

# HIGHLANDERS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Anthropological Research  
in North-East India

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## Tribal Groups and Their Structure

Arunachal Pradesh covers an area of 81,424 square kilometres and had in 1971, the year of the last census, a population of 467,511. This means that the average density of population is 6 persons per square kilometre. In view of the fact that the average density of population of India on the whole is 178 persons per square kilometre, Arunachal Pradesh represents the least densely populated area of the country. There are five districts in Arunachal Pradesh and their population figures are as follows: Tirap 97,470; Lohit 62,865; Siang 111,936; Subansiri 99,239; and Kameng 86,001, and for administrative purposes each of these is divided into sub-divisions and circles. The boundaries of administrative units and ethnic groups do not necessarily coincide, but most of the individual tribes are contained within the limits of one district.

One of the results of the long isolation of many parts of Arunachal Pradesh and the scantiness of information on the inhabitants is the confusion in the appellation of the various tribal groups. In the early days of British contact with the hill-people the only names applied to inhabitants of the various tracts were those used by the Assamese of the adjoining parts of the Brahmaputra plains. Thus the term Dafla was used to describe the majority of the hillmen of the western part of the present Subansiri District and the adjoining eastern region of Rameng District. Similarly the Assamese used the blanket term Abor for virtually all the hillmen of the Siang District. Both terms have a somewhat derogatory flavour, meaning "wild man" or "barbarian", but nevertheless were widely used in official reports, census returns, and also in the entire ethnographic literature. Thus they were used by E.T. Dalton in his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), G. Dunbar's *Abors and Gallongs* (Calcutta, 1915), and as recently as 1959 in the title of B.K. Shukla's book *The Daflas* (Shillong, 1959). It is not surprising, however, that with the spread of modern education the old derogatory designations became unac-



ceptable to the tribes concerned, and were hence displaced by terms based on tribal languages. Thus the tribesmen previously known as Dafla want to be called Nishi or Nishang, both of these terms being derived from the word *ni* which means "human being". Yet not all those until recently referred to as Dafla are now called Nishi, for those in the Kameng District refer to themselves as Bangni, and this term is used in the census reports. Similarly the term Abor has been replaced by Adi, and the wish of the tribesmen for an identity relating to a group larger than a localized tribe has led to the addition of the term Adi as a prefix to the tribal name. Thus Minyongs who were previously classified as Minyong Abors refer to themselves now as Adi Minyong and Gallongs as Adi Gallong. Yet among the list of Scheduled Tribes both these groups are listed simply as Minyong and Gallong, the prefix Adi being omitted.

There is seldom a neat delimitation between two adjoining groups normally referred to by different names. An example for the blurring of boundaries and occasional overlapping of groups is provided by the case of the Hill Miris. This group inhabits a tract of country including the hills lying west of the Subansiri and south of the Kamla river as well as a strip of hilly country between the Kamla and the Sipi river. Their habitat extends as far as the border between the Subansiri District and the Lakhimpur District of Assam, and in the past they used to migrate in the winter to hunting and fishing grounds lying in lowlands subsequently incorporated into the better districts. The Assamese who encountered them there called them Hill Miris because of an assumed connection with the Miris, a tribal group dwelling in the lowlands next to the foothills.

At the beginning of my work in the Subansiri District in 1944 I took the distinction between Daflas, as the Nishis were then called and the Hill Miris for granted, and initial encounters with some Hill Miris who came to meet me in the Apa Tani valley strengthened my belief that Hill Miris could indeed be distinguished from Daflas. The validity of the name Hill Miri was also confirmed by the members of the Miri Mission of 1912 who extended its use even to the hillmen of the upper Kamla valley. Yet, on my first visit to some Hill Miri villages south of the Kamla I began to doubt the possibility of drawing a neat line separating Miris from Daflas. Coming from the Apa Tanis I first camped in a small village called Bua, which lay close to a line which I had imagined to be the boundary between Tapo (Chemir), an undisputed Miri village, and a group



of "Dafla" villages, i.e. Takhe, Pemir and Linia. Were the people of Bua Miris or Daflas? They could not answer that question, neither term making much sense to them. But I discovered that they intermarried both with the people of Tapo (Chemir) as with those of Rakhe, Pemir and Linia. The fact that Tapo maintained similar marriage relations with the people on the north bank of the Kamla and Linia intermarried with villages well inside Dafla—or as we now would say Nishi—territory shook my confidence in the possibility of distinguishing clearly between Miris and Daflas, and I came to the conclusion that the two groups merge and overlap, and may well be considered as local branches of an undifferentiated population which might be described as "Nishis", a term which by that time I had occasionally encountered. Thirty-six years later I once again came to the Bua area, and found that the local people described themselves as Nishi but referred to the people in villages a few kilometres further to the east as Miris.

B.B. Pandey, the author of a recent book on the Hill Miris,<sup>1</sup> argues that notwithstanding the intermarriage between those calling themselves Miris with tribesmen referred to as Nishis, there is no need to abandon the term Hill Miri or to refute their claim to a separate identity. What speaks in favour of that claim are such distinctive features as hair style, head-dress, and women's dress and ornaments as well as certain special religious and social practices. At the same time Pandey mentions that the Hill Miris have been under pressure both from Gallongs and Nishis, and concludes that the Hill Miris are "a link or bridge-tribe between the Nishi and Gallong mainly along the lower stretch of the Kamla."<sup>2</sup> The uncertainty which reigned for so long regarding the position of individual tribes is reflected in the confusing figures as to the strength of this tribal group. In 1912 it was estimated to be about 2,000, in 1961 the first regular census put the number of Hill Miris as 2,442, which would represent a very likely increase, but in the 1971 Census 8,174 Hill Miris were recorded, and this figure can only have been arrived at by a method of identification different from that employed ten years earlier.

