the state came together to attend meetings called to discuss names and recognition for their various tribal identities. This activity was in preparation for a final list of tribes to be submitted to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and subsequently became an Act of Amendment in the Parliament regarding the modification of tribes' names.

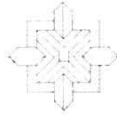
In the first Constitutional notification, 1950, only 12 Arunachal tribes were listed, these being the *Abor*, *Aka*, *Dafla*, *ApaTani*, *Galong*, *Monpa*, *Khampti*, *Singpho*, *Howa*, *Sherdukpen*, *Mishmi* and 'any Naga tribes'. On 21 November 1989, a second notification with certain modifications was proposed by the state government, which listed 25 major tribes and the name *Adi* instead of *Abor*. The *Dafla* and *Galong* of the first notification have also been replaced, in present usage, by the names *Nyishi* and *Galo*, respectively.

The first systematic census operation in Arunachal Pradesh started from 1961 onwards, though census operations were held in negligible pockets of the North-East Frontier Tracts under the Assam government. At that time, only tribes like *Khampti*, *Miri*, *Naga*, *Pasi*, *Dafla*, *Mishmi* and *Singpho* were enumerated in the Frontier Tracts of *Sadiya* and *Balipara*, and the old *Lakhimpur*, *Darrang* and *Sibsagar* districts.⁵

The first census reports of 1961 recorded a population of 336,558. Today, the census in 2001 puts the population of Arunachal Pradesh at 1,096,702, registering an increase by 3.26 times during the last 40 years.



On the winding road to Hawa camp, overlooking the meandering Lobu river



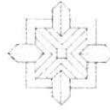
THE CRADLE OF EVOLUTION

Sky Touching Trees

Nature has been bountiful to Arunachal Pradesh. The Himalayan region captures some of the world's heaviest rainfall and the result is an expanse of lush tropical forest where life breeds in a myriad forms. The tangle of root, vine, and decaying vegetation provides distinct ecological niches where life sustains itself in a delicate balance that is vulnerable to extinction by even the smallest threat to the habitat.



Jang falls and Madhuri lake



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