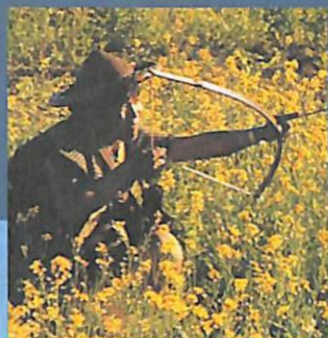


BORDER TAGINS OF
ARUNACHAL
PRADESH



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M KRISHNATRY

India—The Land and the People

Border Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh

Unarmed Expedition 1956

S M KRISHNATRY



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Call No. 915.095 416.3

Acc. No. 6626

The book was originally published by Directorate of Research,
Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar in 1997.

ISBN 978-81-237-4460-5

First Edition, 2005

First Reprint 2007 (*Saka* 1929)

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Rs 80.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
A-5 Green Park, New Delhi - 110016

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Foreword

Prior to Independence, India's eastern marches were scarcely known, unlike the North West Frontier Province bordering on Afghanistan and adjacent lands where the Great Game was played out. The Northeast, a huge swathe of densely forested cis-Himalayan territory was a land of mystery - wild, unexplored and constitutionally "excluded". These Frontier Tracts lay secluded behind a so-called Inner Line along the foothills edging the Assam Valley, rising in serried ranges to the Himalayan rampart and the Forbidden Land of Tibet beyond.

Little was known of the vast mosaic of tribal communities inhabiting this region. In October 1953 an Assam Rifles Major and his unsuspecting column of 42 men and supporting staff were massacred at Achingmori in Tagin country on account of what later transpired was an inter-tribal dispute over a woman. The country was shocked. The Tagins were known to be a warlike and otherwise relatively unknown people, with the Bangni and Adis, whose homelands stretched from the mid-hills up to the McMahon Line in the Subansiri Division of what had come to be known as the North East Frontier Agency or NEFA, today's Arunachal.

Under the Raj, the answer would have been a punitive expedition. However, the new Indian Government stopped short with apprehending the ringleaders of the incident. The further task of establishing friendly contact with the people and bringing the region under settled administration awaited volunteers. An important element in the lives of

the Marabai Tagins had been cross-border pilgrimages to the sacred Buddhist peaks of Takpashiri (Tsari) and Dorji Phagmo between Gelling and Migythun, with a major pilgrimage every twelve years, next due in 1956. This seemed an ideal occasion to mount a friendship expedition. Major Surendra Mohan Krishnatray, a recent addition to the newly formed Indian Frontier Administrative Service happily volunteered to lead it. The choice was apt. Krishnatry and his wife, Geeta, had just completed six years in Gyantse as part of the Indian establishment in Tibet and, filled with a sense of adventure and mission, volunteered to traverse this unsurveyed region.

His terms of reference were to ensure a peaceful pilgrimage, prevent trespass into Indian territory and establish an administrative centre as near the international boundary as possible. In order to demonstrate his friendly intentions, Krishnatry took two bold and imaginative decisions. He invited his wife, Geeta, to accompany him and determined that the column would carry no weapons. Thus, armed with a Gandhian commitment to *ahimsa*, the party set forth to Doporijo, to which point stores had been airlifted, and commenced their forward march on January 24 whereas this writer happened to be present to wish them Godspeed and a safe return.

The journey was full of wonder and adventure for both visitors and hosts. Rhinos on the runway at Jorhat, cobras, leeches and mites, dense jungle and precipitous gorges, some traversed perilously on rope ladders clinging to the face of the mountain. The Tagins were childlike in their curiosity and full of fun. The baubles they valued were safety pins, needles and thread, and payment in eight anna coins - not the smaller four anna variety - as these were good for making trinkets and garlands. The hand mirror Geeta carried was an object of amazement and amusement, as viewers doubled up with laughter on seeing their own grimacing faces! There were uglier facets of life too, like slavery (which quickly ended).

The radio-telephone, packed in a box that crackled and "spoke", was another source of wonder. As Geeta was the operator and cipher decoder and constantly talking into the box, a group of porters finally discovered the "secret". It held the Krishnatry children with whom Geeta would daily converse. Having seen through the game the porters decided that they would not carry that particular load any further as it was too dangerous. What would happen if the box fell and the children were hurt? There were other occasions too when the porters mutinied as they were on half rations on account of delayed or abortive air supply drops. The aircraft that appeared were obviously a special kind of bird. Here were people whose first experience of the wheel was that of an aeroplane.