The confusion of nomenclature stems partly from the fact that a name used by members of a tribal group for themselves may not be

<sup>1</sup>*The Hill Miri*, Shillong, 1974, pp. 9-12.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*, p. 12.



used by, or even known to, the members of another branch of the same tribe. Thus the term Nishi by which so many of the tribesmen of the Subansiri District refer to themselves is not used by their fellow-tribesmen in Kameng District, who refer to them as Tagin, whereas the Nishis themselves use the term Tagin to describe their northern neighbours in the Sipi valley and the region drained by the upper Subansiri.

Yet, all these tribes, including the Hill Miris, but excluding the Apa Tanis, are embraced within a notional genealogical framework in which mythical features are interwoven with relationships that may have some historical foundation. The main structure of this framework is recognized by all Nishis, but views on detail vary from region to region.

The origin of the entire tribal group is being traced to a mythical figure called Abo Tani. He is believed to be of supernatural nature, while the first human being was At Nia, from whom Takr, the legendary ancestor of the Nishis is descended. Takr had three sons, called Dopum, Dodum and Dol, and these have given their names to three main branches of the Nishi group. Some Nishis believe that descendants of Dopum and Dol are found also among some Adi clans, but this idea is not reflected in any specific feeling of solidarity between Nishis and Adis.

Within each of the three main branches Dopum, Dodum and Dol there are several sub-branches which may be described as phratries and these in turn are divided into clans. None of these units including the main branches are endogamous, nor are phratries exogamous. Individual clans, however, are strictly exogamous, and there are small groups of clans which stand in brother relationship and do not intermarry. Some of the clans, moreover, are subdivided into named lineages. The Bedak clan, located in the upper Kamla valley, for instance, comprises four lineages known as Chugu, Changmo, Changlo and Ruglum. Unlike some Apa Tani sub-clans<sup>3</sup> marriage between members of such lineages is not permitted for the rule of clan-exogamy continues to operate even when fission has taken place, and a clan is divided into several lineages.

Neither the main branches nor the phratries are necessarily localized though some of the phratries and many clans have local associations. Only intensive research extending over the entire

<sup>3</sup>See my *A Himalayan Tribe*, p. 84.



Nishi region could ascertain the exact geographical distribution of the various units within the framework of branches, phratries and clans, and such an undertaking is still outstanding, though since the improvement of communication it would be far less difficult than it was at the time of main fieldwork in 1944-45. The instability of Nishi society, which in the past resulted in extensive movements of whole groups, ran counter to any permanent localization of phratries and clans, and there is evidence of a gradual drift of Nishi clans from the regions of higher altitude into the middle ranges and from there into the foothills. The information which I collected on my various tours in the 1940s and updated as far as possible in 1980, allows us to piece together the following picture:

The Dopum branch, believed to be descended from the eldest of the three founder brothers, is represented only by some small fragments of clans dwelling in such foothill villages as Joyhing and Boguli, a group of clans in the Kolariang area, between the Khru and Kamla rivers, and by several Hill Miri villages in the hills south of the Kamla. Thus it is as widely dispersed as imaginable and lacks any major concentration.

The Dol branch, on the other hand, is of much greater strength. It comprises five major phratries each consisting of a number of populous clans. The Durum-Dui phratry is found mainly in the area of the Palin and Kiyi valleys and includes such important clans as Likha, Gemir and Tassar, while other clans of the same phratry were dispersed some four generations ago by raids of stronger groups and are today represented only by isolated families.

Another phratry of the Dol branch is known as Dukum-Duri and this is divided into two divisions, one concentrated in the hills between Khru and Kamla, and the other in the upper Kamla valley and the Selu valley.

Two other phratries of the Dol branch are known as Tedü-Todum and Temi-Talum. While in my earlier work I could not establish many details about these phratries, during my recent visit to Raga I was able to compile a list of the constituent clans but without finding out much about their fortunes and distribution.

The Dodum branch is much better known, being largely represented on the one hand by such phratries as Pei, located in villages in the lower Kamla valley, and on the other by Bhat-Tebü and Leli-Pökhe. The former consists mainly of clans spread over the Panior and Par valleys, and the latter includes some large clans represent-



ed in the Kiyi valley as well as the Panior and Par regions. Clans of a third phratry known as Kemolir, share with those of the Leli-Pökhe phratry the tradition that their ancestors migrated south from the Palin and Khru valleys.

