THE NYISHI OF ARUNACHAL PRADeSH
An Ethnohistorical Study

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for

My Wife Vandana and
Children Phabia and Thamini
When I joined in the discipline of History as a student, I felt the urge and the importance of doing research on the ethnohistory and the traditional indigenous institutions of the Nyishi of the North East India, which will serve as written history for the use of contemporary and future generations. The history of the Tribe and the institutions of the Nyoku Aathu are closely connected with the origin, migration and settlement pattern of the Nyishi in their present day habitated territory. Many queries relating to history, culture and traditional political institutions of the Nyishi, which rouse in the mind of author found no ready answer in available works. The Nyishi do not possess written records of their past, but possess rich oral traditions embedded in their myths and legends. Mainly non-Nyishi scholars, however, have done a few works, on the Nyishi. These studies are social and anthropological in nature. But these works mostly failed to comprehend and appreciate the real and deeper socio-cultural life of the Nyishi. Scholars from within the Tribe also had not done in-depth research with regards to the ethnohistory of the Nyishi. Whenever we open the pages of history on the Tribe, we generally find heaps of truncated and disjointed historical information about the Nyishi in all the earlier works. The author became aware of this shortcoming and urgently felt the need
for collecting the widely scattered materials on the Tribe to meet those queries and reconstruct the ethnohistory proper. This study emanates from that awareness.

This thought-provoking work examines ethnohistory, an underexplored field of study that lies at the intersection of interpretation, reinterpretation, intellectual history, literature and gender studies. A pioneering piece of ethnohistory, The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: An Ethnohistorical Study uses a variety of interdisciplinary means to reconstruct the oral history of an important Tribe in North East India from the origin to 1947.

Central to the study is the belief that many aspects of life of the Nyishi which could not be easily uncovered or appreciated, with a superficial knowledge of their socio-economic and polity organisation would aptly have misled earlier researchers and scholars. So, author paints in-dept a fascinating portrait of a society in way of new interpretation and exploration. It traces the impact of misnomer nomenclature labelled on the Tribe throughout century and psychic agony inherent in the transformation of people under the twin impact of pre-colonial and colonialism. It analyses and explores how these factors shaped and reflected the society as static and stagnant. In reconstructing the history of traditional political institution that have been wrongly interpretated and understood have been systematically re-examined to attain the objective study. Therefore, author raises whole issues concerning the methodologies of ethnohistory and the dynamics of the whole last millennium history of Nyishi of North East India. Author powerfully combines analyses of medieval writings, eighteenth century texts, local and colonial records, and extensive ethnographic field work, and attempt to piece-together oral history, oral tradition and ethnology of the Nyishi people in a unique study that will appeal to the general reader, student, specialist, policy-maker, professionals and researcher. This book is divided into eight chapters for a critical and comprehensive analysis of various historical events by focussing on the ethnographical outline, political, social economic aspects and the relationship between the Nyishi and the plains people of the Brahmaputra Valley.

During this research work, a number of individuals, officials, institutions and well-wishers have extended their cooperation and helping hand, without which the research would not have been
possible. I owe an immeasurable debt to them and apologies for not being able to name them individually. Nonetheless, my close and constant associates who helped me to complete this work cannot get away from the pen of the author. First, I thank the Authority of the Rajiv Gandhi University for granting me study leave, which enabled me to carry out an extensive fieldwork within and outside of the State. I thank all my colleagues, Department of History; who always constantly encouraged me by taking care of my paper during my leave period. I wish to put on record my profound regard and thank to Prof. S.Dutta who has been my colleague, and guide of this research work. His patience, attentive and meticulous reading and re-reading of the manuscript have helped me to lessen further errors as far as possible.

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I am also thankful to the authorities and the staff of the Assam State Archives, Dispur, the Gauhati University Library, Guwahati and the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati for their valuable help and facilities extended to me during my consultation works. My sincere and heartfelt thanks to all the village elders, priests, and intellectuals for indefatigable and spontaneous response to my interview and questionnaires.