Krishnatray distributed hoes, axes and spades to help improve the simple tillage practised locally. Approved elders and headmen or "gams" were given red coats as symbols of new administrative authority. At other times he tried to mark the rivers and seek confirmation or correction of the maps they were carrying. Geeta taught knitting. The expedition doctor healed the sick.

And so beyond Longju to Migythun, a predominantly Tagin settlement of about 40 houses, and the Ring-Khor or "long circle" pilgrim trail that attracted numbers of devout Buddhists from Arunachal, Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim in the Tibetan Year of the Monkey. The Tagins and the Nime (Tibetans) would hold a Dapo or peace and friendship rite with prayers, a yak sacrifice and oaths to ensure peaceful passage of the Dalo (holy circumambulation). Krishnatry distributed gifts from the Government of India and conducted meetings, telling the people of Gandhi and Nehru. Only Tibetan officials were encountered. Thereafter, the return trek to Jorhat.

The peaceful opening up and integration of Arunachal is a little told story and sadly even less appreciated. It ranks among the greatest achievement of Indian nation-building. The further development and political growth of this

sequestered corner of India have been unique and merit tribute to the sagacity and foresight of those that made it happen. Geeta and S.M. Krishnatry are among that band of unsung heroes.

January 28, 2005

B.G. Verghese

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Preface

The bulk of this narrative is based on diary of my wife, Geeta, which forms Chapter II of this work. Completion of this work was delayed on account of the preconceptions of Geeta as also of the associate leader of the expedition, that is, myself. She held top positions in respective State Social Welfare Advisory Boards till she retired in 1979. Thereafter too she remained victim to intermittent problems of failing health. Haunted by incessant agitations in Shillong, we found ourselves catapulted to settle down like immigrants in Delhi.

Most exploratory expeditions in the tribal frontiers have been armed or armoured with heavy escorts much to the cost and suppression of human rights, occupation of their lands, burning of villages, molestation of women, looting of livestock, crops and banning of trade. This was the trend in Abor, Mishmi and Miri expeditions led by the British armed forces during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh thus fought back with stockades and their native resources. Peace was elusive due to revengeful bloodshed. Non-violence was not for the British.

Marabai-Tsari expedition led by me was conducted with a difference. It was wholly unarmed and unescorted. The Diaspora of the Tagin tribesman sprawled right along India's north-eastern frontier with Tibet—along its extremities extending through the hidden valleys of their Bangni kinsmen of Kameng frontier and their habitats of the Khru, the Kamla and the Subansiri river basins and

over to the Mara and Na Tagins on the border lines, finally merging their identities astride Siang frontier with the Monpa mix of Mechukha. The Tagin heartland, however, must be identified with the higher approaches of the upper Subansiri river confluencing with Tsari chu and other feeder valleys right up to Migyithun in Tibet — their El Dorado where every twelfth year they were hosted by the Tibetan authorities for contracting a peaceful management of the Tsari-Rong-Khor (circumambulation) pilgrimage. Marabai and the Na people had border trade with Tibetan Ihopas and, therefore, rarely seen on Assam side. The pocket of territory remained the last to be explored for want of takers earlier for fear of warlike Tagins. It was for this that my wife and I volunteered and planned an unarmed friendship expedition. She became the soul of this expedition and her diary forms the piece de resistance of this volume.

Having descended from Tibetan height in 1954, I sought positioning ourselves at Ziro for a feel of the area, fully convinced along with Geeta that the bloody culture of armed legacy of British expeditions against our own people must end forever—punitive or retributive. And a human rights approach of love, humour and patience must be tried out to set a tradition for future administrative operators. I felt that a woman was a more secure safeguard against tribal onslaught, while Geeta was firm she would rather trust peace with tribals than with armed escort in our company. This unarmed and unescorted expedition has served to be a watershed in the administrative history of Arunachal Pradesh and has, if it is to be believed by the cynic, set the pace for lasting peace between the tribals and the administration unlike the other tribal communities of the north-east region of India. Tagins have been at peace with themselves and their own government led by committed leaders and devoted bureaucracy have thus established an abiding rapport. Besides, it prevented any possible clashes with the expected Tibetan and Chinese

soldiery which were expected to be in the offing. It poured cold water and disarmed the wrathful sullenness of the entire Tagin tribe and their frayed tempers which had left their heat after the Achingmori massacre they had perpetrated about two years earlier by killing 47 Assam Riflesmen halfway in our projected itinerary.