A remarkable feature of the phratry and clan system of Nishis and Hill Miris is the discrepancy between the very detailed knowledge many men possess about the composition of the various phratries including the names of clans, many of which are virtually extinct, and the non-functional nature of all these groups. Neither the three major divisions Dopum, Dodum, Dol nor phratries or clans are corporate groups with a sense of solidarity, and any mechanism for concerted action. In other Indian tribal societies, as for instance that of the Gonds of Middle India, the clan-membership of a man determines his actions in many situations and particularly in communal ritual activities, and among most Naga tribes—so close to the peoples of Arunachal Pradesh—individuals can depend on the protection of their clan fellows, who are not only under an obligation to revenge their death in the event of their falling victim to an attack, but may also be called upon to accept liability for the debts of a clan member. In the notoriously loosely structured Nishi society neither phratry nor clan members are burdened by any comparable duties and the only concrete function of the clans lies in their character as exogamous groups. Among the Apa Tanis, spatially and also in some respects culturally close to Nishis and Hill Miris, clans play a much more important role in the social and ritual system. Nishis have no institutions comparable to the cult-centres of individual clans or sub-clans, nor do clans ever rally to the defence of common interests as it is done by Apa Tani clans and wards.<sup>4</sup>

The whole structure of named divisions, phratries and clans appears thus as a purely fictional framework, whose persistence in Nishi thinking does not serve to validate social and political relations between the various units, and is totally unconnected with any ritual performances or even with religious beliefs comparable to the clan-cults of other tribal societies. It is therefore truly surprising that the consciousness of this framework of Nishi persists, and ordinary Nishis who have always lacked the help of any written records remember the names of the various clans and their group-

<sup>4</sup>See my *A Himalayan Tribe*, pp. 80-83.



ing in phratries. In all my notes on the phratry and clan-system I find only one reference to a possible political alignment such as might have anchored the groupings in tribal memory. In 1945 one of my Nishi informants mentioned a tradition according to which the ancestor of the Licha, Nielom, Tar and Lisi clans, which make up the Dodum phratry known as Leli or Pökhe, belonged originally to the Dol group but became the "brothers" of the Leli groups when threatened by repeated raids they had to beg the help of men of the Leli phratry.

Similar alliances between different clans are certainly rare, and no other concrete case has come to my notice. Their occurrence is also unlikely because not even men of one and the same clan are wont to unite in the face of aggression. Indeed I came across several instances of members of the same clan being involved in a feud with each other (see pp. 102-5).

Despite the apparent absence of formal alliances between clans, there are traditions supporting the view that groups of clans, usually belonging to the same phratry, were involved in the same migratory movements and subsequently settled in the same territory. Thus it is said that certain clans of the Chili-Dumchi phratry of the Dodum branch expanded southwards from the Khru region and occupied part of the Panior valley. The important Nabum clan of that phratry can trace its migration from the upper Khru valley to the Panior and Par valleys over five to six generations. We do not know whether there was any organization to coordinate such migratory movements but judging from the mobility of individual households in present days, one is inclined to believe that no formal organization existed but that individual families drifted from one area to the other, partly in search of better land to cultivate, and partly under the pressure of more powerful neighbours. It is probable that families linked by descent or marriage moved at the same time and in the same direction, but there is no indication that such migrations were planned by generally recognized leaders, comparable to the colonizations sparked off by sons of Chin and Mizo chiefs of even the highly organized foundations of new villages by prospective headmen among the Raj Gonds.<sup>5</sup>

There is one feature of the social framework embracing Nishis

<sup>5</sup>J. Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, London, 1912, p. 43. C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh*, Delhi and London, 1979, pp. 43-46.



and Hill Miris which remains to be more closely investigated. During my tours in 1944-45 I repeatedly heard the term *Gungü* with reference to people commonly referred to as Hill Miris, and I took this to correspond to the terms Dopum, Dodum and Dol. B.B. Pandey, who came to know the Hill Miris much better than I had done, mentions in his book *The Hill Miri* (Shillong, 1974) that he found no confirmation of this term. When in 1980 I enquired into this matter in Raga I was told the word *Gungü* existed, but did not refer to a social group but had the meaning "stranger" or "foreigner". It is possible that my Nishi informants had referred to Hill Miris as *Gungü*, because of the cultural differences between the two tribal groups, and that this misled me to take the term *Gungü* for the designation of a tribal branch such as Dopum or Dol. In this I was undoubtedly mistaken for in 1980 I discovered that phratries I had subsumed under "*Gungü*" are considered as belonging to the one or other of the main branches. Thus the Pei phratry is attributed to Dodum, the Peru phratry to Dopum and Telü-Todum and Tai-Talom to Dol. The fact that the clans of the latter phratries are found in the upper Kamal valley among other clans of the Dol group as well as in Nishi villages immediately west of the core of the Hill Miri region confirms my present opinion that it is impossible to draw a hard and fast line between Nishis and Hill Miris, both of whom are comprised within the structural framework outlined in the preceding pages.

The division of society into patrilineal exogamous clans is a feature in no way peculiar to the Nishi-Hill Miri group. We find it among Apa Tanis as well as Adis and most other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh including Noctes and Wanchus in Traip District on the border of Nagaland and Burma. Akas, Mijis and Khovas all have similar descent groups and so do the Sherdukpens. It is only among the Monpas that unilineal clans are not clearly formulated, though there are in some villages clan-like groups which may be described as pseudo-clans as they trace their descent from men whose origin in specific localities has given the whole descent-group a name derived from that locality. The absence of true exogamous unilineal clans among the Monpas is not surprising, as this group belongs basically to the Tibetan culture-sphere where unilineal descent-groups do not form a vital part of the social structure.

### *Social Stratification*

The division of society into classes of different status is a pheno-



menon found in several of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. It is most clearly pronounced among the Apa Tanis of Subansiri District and the Wanchus of Tirap District but occurs also in a number of other tribal societies.