I also gratefully acknowledge my debt to the Librarian and the Library staff of the State Library, the Nehru Museum Reference Library, the State Archives, Directorate of Economics and Statistics of Itanagar, Rajiv Gandhi University Library, Rono Hills for the invaluable assistance during my consultation and studies in these institutions. I wish to offer thanks to all my Nyishi and other friends who in one way or the other have inspired me to undertake this
work. I also acknowledge with deep sense of gratitude and love to my wife Vandana who provided stimulus for my entire academic work and shouldered lonely the responsibility of looking after our son Phabia and daughter Thamini throughout the period of preparation of this work. I must also thank all my colleagues and academic friends who inspirited me in many ways.

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AM : Alexander Mackenzie’s The North-East Frontier of India.
AS : Lewis H. Morgan’s Ancient Society.
ATN : The Apatanii and Their Neighbours.
ATR : Lakshmi Devi’s Ahom-Tribal Relations.
BAB : Golap Chandra Barua’s Ahom Buranji.
CWH : Gordon Childe’s What Happened in History.
DAB : S.K.Bhuyan’s Deodhai Assam Buranji.
EG : Edward Gait’s A History of Assam.
ENOTSR : Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of the Subansiri Region.
ES : Krader Lawrence’s Article ‘The Origin of the State Among the Nomads of Asia’.
FOE : Frontier Overseas Expedition From Vol.7.
HAPAR : Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh : Anthropological Research in North-East India.
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<td>SM Buranji</td>
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About the Book

This thought-provoking work examines ethnohistory, an underexplored field of study that lies at the intersection of interpretation, reinterpretation, intellectual history, literature and gender studies. A pioneering piece of ethnohistory, uses a variety of interdisciplinary means to reconstruct the oral history of an important Tribe in North East India, i.e. NYISHI.

It traces the impact of misnomer nomenclature labelled on the Tribe throughout century and psychic agony inherent in the transformation of people under the twin impact of reign of the Ahom and colonialism. It analyses how these factors shaped and reflected the society as static and stagnant. In reconstructing the history of traditional political institution that have been wrongly interpreted and understood have been systematically re-examined to attain the objective study. Author also raises whole issues concerning the methodologies of ethnohistory and the dynamics of the whole last millennium history of Nyishi of North East India. Author powerfully combines analyses of medieval writings, eighteenth century texts, archival records, local and colonial records, and extensive ethnographic field work, and attempt to piece-together oral history and oral traditions of the Nyishi people which will appeal to the general reader, intellectuals, specialist, policy-maker, professionals and researchers.

The study of oral history leads into an area of human culture to which social scientist are now increasingly turning their interests as part of research on pre-literate non-segmentary acephalous societies linking up with developing method on such subject, social memory, the emotions, the ethnography of speaking and verbal arts action more intensely. It is now timely to have a book of guidance for researchers as to the possibilities and problems of researching in the area where no written record and archive sources are available. This book will definitely serve as useful aid for such researchers who eager to work on the topics of oral history, oral tradition and understanding the non-literate community.
Chapter 1

Introduction

North East India: Land and People

The North East India of the Indian Union consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Most of these States barring the erstwhile princely States of Manipuri, Tripura and Sikkim were carved out gradually from the erstwhile Province of Assam. The North East India offers two distinctly geomorphologic divisions of the regions viz., the plains area and the hills area. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim are hill States, while Assam, Manipur and Tripura covered with both plains and hills. The Himalayan range runs through Arunachal Pradesh and continues towards Patkoi Range in Naga Hills, and Mizo Hills, to the further south in Myanmar. The immediate international boundaries of the region on the North are China (Tibet), Bhutan to the North-West, Myanmar to the East, and Bangladesh to the South, while it is connected with the mainland of India by the narrow corridor-Silliguri-neck in Darjeeling district of West Bengal bordering North-West of the regions.

The Brahmaputra Valley which is the largest plains tract in the region is an alluvial plain, about 450 kilometres in length, with an average breadth of about 50 kilometres, lying almost east and west