We took the plunge not unaware of the prohibitive passage through deep river gorges and towering missile like peaks. Bailey, Morshead, Sherrif and the Kingdomwards had to turn away dreading the Marabai and their formidable deep gorges. Three years later Lt Gen. B. K. Kaul tracking the same route swore he would do it 'never again' as he recorded in his *Untold Story* thus: *We had to do crawling at times on all fours with a thumping heart — our inside seemed coming out and I panted for breath — I swore I shall never again undertake such an ordeal — I had to put cotton wool in ears to sleep with the noise of rivers and waterfalls — the track was studded with ladders climbing over sheer rocks loosely hanging on their last legs — we had to hug the mountain face holding on to creepers — one slip and goodbye to life.*

This fairy tale is all about the multi-dimensional expedition reaching out to the last line of our administrative control with benefits to the last villages Limeking, Ging and Na enclaves in order to evaluate their living conditions on the borderline, cooling off of the Tagin trauma caused by arrest of the ring leader of Achingmori massacre by two large columns of the Assam Rifles force led by Hipshon Roy and K. T. Khuma, my colleagues, keeping peace with the Chinese or Tibetan escort for the pilgrims who had to circumambulate through our territory and the Governor Jairamdas' dictate to consolidate the border — all in one, apart from the necessity of keeping ourselves on our feet. Besides, the main agenda was to lay down a pragmatic charter of behaviour for future generations following in the footsteps of time.

When I took this expedition, Tibet was on my mind. I

Subansiri area as a whole, both men and even more so the women, who ideally and willingly joined us with their varied support groups were the genuine heroes and heroines who acted together to make this unarmed expedition a grand success. Their spontaneous response converted a probable disaster into a triumph.

I am grateful to Srirang Jha, who has edited this volume. Indeed, the present revised edition with a new title is the outcome of sincere interest taken by the National Book Trust, India.

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New Delhi - 110 019

S. M. Krishnatry

INTRODUCTION

PEAKS, PLACES, PATHS AND PEOPLE

Adventure should be of the human spirit, so that we win over the hearts and minds of the people.

— Jawaharlal Nehru

Reference to Marabai Tagin identity was conspicuous by its absence in the 19th century records. They seldom descended far down to come to Assam nor frequented far in Tibet. What 'Abor' was to Assam, 'Ihopa' was for centuries to Tibet and it covered Mishmis, Adis Bokars, Shimongs, Tagins, Bangnis and Monpas in a generic sense. One residing nearer the southern international frontier of Tibet was Ihopa. Mara and Na Tagins along with the group known as Marabai did not claim to be in the line of Abotani as ancestor as has been imagined. Old reference to Nidu-Mora itself alludes to Nyido-Mara. J. N. Choudhary has described Tagins to be migratory from Penzi village. Mara Tabe said that the place they migrated from was known as Helungjiang far in the north. This, he said, was apart from Tsari area, their habitat for centuries. It was not correct that Tagin houses were as large as those of Daflas (Nisis) whose largest house seen by me was an elongated housing structure containing as many as 15 hearths (family units or dormitories). Tagins were individualistic and the largest Tagin house seen by us was one containing four hearths. Centuries of tradition and mythology of our tribes residing in Arunachal Pradesh had rendered their own accounts and descriptions of places, names and all else in

their thought and culture to mix up the haze of mystery. Nevertheless all that remained and rendered into new forms is relevant and interesting.

Tagins then were believed to suffer from endemic dissidence to authority. Tours and expeditions were a prohibitive thought. But for us, the technology of love and tolerance applied to primitive and hostile perceptions of their mind-set was, in a sense, ultra-modern. Anthropologically it turned into a path finder for future for dealing with the primitive mind. A chain of commonly linked markets with bargaining no less organised, freely imposed tariffs and monopolies in the process of trading in relays — where prices were not measured in weights and coins and currency notes had no value, where bartering levels and pricing were dependent on age-old free equilibrium unfazed by our economic trends and where coins had the only value for weaving them into trinkets and necklaces—such was the unique world of brave Tagins. That a yak would equal to 5 swords and rock-salt in a sack, a quantity of *ambin* (rice) was dependent on their own values and leverage.