Apa Tani society is divided into patricians (*guth*) and commoners (*guchi*), and in the past the latter category included free born commoners as well as slaves, but today the slaves, freed in the 1960s, have the same status as other *guchi*.<sup>6</sup> Similar terms, *gute* and *guchi*, are also used by Nishis, but their meaning is far less clear than among Apa Tanis, and in some areas it has been completely blurred.

In the Kamla region both Nishis and Hill Miris describe certain clans and even whole phratries as *gute* and others as *guchi*. There is the tradition that the *guchi* people were the first settlers in the country, and the *gute* were late comers. Another interpretation is that when the two ancestors of the Nishis arrived, the younger of the two brothers went ahead to spy out the land, and the elder brother followed later. The *guchi* clans are believed to be the descendants of the younger brother, who arrived first, and the *gute* clans the off-spring of the elder brother. There is a vague idea that the *gute* clans are of higher social status than the *guchi* clans, and it is said that in the beginning the two groups of clans did not intermarry. Today no such restriction is in force, and people of *gute* class enjoy no privileges.

In the regions of the Khru valley and upper Kamla valley, the division into *gute* and *guchi*, is most clearly pronounced and there the entire clans of Sartam, Rugi, Mei and Tali are of *guchi* status while the clans Niktor, Tungar and Haki are *gute*. Similarly within the Tai-Tamin phratry the important clans of Kabak and Balu are *gute* whereas the Lomra clan is *guchi*. The classification of Niktor as *gute* cannot be easily reconciled with the information, obtained in 1980, that the Niktor people were "servants" of the Kabak people and immigrated from the north along the Selu river, because in their home-villages good soil for cultivation was scarce. Yet, nowadays the Niktor and Kabak clans intermarry, and so any idea of an inferior status of *guchi* is probably obsolete.

In the areas of Panior and Par, which are close to the foothills, the distinction between *gute* and *guchi* seems to have been comple-

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed description of the Apa Tani class-system see *A Himalayan Tribe*, pp. 87-102.



tely obscured, possibly because of the involvement of a large part of the population in relatively recent population movements. In this area the *guchi* status is no longer attributed to whole clans, but the term is used for the descendants of slaves.

Even thirty years ago slavery was wide-spread among Nishis and many men, women and children taken captive in raids ended up as slaves if their kinsmen did not have the means to pay the ransoms demanded by their captors. But there was a difference between the slaves of Nishis and those of Apa Tanis. While an Apa Tanj slave, even if freed by his master, could never rise above the status of a *guchi*, and usually remained in economic dependence, a Nishi slave could not only attain his freedom but also acquire property and rise to the status of a respected free man.

Whatever the original connotation of *gute* and *guchi* may have been among Nishis, today the distinction has lost all relevance, and Nishi society is becoming more and more egalitarian.

When in Chapter 11 we discuss Sherdukpens and Monpas, we shall see that among these groups status-distinctions are very pronounced. The upper and lower class of Sherdukpens, respectively known as *thong* and *tsaw* are very well defined and there is no mobility across class-lines just as there is none among Apa Tanis. Monpa society too is stratified, but there the number of status-groups is much larger.

Traces of a division of society along class-lines is also found among the Adis, but our knowledge of the phenomenon is still inadequate, and it is not mentioned by either of the two anthropologists who have worked on Adi tribes in recent years, namely Sachin Roy, the author of *Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture* (Shillong, 1960), and K. Kumar, author of *The Pailibos* (Shillong, 1979). My own familiarity with any group of Adis is very limited, but when in 1937 I spent a short time among the Minyongs of Siang District, then known as Sadiya Frontier Tract, I came across some traditions relating to two social classes of different status.

What is not in doubt is the division of the Minyongs into two moieties, known as Kumuing and Kuri, each of which is sub-divided into a number of exogamous clans, for this is mentioned by all authorities on the Minyongs, and Sachin Roy gives on page 214 of his book a list of clans which coincides exactly with that



contained in a tour diary by J.H.F. Williams.<sup>7</sup> The latter mentions that in Riga, the largest Minyong village, political factions coincided with these two divisions and that in their backing of the rival parties of the neighbouring Karko tribe the Minyongs were split according to their moieties, a statement indicating a notable contrast to the groupings of Nishis, which are not a basis for political alignments.

While the existence of the two moieties among the Minyongs is explained by their alleged descent from two mythical tribal ancestors—comparable no doubt to the three Nishi ancestors Dopum, Dodum, Dol, there is yet another dual division among the Minyongs which appears somewhat obscure. According to R.C.R. Cumming,<sup>8</sup> there are within the Minyong tribe two social classes known as *mishing* and *mipak*. The origin and nature of these classes are not at all clear and neither my own field notes nor the accounts of other observers provide any real clue. A myth which I recorded in the village of Rotung and which describes the origin of the two divisions runs as follows:

When the Minyongs first came out of the earth they strangled a great mithan called Khosung. After they had cut up the mithan they sat down in a circle, each clan in its own place, and shared out the meat. All clans received shares except the clans of Dupak, Gao and Messar, for whom no meat was left. Therefore these clans were called *mipak*. In the old times *mishing* and *mipak* did not intermarry, for if a *mishing* consorted with a *mipak* he (or she) as well as any children from the union became *mipak*.

All the three clans mentioned in the story occur also in Williams' list, but while Messar and Gao belong to the Kuri group, Dupak is a Kumuing clan, and this suggests that the two classes *mishing* and *mipak* cut across the division into Kumuing and Kuri.

