Arunachal Pradesh

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Arunachal Pradesh is the most cut-off part of India, a place you still have to get special permission to visit. This British-inspired system followed raids on the tea plantations of Assam and it is still faithfully maintained, although for the British it was about wild tribes, whereas for the Indian government it is the threat of invasion from China. As a result, almost everything you associate with India, vast crowds, rotting palaces, insistent posters advertising films and music videos, are largely absent. Arunachal Pradesh is where some of the last great forests of SE Asia still persist, where hunting is still a practical activity in many areas. There are more than fifty languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh and it is one of the last places on the planet where unknown people still exist.

This is not to say it is cut off from the world; mobile phones and satellite dishes now penetrate even quite remote areas. There are roads of a sort, much more so than in neighbouring Bhutan. These are maintained by an annoying body called the Border Roads Organisation, which builds really amateurish roads which fall apart almost as soon as they are constructed. This is partly because of the constant traffic of army convoys along the roads, linking together the enormous camps that disfigure the river valleys. Both the BRO and the army go in for a sort of bombastic self-adverting ('Firepower: the only answer'; 'Guns, guts and glory'). This is the subject of a certain amount of satirical comment by the indigenous population, who see the real purpose of the army presence being to remind fractious locals who really runs the place and not to make demands for autonomy. Unfortunately, the locals are all too aware that China is a much more efficient and well-run place, and if ever there really were an invasion, the Indian army would scarper sharpish, leaving them to their own devices. The army officers all hate the place, being posted from the Punjab et al. and the locals resent them. As a result, the army has opened ice cream shops in order to tempt children into accepting that this is all for their own good.

The purported threat of invasion from China feeds a popular Indian fantasy which the government makes good use of for repressive purposes. Although the last Chinese invasion was fifty years ago and lasted exactly two days, it lives on Indian memory and is actively propagated by civil servants. The irony is that it is India that has a bad record of invasion and colonisation in this area; they first took Tawang, then part of eastern Bhutan and later Sikkim under their protection, although for some reason this doesn't attract the same publicity as the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Perhaps if you can masquerade as a 'democracy' invasion is somehow more tolerable?

High up in the west of Arunachal Pradesh is Tawang, the great Buddhist monastery on the borders of Tibet, the place the Dalai Lama escaped to in 1962, and the last of the great chain of monasteries where worship and pilgrimage are essentially uncontrolled. You enter the Tawang valley over an extremely high pass in heavy snow and I feared the monastery would be cut off. But Tawang is a sort of happy valley, you climb back down the road and the sun shines, the lakes sparkle and you enter a rather ecentric Shangri-La. Well, not entirely but still much of the noise and visual disorder of modern India is absent. Yaks and Tibetan dogs walk along the street as if they own it and you can buy plastic Buddhas on every street corner.

The monastery itself is rather different from the *dzongs*, fortress monasteries like the Potala and those in Bhutan. It is more like a small village, with temples, libraries and living quarters. The central temple is a marvellous building, a great square block in red and white, with high carved windows. Inside, it is hung with banners and decorated and at the morning service, hundreds of monks gather for the ceremonies. There is a small but fascinating museum where the relics of previous lamas are kept, as well as numerous objects used in Tantric ceremonies, so this is very much traditional Bon. There is evidently no problem in recruiting the next generation of monks; in the morning they sit out on the terraces in the sun and study away. Every day, groups of pilgrims, especially old ladies can be seen doing the rounds of the temples, spinning the prayer-wheels and offering butter-lamps.

Tawang is a peaceable place and I could certainly have stayed longer; I fell into conversation with some of the monks in the library and began to feel its atmosphere developing. This tale has an intriguing footnote, as two weeks later I was stuck in Gauhati airport due to fog, and I met a monk heading on the same flight and delayed along with me. Red robes, mugger's hat, cheerful smile. After some discussion, in which I was able to produce not only a sentence in his language (a type of Monpa) but also happened to have a book about it

in my bag, he became very friendly. It was then that I learnt he actually the abbot of the monastery, heading off for a spiritual conference somewhere in darkest India. Anyway, he was positively anxious that I return and promised to put his assembled monks on the case of assisting me to describe their language (which is related to Tibetan, but not closely). With contacts like this, how can I refuse?