These were the Marabai Tagins whose lives were interwoven with cross border pilgrimages in the worship of two magnificent snow peaks named in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon as Takpashiri (Tsari) and Dorji Phagmo. The former is the abode of Heruka (Sanskrit) or Demchok (Tibetan), one of the holiest; Dorji Phagmo or Vajravarahi, the guardian of the entrance, overlooks the holy Chikcha, *gompa* and the Migyithun village before the tracks plungs into the gorges of densely forested Tsari Chu (Gelling in the vocabulary of Tagins). Those were the days when Dorji Phagmo and Herunka sanctified the guarded entrance into the untreaded route to India, deemed to have been impenetrable and also perhaps guarding both the countries of Lord Buddha for their prosperity and religiosity. The larger of the two pilgrimages exploded curiously once every 12 years like a Supernova on this international

border Shangrila without notice of and concealed from all the glaring eyes on media's camera flashes. It was the similar periodical regularity with which Kumb and Kailash beckoned the devotees from far and wide and when an extravaganza sprang up into existence on the blurred borders of India and Tibet. India was shut out to its own pocket of territory for generations of hoary history. It posed no border problem or anxiety on both sides in mutual respect, understanding and sympathy. The remote threshold to be reached for the rendezvous was Migyithun Chikchar villages, Mara and Na Tagin traditional homelands pitched on international border. This was never one of those trade routes between Tibet and India over which the traders travelled like Sadiya Rima and Tawang Nymjang Chu-Tsona, and in the opera—*The rebel rousing*, Tagins both Mara and Na played the major role.

T. S. Murthy in his *Paths of Peace*, while discussing boundary in this region mentioned that "Krishnatry's would probably be the best account". I would put it differently and say this was the only account of approach from south of the international frontier and, though I am not discussing international frontier here, I had studied it and would deem it to be the least likely to be controversial with well-defined parameters. Those of us who had not studied Bailey and others' reports did not even know in 1955 in the NEFA outfit that these pilgrimages had in fact been regularly performed since the creation of Sun and the Moon and pilgrims were trespassing through this segment of Indian territory. Of this we came to know from Lhasa. The Dalai Lama had in fact performed the circumambulation ritual in 1900 over the Kinkhor or Chinkhor or Chunkhor circuit of the short pilgrimage around Takpashiri, with 11 staging huts for the stay of pilgrims which was an annual feature. I am avoiding repetition of what has already been recorded by travellers from the Tibetan side. Nevertheless this had been the region of Mara and Na Tagins' periodical hunting

expeditions— hunting of Takins, even snow leopard, whenever the area was free from snow.

Not to confuse, there is another Takpashiri snow peak south of Chayul Dzong, quite outside the Tsari tract. Tsari tract and the Tsari Chhu valley, paradoxically and unlike the neighbouring valleys, got abundantly heavy rainfall and were regarded to be very holy. The monsoon apparently surged through the atmospheres, unobstructed by high ranges, into the deep gorges funneling along the Tsari Chhu valley. The average height of the Tsari area was about 9,500 ft. and its beauty would be comparable with the Chumbi valley of Tibet. Sanctified by religious sanctions the Tsari region did not permit taking of life, specially wild animals, or even tilling the soil. No women were allowed to go beyond Droma La en route Kinkhor and even the Dalai Lama had to dismount and walked a particular stretch on foot. Kintup, the well-known Sikkimese explorer, who performed the short circuit wrote that "the soil yielded no kind of produce. It was this Tsari tract which the Mara Tagins claimed as their traditional abode to which they had migrated from Helungjiang and from which they were driven out. It was they who had regularly frequented Tsari and Takpo region of Tibet, but it was one-way traffic in which Tibetans seldom came down to Ihopa villages for trade — only Tagins and Ihopas went up on trading or galavanting missions. They took madder vine, cane musk, skins, rice, etc, to Tsari, the land of rhododendrons, birch and fir trees which they have viewed nostalgically. This account is based on Nguri Tem's verbal report when he went to Migyithun as our envoy.