According to another story the *mipak* people are the descendants of a man whose wife was kidnapped by a spirit (*epom*) and forced to live with him. Finally the husband succeeded in killing the spirit and regaining his wife. The couple's children were the first *mipak*, and their lower status can perhaps be explained by the fact that their mother, though ultimately restored to her husband, had for two years lived in an adulterous union with a spirit.

<sup>7</sup>Tour diaries of the Assistant Political Officer, Pasighat, November 1940-April 1944. Shillong 1944, p. 12

<sup>8</sup>Census of India 1921, Assam Part I, Appendix B, p. XIII.



T.K. Lorrain's *Dictionary of the Abor-Miri Language* (Shillong, 1910), does not throw much light on the terms *mishing* and *mipak*. According to this dictionary the noun *mipak* means "Assamese; foreigner; alien; outcast, vagabond", and the verb *mipak* means "to be outcasted (for marrying one of another tribe or one below in social scale, etc.)". Both these meanings imply a degree of inferiority, and Cumming too translates *mipak* as "outcaste". He further states that marriages between *mishing* and *mipak*, though not prohibited, were comparatively rare, because sexual intercourse with a *mipak* caused a *mishing* to lose his status and to become a *mipak*. Yet even occasional intermarriage between the two classes must obviously lead to an increase in the proportion of *mipak*, because all off-spring of such mixed marriages are considered *mipak*. In Rotung I was told that two generations ago the villagers had all been *mishing* while at the time of my visit most were *mipak*.

The parallel between the Minyongs' division into *mishing* and *mipak* and that of the Apa Tanis' into *guth* and *guchi* is close enough to suggest that in the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh there is an underlying tendency towards stratification. This might be clearly expressed in distinctions of rights and obligations appropriate to two classes as among Apa Tanis and Sherdukpens or it may be blurred and without discernible function as among Nishis, even though the linguistic terms for the contrasting classes persist.

The most striking and also best known example of a hierarchically organized tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh is provided by the Wanchus of Tirap District who are undoubtedly a branch of the Konyaks of Nagaland. Among the Wanchus there is a class of hereditary chiefs known as Wangham and a class of commoners called Wangpen. In between these two classes rank those who are the issue of unions between men of chiefly class and women of lower status.

The Wangham class consists exclusively of those members of a ruling chief's lineage who are the issue of marriages between Wangham men and women from other villages of similar status. As marriage within the chiefly lineage of the same village is inadmissible, all alliances in which both spouses are of Wangham rank have to be contracted between chiefly houses of different domains. Men of the highest chiefly rank can marry secondary wives of commoner class, and the issue from such chief-commoner unions constituted the Wangsa or small chiefly class. Girls of Wangham



status were never married to commoners, but if no suitable husband of equal status could be found, they were given in marriage to men of Wangsa, i.e. small chiefly class.

Men of Wangsa rank could either marry wives of similar status from other villages or conclude unions with commoner girls. The children from both types of marriage were of Wangsa status, for even the repeated admixture of commoner blood did not result in a further lowering of the status of descendants of a great chief.

The most striking difference between the chiefly classes, whether Wangham or Wangsa, and the commoners lies in the appearance of their women. Those of the former wear their hair long, whereas all commoner women, even those married to a paramount chief have their heads shaved or closely cropped.

People of different class did not eat from the same platter, but food cooked by commoners could be eaten even by chiefs of the highest rank.

Despite the fact that the great chiefs of the Wanchus had much more power and prestige than even the richest Apa Tani patrician, there is yet a certain conceptual similarity between the class-system of the Apa Tanis and the rank order of the Wanchus. And as among the Apa Tanis, who frown on intermarriage between *guth* and *guchi*, girls of the upper class may have premarital love-affairs with *guchi* boys, the Wanchus too have a custom which seems to make nonsense of the great chiefs' claim to the purity of their line. A chief's bride of equal status remained for some time in her parental village paying only occasional visits to her husband. As long as she lived in her father's house she was free to associate with young men even of commoner status, and if she became pregnant the possibility that the child's father was a commoner was ignored and the child was accorded chiefly rank.

Both among Apa Tanis and the Wanchu it is the social, and not the physiological paternity which counts and determines a child's status.

Class-distinction affect marriage-rules also among Sherdukpens and Monpas. Among the former Thong and Tsao traditionally did not intermarry, though in recent years the rule has been relaxed and some unions across class-barriers have taken place. Monpa society is structured rather differently, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 11, for Monpas are divided into a number of status groups, and there is no sign of a simple division into an



upper and a lower class, as among Apa Tanis, Sherdukpens, and possibly Minyongs.

### *Linguistic and Racial Differentiations*

All the tribal populations of Arunachal Pradesh speak Tibeto-Burman languages, but while some dialects are mutually understandable others have diverged so far that meaningful communication between members of different groups, not necessarily far removed from each other, is hardly possible. Insofar as the Nishis are concerned it would appear at first sight that the major tribal divisions coincide with linguistic groupings. Nishis of the foothills adjoining the Lakhimpur District of Assam refer to their own dialect as Leli language, to the dialect of the Likha cluster of settlements as Durum language, and to the dialects spoken on the upper Par river and upper Panior river as Aya or Nabum. "Aya" means literally only "of the high regions" whereas Nabum is the name of a prominent clan whose north-south migration during the past six or seven generations can still be traced, though not with a high degree of accuracy.

However, such associations do not bear close scrutiny. While originally the main tribal divisions may have been localized each with its distinct mode of speech, with the dispersal and merging of populations, the connections between tribal groups and localities became obscured, and today a man's language is indicative of the region in which he grew up, rather than of his phratry or tribal branch. Thus many members of the Nabum clan in the Par valley speak "Leli", the people of Licha, though of Leli phratry according to the genealogical framework, speak a Durum dialect, and the Nurum-Benga people of the upper Khru valley, though part of the Dodum group, speak a dialect associated with the Dol clans of that region.

How far are these dialects mutually understandable? A man of the foothills has no difficulty in conversing with people of say Mingo, or the Palin or lower Khru valley. But when he meets people of the Upper Kamla valley understanding becomes difficult. He may not be as completely at a loss as, for instance, an Angami Naga in a Konyak village, but there is no more a question of unhampered conversation. In view of the isolation of groups in times of difficult communications and absence of security, it is nevertheless the overall linguistic uniformity rather than dialectical



differences which are surprising. In Nagaland some language groups are confined to a dozen villages, and on a three days' walk one may pass through the zones of three languages not mutually understandable. In the Nishi hills such a situation is unthinkable; language groups extend over large areas and merge very gradually one into the other.

Nishi tradition holds that all branches of the tribe have sprung from the same ancestor. The far-reaching linguistic uniformity and the similarity of basic customs in widely separated areas would seem to support this theory of a common origin, but the racial make-up of the Nishis speaks more for a heterogeneous character of the tribe. Some of the hill-tribes of Northeast India evince certainly a greater racial uniformity, and though the majority of Nishis bear some of the features commonly associated with the so-called Palaeo-Mongoloids, there are among them at least two outstanding and greatly divergent types. The more frequent one is characterized by a round, rather flat face with a broad snub-nose, prominent cheek-bones, eyes lying in shallow sockets, and a small, weak chin. Comparatively small stocky stature and a sallow yellow-brownish skin-colour seem to go often with this type. There is a striking difference between the Nishis with these traits which represent a fair picture of the Palaeo-Mongoloid type of the textbooks, and the Nishis characterized by an oblong face, a prominent, often hooked nose, with a narrow bridge, deep-set eyes, a well pronounced chin, ruddy complexion, comparatively high stature and athletic build.

Obviously the Nishi population of today does not consist only of individuals conforming to either of these two types which represent two extreme ends of a spectrum of physical features, extremes which cannot have sprung from a single origin, and suggest therefore the presence of at least two distinct elements in the racial make-up of this tribe.

Until physical anthropologists have studied in detail both the Nishis and their immediate neighbours it would be unjustifiable to draw from visual observations of the various physical types any far-reaching conclusion, but there seems to be nevertheless a *prima facie* case for the hypothesis that the Nishis as we find them today are the product of the blending of two or more distinct populations, one of which may perhaps be responsible for the tradition of an immigration from northern regions close to either side of



the Himalayan main range.

### *Migrations and Transhumance*

The instability of Nishi settlements and the practice of shifting cultivation creates conditions in which individual households and whole communities can easily move from one area to another, and apart from traditions—perhaps partly legendary—of large-scale migrations in the distant past, many Nishis recall the movements of their own forefathers from one named settlement to the other.

As this type of migration belongs probably to a phase in the Nishis' history which has now come to an end, and present population movements are motivated in quite a different way, I propose to record here a few concrete instances of migrations which I recorded in 1945. While staying in the upper Panior valley, I discovered that most of the families of the village of Mengo had settled in the area only a few generations ago, and could describe the circumstances of their forebears' immigration.

Mengo lies in a broad valley separated by a range of high hills from several populated valleys whose rivers drain into the Khru. At the time of my enquiries these valleys were still unexplored, but I had collected some second-hand information on their inhabitants who belonged mainly to the Dol group. Of the four settlements of Mengo two were inhabited by people of Nabum clan, one by people of Gollo clan, and one by families of Tara clan. Some Gollo families were the first to settle at Mengo. They came from the north across the Yelibo range from Debra, a village in the Lebla area in one of the valleys drained by the Panyi, a tributary of the Khru. They came south because in Lebla the population had grown so much that there was not sufficient land for jhum-cultivation left. One of the Gollo men I spoke with told me that his was the fourth generation in Mengo, and that before their arrival Mengo had been uninhabited. But the families of the settlers increased and some of them founded the nearby village of Tapo, which contained then seven Gollo households.

People of Nabum clan came soon afterwards and were in 1945 also the fourth generation in Mengo. It is remembered that there was in Lebla a man called Nabum Takum. He had two sons Sakha and Tado, both of whom lived and died in Lebla. Sakha's sons Tasser and Tamar migrated to Mengo and so did Tado's three sons Kankha, Tai and Nanu. The latter had three sons,



Tarum, Topum and Tayam, all of whom lived in Mengo. Tarum's son Tai built his house at Rumi, a site close to Mengo, and his two grandsons Tajom and Talom, both alive in 1945, settled at Dorde, a place some 15 km. east of Mengo, where their father's sister was married to Serbe of Likha clan. Dorde had been a deserted site before Likha Serbe settled there. The descendants of Tayam, Nanu's youngest son, had moved to the Par valley which lies in the outer ranges south of Mengo. Other men of Nabum clan, descended from those who had moved from the Panyi valley to the Mengo area also moved towards the foothills and settled in various places in the Perü and Par valleys.