The people in Tawang aren't actually Tibetan, they are Monpa, which is a sort of cover term for all the non-Tibetans of the region. However, they evidently speak, read and write Tibetan as well, and public notices in Tawang town are in Tibetan and English. The Mon are evidently fed up with the Indian government's attempt to Hinduise them, and there are notices up around town concerning a demand for a Mon autonomous region. Some of their leaders have been arrested and there is a general discontent.

Traditional dress is going out of fashion in Tawang town, which is flooded with cheap Chinese cold-weather wear, but the women do still wear a beautiful embroidered jacket and a furry black head-dress made of black sheep's wool. Men sport black waistcoats called *gurdan*s. Apparently the problem is that fewer and fewer people want to do the hard work of livestock-keeping. The main people now doing this are the Brokpa, nomadic yak herders who cross the borders through the high passes and migrate southwards in the worst part of the winter. As a result, meat and butter prices are sky-high.

South of Tawang is Old Dirang, a marvellous stone town, and I was lucky enough to participate in a ritual called Choskor, which takes place in November. The idea is for the Buddhist scriptures to be carried from one *gompa* to another and be blessed. The scriptures are carried by school-age girls, highly mixed dress, some in traditional gear, some in trainers and t-shirts. Inside each *gompa* is a set of monks reading scriptures, but also large bowls of locally brewed millet wine, heartily drunk by the adults accompanying the procession. The music groups which greet the procession at each *gompa* are quite diverse, sometimes the usual Tibetan band of trumpets and shawms, or else the Monpa group of flat cymbals and two-headed drums. However, the curious part are the masked dancers which accompany the procession. These are opposed characters, black and white and the white mask is a skull face. The dancers wear strapped on wooden phalluses and thwack the women with them, to the accompaniment of much giggling and obscene commentary.

After leaving Tawang, I attended the Khiksaba Festival, the main annual ceremony of the Sherdukpen people in Rupa. Khiksaba is a recapitulation of their spiritual history which blends traditional shamanism with Buddhism. The shamans who preside over the ceremony are charged with reciting lengthy poems in a language no-one now understands. Fortunately, there is a younger shaman in training, as the older one is clearly on his last legs. The festival involves a young versus old battle, where the young men go up into the hills and cut fresh bamboos, which I interpret as a reminiscence of a hunter-gatherer past, as other foragers in the area still do this today. The warriors then charge across the river with the bamboos and chase away the demons of the old year.

The following day, there are two major parts to the ceremony, spinning the thread and battling the Tibetans or Khampa. Spinning the thread involves literally hundreds of people all holding sections of a white thread, and gradually moving in some sort of order so that the threads are gradually entwined to form a pattern. Despite the apparent chaos, it seems to work out; you can't really imagine the co-ordination necessary to perform this sort of ritual in Africa. Then the young warriors of the day before charge down the hill and do ritual combat with people dressed in imaginary Tibetan gear. The Tibetans go home disconsolately. Everyone gathers all dressed up, and this is serious stuff with embroidered robes and masses of beads and silver jewellery, often superimposed on highly unsuitable t-shirts and topped off with cowboy hats. After that everyone heads home and eats special meals. Luckily I was invited to the house of a senior figure and we had the full range of intriguing dishes. And these meals definitely recapitulate history. The main dishes are made of millet (which is disappearing in favour of rice) and fish (disappearing in favour of beef) and wild plants, all washed down with copious amounts of *morchang*, a special version of local beer with egg and milk.

The following day there are ritual pilgrimages to the two sacred sites in town. These are rather undistinguished stones you would probably pass by on an ordinary day. The one at the top of the hill has a

gompa next to it, but this is converted to a brewery for the purposes of the festival. Gradually, families climb up the hill with picnics and begin singing round songs. After a while, the two shamans climb up the hill and perform various ceremonies and the signing goes on till morning. Down the hill is where those who wish to gain merit offer curious pyramidal millet cakes and these are blessed by the warriors. More alcoholic singing. In short, the Sherdukpen really know how to do ritual. Colour, ceremony, humour and seriousness, mixed history and dancing. Hard to know why anthropologists no longer engage with this sort of stuff. Maybe it no longer suits the dry politics of the seminar room?