According to Bailey's account, Pemako which constituted the valley of the Tsangpo (Bramaputra), below the gorge, used to be inhabited by Abors but about 100 years before (more than 200 years before now) they were driven away by people migrating from Tawang-Bhutan area. They had come in search of land of Pemako, the land where 'rivers of milk' flowed, which in a prophecy they

had come to know about. Murthy, in his *Paths of Peace*, described a generic people called Mon which for centuries inhabited the Himalayan border regions. These migrants came to be known as Monpas and some of them also, perhaps along with some Tibetan Khampas, found their way into the Dibang valley down south. They also spoke a dialect of Monpa spoken in Tawant. A portion of this immigration made their way into Pachakshiri (modern Mechhukha of Siang Frontier district). Interestingly Bailey described that even in 1912 some of the Abors or Ihopas were living in I'emako wearing Tibetan clothes but otherwise speaking their own language. The Monpas and Ihopas of Pemako were indistinguishable to the untrained eyes. Before the Monpa immigration the whole Pemako belonged to Ihopas (Mishmis, mostly Karkos). This of course has a historical base and so has the historical backing as to how the Mara Tagins and the Na Tagins were dislodged from their ancestral homes in Tsari-Chayul area. The exiled Prince Rupati, described as father of Mon people perhaps due to his royal connection, went from plains of India with 1,000 soldiers and travelled across into Tibet. He had been identified with King Drupad of the Mahabharata. Gyalpo Rupati, the five Pandavas and the 12 Kauravas were also there in Tibetan legends, quite often credited with founding of Tibet as per Shankarapati's description of the prince fleeing and migrating into Tibet. Murthy, however, seems to downgrade Rupati legends as a later modification of Naraka. He had made a good use of this stint in Tawang for his studies. Lahaul people had been looked upon by Tibetan neighbours as belonging to Mon group and they considered, the Kulu Hindus as Mon. Sarat Chandra Das, however, described the people and tribes living in the cishimalayan region as Kiratas, the generic name found in Maharashtra in which there is a reference to Kirata-Arjuna battle. In his book *History of Western Tibet* (1907) Francke thought the western Tibet and the Zanskar Tahsil of Laddakh to be Mon. He also

identified Mustang of Nepal to be settlement of Indian or Mon origin, possibly pre-Aryan population.

There had been various legends from tribals themselves but curiously there were as many seeking migrations from south as those from unidentifiable north, such as Helungjiang of Mara tribe. It would seem likely for the people from the plains migrating to settle in the Himalayas for cooler climate, religious motivation, adventure and search for probable land or due to wars and chase rather than to imagine Tibetan people from cold and freezing heights descending to the heat of the plains or even milder climates of the submontane regions. It is wholly probable that wave after wave of simple people moved in enfilades for spread of Hinduism or Buddhism or for quietude up the enchanting and beckoning Himalayan heights from east to west of the great Himalayan spread. This explains for differing sects and denominations from Assam to Kashmir (Laddakh) having different dialects. They inevitably must have socialised and traded with Tibetans merging into a cultural admixture and forming a belt of southerners engaged in trans-border missions. Thus a mixed Aryan or pre-Aryan Mongoloid identity of their own grew up. There was nothing to stop the adventurer from travelling east-west seeking new pastures under such a generic identity as Mon. Not all the Himalayan people or tribes were Mongoloid; not all Tibetans were Mongoloid for that matter. No wonder that with thousands of years or more behind them they have lived parcelled out in different tribes and communities. It also stood to reason that the Tibetans described them as Mon-pa or Mon-yul (one living in the land of Mon) or simply Ihopa (one living in the south or coming from the south-Iho = south).

It was clearly identifiable that what Christopher Haimendorf referred to as Agla Mara was the same as Upper Mara but the village group was around Limeking. Also his Hru-Mara was Helu-Mara and Nime-Na the same as settlements of Na Tagins. Both he and Bailey had

gathered clues and information from two different and distant sources. Bailey divided them into five Ihopa tribes and Haimendorf into five routes leading to Tibet. Morangwa Tingba of Bailey corresponded to Mara Tagin, (also Marang Tage), Lungtu Ihopa to Na Tagin, also to Nime-Na of Haimendorf, Tingba to Sonu-Sekke, and Soreng Lingpu-Langongwa to Nising or Bangni from 'Khru side or those crossing over from Chyangtajo region. The last group Lawa is from Kamla valley areas.