Some men of other phratries and clans, such as the Tana clan of the Leli phratry, now settled in the Par valley have the tradition that their forefathers came from the northeast and after crossing Kamla and Khru settled at Lihi, a place midway between Mengo and Likha. They mention a large number of localities, such as Yazali, Yoijat, and Embinkota where their ancestors are supposed to have stayed before they finally settled at Posa in the Par valley.

The move from the Khru area to Mengo and other villages in the Panior valley seems to have continued, and in 1945 I met in Mengo a man of Tara clan who only a year previously had left his home-village Gaga in the Panyi valley, because of a shortage of food caused by a plague of rats who had ravaged the crops. He came to Mengo where two sisters of his were married, and could help their brother to establish himself. Some five years earlier a family of Tedr clan had left their home-village Litlot in the Panyi valley and settled at Mengo.

Population movements similar to those which brought such clans as Gollo and Nabum from the Panyi valley to the Mengo area, and from there to the Par valley, occurred also in the region of the Kamla river, but we lack detailed information on those migrations. It appears fairly certain, however, that people of the Tai-Tamin phratry and particularly the powerful Kabak clan and its subsections moved from the north possibly via the Selu valley into the upper Kamla valley, and there split an earlier population akin to the Hill Miris in two, so that now the Guchi, Sojam and Rei clans of the upper Kamla valley are separated from related clans of the Chimr phratry of the lower Kamla valley. There is the tradition that the forefather of all Kabak people was Dirge-Dirpe, son of Talo, who came from the upper Subansiri valley, now regarded as the



home of Tagins rather than Nishis. His direct descendants in several generations are remembered, among them Ragumo, Ragram and Rapchak. The latter had four sons: Sagdu, Changmo, Chaglo and Chagrak, and those have given their names to Kabak lineages still living in villages in the Kamla valley such as Mingo, Luba, Hebe, Bidan, and Dokum. Some of the descendants of Ragchak went to live at Hova, which was originally inhabited by clans akin to the Hill Miris south of the Kamla, but now no one lives at Hova, and the Kabak people who were living there moved to the regrouped village of Dokum, on the road near Raga.

The Kabak people themselves claim—not necessarily truthfully—that they did not fight the Pei people of the lower Kamla valley, but only Dui people of the Daporijo region. Whatever the truth of this claim may be, the Kabak clan was greatly feared because of its aggressive character and its numerical strength, and there can be no doubt that either by raiding or infiltration and intermarriage Kabak people took over several of the villages in the hills flanking the left bank of the Kamla river. Even in 1945 the Hill Miris of such Chimr villages as Tajo, Bua and La, south of the Kamla, were certainly still sufficiently afraid of their northern neighbours to increase their security by cutting down the cane suspension bridge which had spanned the Kamla river. Guch Tamar of Tapo (also known as Chemir) explained to me the reason for this action by pointing out that within the span of the last three or four generations the whole area had been subjected to much savage raiding and there had been a complete transformation of the political set-up. Previously inhabited by a group of clans which extended both north and south of the Kamla, the area north of that river was now dominated by the powerful Kabak clans. Having come from the upper reaches of the river some three generations ago these clans had first established themselves in Mingö, a village some four days' march northeast to Tapo (Chemir), and had rapidly extended their hold over the whole of the neighbourhood so that now they occupied most of the villages in the country lying south of the Sipi and north of the Kamla.

While most of the population movements described so far, are those of individual families or groups leaving their homes, either under the pressure of attacks or because of a shortage of cultivable land, there are other migrations which involve only a temporary change of habitat, and do not indicate a dissatisfaction with the migrants' permanent home-villages. The most important of such



movements were the annual migrations of Hill Miris of the Kamla valley and the hill-tracts south of the Kamla river to the plains-region adjoining the foothills. They moved there in the cold weather leaving only a few very old people in their villages, and established themselves in camps situated year after year in the same locality. Hunting and fishing in the rivers and streams of the plains were during that time their main occupation and each clan and village-community had their recognized hunting and fishing grounds, land which was considered their property as much as the communal village land used for slash-and-burn cultivation in the hills. The Miris recall that in their forefathers' days when hunting and fishing in the plains were still good, not only the villagers south of the Kamla, but also those of the north bank went regularly to the plains. Later Assamese colonists settled in the Miris' hunting and fishing grounds, and the Miris demanded a certain rent for their land, and at first this was paid in kind the cultivators giving the Miris a share in the crops grown. That payment was more in the nature of rent than of tribute, for the Miris with their age-old rights in the forest areas along the foothills, were in relation to the Assamese peasantry in a position similar to that of an absentee landlord insofar as they visited their hunting grounds annually and entertained quite friendly relations with the new-comers settled there but using at first only a fraction of the land for cultivation. Later when there was friction between the hillmen and the new settlers over the paying of these rents, the government, anxious to prevent any conflict on the borders of the administered territory, took over the obligation in the form of making annual payments to the Hill Miris and a few Nishis, and these payments were described as *posa*. In 1945 the memory was still strong among the Hill Miris that the *posa* was rent for land along the foothills which belonged to the Miris by ancient right and every year the hillmen spent some weeks in the plains villages built on their hunting grounds.

The payment of *posa* was not confined to the Hill Miris but some Nishis of foothill villages were also in receipt of *posa*, and in the Kameng District the Sherdukpens who had also claims on land cultivated by Assamese were entitled to *posa* payments. They still annually visit the plains to trade with Assamese, and also spend some time at Doimara, a new settlement within the borders of Arunachal Pradesh.

After the establishment of the Indian administration over the:



whole of Arunachal Pradesh, *posa* payments were phased out, and unless the amounts due to the individual *posa*-holders had been adjusted to the decline in the value of money through inflation, the payments received would in any case have become negligible.

In 1945 I had still paid the *posa* to a gathering of Hill Miri notables, and even then there were complaints that the rupee coins paid out did not buy as much in the bazaars of the plains as the same rupee-amount had bought before the war. On that occasion I realized that the system of *posa*-payments had very real advantages for government. It had created a set of influential people who realized that they had to cooperate with government in such matters as the supply of porters. The officers of government had generally considered *posa* as a form of tribute with which in the early days of British rule the hillmen had been bought off from raiding the plains, but I am convinced that in this they were mistaken and *posa* was really a kind of rent for land belonging to the Miris and other hillmen by right.

Today the seasonal migrations to the plains have largely ceased, for the pressure of population growth in the plains of Assam has encroached on the Hill Miris' former hunting grounds and the economic changes in the hills have largely removed the necessity for the annual moves to the plains.

There remains, however, the historical problem, why for generations there has been a steady movement of tribal populations from the north and northwest to the south and southeast. Even the most settled of the Subansiri tribes, namely the Apa Tanis, have the tradition that their forefathers came from the north, along routes still remembered and retold in legends and songs,<sup>9</sup> and we have seen that among Nishis there have been numerous much more recent movements from the regions of the upper Khru and upper Kamla to the middle ranges and the foothills. The causes of these movements are obscure and must remain so until more anthropological research in the regions closer to the northern border of Arunachal Pradesh has been done, though even such research may not produce a definite solution of the problem, which may partly have to be sought on the far side of the Great Himalayan range, which means among the Tibetan populations who used to have contacts with the northernmost tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. There may have been

<sup>9</sup>See *A Himalayan Tribe*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 12, 13, 160.



pressure by other populations, perhaps by Tibetans or Tibetanized tribes, on the Nishis of the higher regions, or exhaustion of the cultivable land, as mentioned by some of the settlers in Mengo, or an increase in population may have forced weaker groups to seek new land in the lower valleys where forest and unexhausted land suitable for slash-and-burn cultivations was more plentiful. If Nishi tradition is to be believed the Par region and lower Panior valley were uninhabited but for some scattered Sulungs until the arrival of the people of the Bhat-Tebü phratry, who were the first to carve fields from the virgin forest. There is certainly a great difference between the densely wooded outer ranges and the hills denuded by successive immigrants in the Talo-Jorum area on the lower Kiyi valley. In the 1940s the movement towards the outer ranges had not yet come to an end, but the pacification of the country and suppression of raids have now created a new situation of stability and such movements of population as still take place are of an entirely new kind.

In those areas which have recently been opened up by motorable roads and bus routes Nishis and Hill Miris evince now a tendency to move their houses from hill-tops and high spots into the vicinity of the roads where they can benefit from many of the facilities provided by government such as schools for their children, medical care, and wherever possible also piped water and even electricity. Government too has encouraged the re-grouping of villags in order to bring such welfare measures to as many households as possible. In the Raga Circle I visited several such regrouped villages, and had the impression that the inhabitants had adjusted themselves well to life in communities rather larger than traditional Hill Miri settlements. In Dukum, which lies on the road only a few kilometres east of Raga, there were altogether 31 households. Eight of these were of Maga clan and had all come at the same time from Lige,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  km east of Dukum. They retained their land at Lige and still went to cultivate there. Similarly seven families of Raga clan had only moved their houses but continued to till their land at Raga. Thirteen families were of the Hova branch of the Kabak clan, and had come in a body from Hova, a site higher in the hills, which has now become deserted. Minor clans represented in the re-grouped village are Mugu and Nidu.

A village known as Maga situated 40 km east of Raga, had in the early 1970s 13 houses of which 9 belonged to men of Maga clan.



In the process of re-grouping most of them moved to the newly established village of Kemliko not far from Dukum. The dissolution of this community is remarkable because Maga was known as a strong village which nobody dared to raid though Maga men raided other settlements.

While the traditional mobility of Nishis and Hill Miris undoubtedly facilitated the process of re-grouping it will be interesting to see whether this mobility will be detrimental to the stability of the newly re-grouped villages by making it easy for the inhabitants to settle elsewhere if the spirit moves them.

The abandonment of hill-settlements occurred in some areas even without the incentive of re-grouping under government sponsorship. Thus many of the Nishis on the hills flanking the lower course of the Panior river left their villages which they and their forefathers had built on the crest of ranges at altitudes of 1,500 to 3,000 feet, and moved down into the valley, where they now live in dispersed settlements close to the motor-road linking the plains with the Apa Tani valley. In making this move they forwent the better and healthier climate of the hills, but gained the advantage of easy communications, proximity to bazaars and schools, improved chances of obtaining casual employment in such public works as the building and repairing of the motor-road.

In the Par valley a similar movement to lower sites has taken place, and some Nishi communities have even settled in the plains outside the borders of Arunachal Pradesh.