The great difficulties of getting permits to come to Arunachal Pradesh have discouraged all but the hardiest of visitors. I encountered a group of Germans at the monastery, but otherwise those are the only outsiders I saw. The trouble is, if it ever does open up it would probably be flooded with backpackers etc. which wouldn't be so great either. At the moment, outsiders are so rare that we are constantly befriended and offered hospitality, which means you get an insight into people's lives that is more difficult elsewhere. Not all those insights are something you would wish for. Because of my contacts in the government, I have was hosted by a series of bureaucrats. Although these are indigenous to Arunachal Pradesh, they seem to have had their brains replaced according to the grand traditions of the Indian Civil Service. One aspect of this is that they complain of being punished by being sent to live among 'primitive', 'backward' or 'savage' people. Their days are spent scheming to escape back to some centre of supposed civilisation, where the mobile phone service is good, the satellite dish works properly and the streets are piled high with rubbish. They seem quite unable to look out of the window and see that they live in one of the most beautiful places in the world. High mountains on every side, unpolluted rivers running beside the house, flowers everywhere, sunshine and clear blue skies. The Mon even build stone cottages, so you could reconstruct the British rural dream rather easily.

Talking of British dreams, you do wonder what these people are taught in schools. Long after the end of the Raj, a fantasy vision of Britain seems to permeate their minds. I have several times been asked about Robin and Hood and whether Sherwood Forest is 'still there'. People tell me their greatest dream is to be photographed with Tower Bridge in the background. People obviously consult books of 'correct' English usage, written by Indians who have never been near England. They will ask you whether it is 'correct' to say 'erstwhile' or 'hithertofore'. But usually both are wrong or long superseded. Contrast this with somewhere like Vanuatu, which was also a British colony, but where there seems to be no memory of Britain at all.

Following Rupa, I went to visit the Hruso, a group of people who made themselves notorious to the British by their raiding. Their area remains remote and hard to reach, and once you reach their main town, Thrizino, it is necessary to walk on to the other villages. Hruso live in very large houses, often with a single room, dominated by a giant hearth, usually with two massive iron tripods for cooking great swatches of rice. The large tripod is for cooking for 'parties' which are clearly a highly regular occurrence. However, the particular interest of Hruso is the flourishing system of shamanism. Each village has a shaman, a man who possesses a bronze bell, a hat of feathers and various endangered animals, and a ritual bag made from animal parts. Outside their houses, there are complex constructions of bamboo and leaves which mark the ceremonies they must hold, which usually involve the sacrifice of mithuns and pigs.

However, the coming of Christianity and churches has had an interesting consequence. In the mid-1990s, the shamans decided that their previous system was not sufficiently structured and if they were to keep people's allegiance, they needed more visible symbols of their power. As a result, they decided to hold a pan-Hruso shamanic ceremony, and built a rather dreary, but functional hall outside Thrizino. to hold these annual meetings (known as

‘seminars’). More ambitiously, they decided to erect a monument to symbolise their links with the universe (traditional Hruso religion, Nyechidow, means ‘Heaven and Earth’). So they hired an Indian contractor to build a sacred platform and a globe. However, the contractor cheated them and the globe was left only half-finished, becoming an adjunct to the non-functional microwave tower. Rather like the séance cancelled ‘due to unforeseen circumstances’ you might have thought the collective wisdom of the shamans would have seen this one coming…

The final stop of this trip was Seppa, a difficult place. Despite being quite cut off, and the home to numerous mosquitoes, it is where the ‘Indian’ community has chosen to settle. Unlike the relatively small towns with tidy streets in the Tibetan-influenced area, this is a large, straggling place, with numerous shops and the usual filthy gutters. The local population are the Nyishi, who are intriguing people. Part of the great Tani group, who dominate the whole central region of the state, they have quite deliberately positioned themselves as bad boys, ‘rough people’ as I was regularly informed. They aggressively wear traditional dress in the street, in considerable contrast to elsewhere and indeed there were shops where you can go an equip yourself as a Nyishi. Their hair is very striking, as it is grown long and then coiled up and pinned with a long needle, very similar to the traditional Japanese fashion. The Nyishi communities are often responsible for making trouble outside; their ethnic fora call strikes as they manipulate the power structure for their own ends.