Sir Henry Mac Mahon's India-Tibet borderline remained undefined when drawn in an arc presumptively pending determination of the status of the Ihopa hamlet called Migyithun for which the Tibetan Prime Minister had especially asked to be placed on the Tibetan side during the 1914 convention parleys. For ages it had been the launching base for the pilgrims circumambulating down the Indian gorges alongside the Tsari Chu. Lonchen Shartra's request was tacitly understandable pending formality. The route lay through the unsurveyed and uncharted Tagin territory bordered and studded by a chain of holy snow peaks like Gorichhen, Takposhiri (Takpo-Tsari) and Dorji Phagmo, the protective guardian deity overlooking the passage.

The holiest of them all were, of course, the last two around which the pilgrims drawn from neighbouring Buddhist countries went around reciting prayers and covering the distance prostrate on their bodies. If Mount Kailash is the holiest in the western sector, these two combine to make the holiest pilgrimage in the east. Even one of the Dalai Lamas who performed the pilgrimage reverently walked the portion directly under the eye of Dorji Phagmo. She is no other than Varja-varahi in her snow peak abode, whereas the other is the holy abode of the deity Demchock (Heruka in Sanskrit).

This was the Tsari pilgrimage held every twelfth year (monkey year) on a large circuit, but also yearly on a short circuit. This 1956 pilgrimage was first ever to be seen by

outsiders in this expedition and perhaps the last one to be performed, since thereafter the Dalai Lama's Government fell and the Chinese communists took over Tibet under the Chinese rule. It is like a mythological pageant on Shangri-la revealing its grandeur in a glimpse and then being shut out once again to the world. The towering snow peaks and the piercing rocks still shoot into the skies, but wait for the day of redemption.

Though the immediate concern of the Tibetan authorities was the peaceful conduct vis-a-vis the fear of the demanding Tagins, the real focus shifted to the expected advance of the Chinese P.L.A. to ostensibly escort the pilgrims to protect them against the warlike Tagins and exploit the occasion to claim territorial access. The trespass over the Indian territory was implicit and the Indian Government could not sleep over the possibility of a military or political gain while exploiting the opportunity. The Tagins loved their opportunity and were prone to spark incidents. They loved their heritage and were not beholden to anyone, including the Indian Government. This enclave had not been explored before, though they knew that they were there. In the march towards reaching out to our borders with Tibet this enclave of our territory remained the last to be explored as there were no takers to mount an expedition which could survive the ordeal and enable them to return without death in the deep precipitous gorges or by the Tagin swords. Forty seven Assam Rifles led party had been killed a couple of years earlier in what is known as the Achingmori massacre—with no survival. Fresh on my return from Tibet, I had decided to face the sword of Damocles just when came the SOS to proceed in this multi-dimensional mission which had a far-reaching and permanent impact on peace keeping all around.

My mandate was indeed as simple as it sounded supercilious:

Plan your own strategy and take as much force as you would need to thwart any designs to trespass Indian

territory, enforce law and order among the recalcitrant Tagins in the Mara area and ensure peaceful passage of the pilgrimage; establish an administrative centre as near to the international border as possible.

It was a tall order in the face of no worthwhile intelligence available from any quarter. I had to deal with the people and I loved it with freedom to act as deemed necessary.

The book provides an incisive account of the first unarmed expedition of north-eastern frontiers of India along Tibet undertaken in 1956. The tribes such as *Tagins*, *Apatanis* and *Maras* living in frontier areas of Arunachal Pradesh which formed the itinerary of the expedition, were believed to be quite hostile and all attempts by the British Indian troops to enter their villages were foiled. Hence their lifestyle, folklore and socio-economic conditions remained unexplored until this unarmed expedition led by the author and his wife Geeta Krishnatry whose diary forms the mainstay of the narration.

S.M. Krishnatry (b. 1921) joined the British Indian Army in 1942. He fought the enemies during and after World War II. He remained posted in the north-eastern frontiers for almost 35 years. He held important position in military and civil administration in post-independent India. His other books include *Portrait of New Social Order* and *Call of the Individual*. He lives in Delhi.



Rs 80.00

ISBN 978-81-237-4460-5

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA