
Changlang: An Overview

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Very few of today's generation-X would have heard of, or have cared to learn about, Changlang, Miao or Namdapha in the country's northeastern region. To a commoner, the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) are places that reckon with distance (read distant) and insurgency/ militancy. Ask a man on the street as to where Tinsukia is and one is bound to get a shrug of the shoulder or an answer that would put geography teachers to shame. During one of my field trips regarding a project, I had the opportunity to travel to the picturesque Changlang district via Tinsukia and also to Pangsau Pass and Namdapha (Miao) to name a few. The plethora of information I gathered during the course of my travel and stay at a few of these places only made me richer. What follows is, one can say, a brief from a traveller's diary.

The picturesque Changlang district, covered with hills, lies in the southeastern corner of Arunachal Pradesh. It has an area of 4,662 sq km. Drawing its name from Changlankan, Changlang district has reached its present set-up through a slow and gradual development of administration. The district is bounded by the Tinsukia district of Assam and the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh in the north, by the Tirap district in the west and by Myanmar in the southeast. Its geographical location, besides various other factors, has seen Changlang become a haven for insurgent activities in recent times. Except for a few strips of flat land in Changlang, Jairampur, Vijoynagar, Nampong, etc, the district is a hilly area with hills ranging in height from 200 to 4,500 metres.

Changlang district has around 335 villages, with the district headquarters at Changlang and the sub-divisional headquarters at Jairampur, which are the so-called urban centres. The district is not predominantly inhabited by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh but has a curious mixture of Tangsas, Singphos and Tutsas besides an influx of immigrants from Bangladesh, Nepal and Tibet. The

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Bangladeshi influx has been that of the Chakmas and Hajongs who came in as refugees, besides the non-tribals in a form of the major labour force.

As is common amongst all the other tribes of the Northeast, each tribe has, and follows, its own traditional religious belief and practices. However, recently, many of the Tangsas and Tutsas have come under the influence of Christianity and Buddhism. Though the Singphos are Buddhists by religion, the touch of the traditional beliefs of their ancestors can be seen in their practices. Islam is not unknown in the areas between Lekhapani (Assam) and Jairampur, with maximum concentration in Makum. This stretch of land, which is mostly flat, is cultivable and, strangely enough, the cultivators are not indigenous people, and if at all, only a handful are. One wonders then as to where the indigenous people are and what do they do.

The Tangsas and Singphos have a democratic form of social life and they do not have the kingship system. Living in villages, the primary occupation of the indigenous people of the district is agriculture and its associated activities. Rearing of animals is also a secondary occupation of the people. Other activities such as government jobs, agricultural labour, government contract works, casual work under government departments, trade in local products, etc, too bring in resources to the people of the district. It was yet another experience to learn about the bureaucracy of the contractors playing masters in the area.

The spread of education and the touch of urbanisation have definitely brought in a gradual change in the customs and economic patterns of the inhabitants and the process is still on. As in many other parts of the Northeast which have been affected by urbanisation, the barely literate youth refuses to till the soil and is content with small time business deals, contract works, and government jobs, etc which offer more and relatively easy money. Thus, there is a shortage of indigenous agricultural labour which is then compensated with a migrant, cheap labour force. This, in turn, has definitely changed the demographic pattern of not only Changlang district but many such in the entire northeastern region. However, the truth is that a vast majority of the population of the remote areas of the district is living hand to mouth.

All that besides, travelling through the district astride and across rivers such as the Noa-Dihing, Tirap, Buri Dihing, Namchik, etc, and the thick tropical greenery, time seemed to have stopped at some other planet altogether. The vegetation was so dense at certain places that one wondered whether it was the Amazon basin. Except for the chirping of a few birds, and the sounds of crickets and howler monkeys, civilisation seemed really far away. But what broke that

charm and spell was the memorial of a fallen soldier in truly the midst of nowhere. Things began to take an eerie turn and one could feel that all was perhaps not so well here, or else why should have a soldier fallen to bullets in a place where even the sun's rays shy to reach the forest floor!

This chilling reminder came on the way to Nampong, travelling on the historic Stilwell Road which was constructed by the Americans during World War II. The road stretches from Ledo in Assam, India through Lekhapani, Jagun, Jairampur, Nampong and Pangsau Pass (India-Myanmar border) to upper Chindwin, Hukawng and Mogaung Valleys to Bhamo and then finally to Kunming, Yunnan Province in China. Further, a dilapidated and fast degrading World War II cemetery screamed to draw any passerby's attention to its historical significance and the neglect of all those who had laid down their lives and continue to do so incognito.

This cemetery hides in its womb Chinese, Kanchin, Indian, British and American soldiers who may have perished fighting the enemy or during the construction of the Stilwell Road. This uncared for haven of the dead is approximately 6 km from Jairampur, on the Nampong road. To think that there could have been so much of action along this stretch almost 65 years ago is in itself astounding, as even today one can barely spot a human being at most of the places.

Once again, the memorial of a fallen Assam Rifles soldier flashed across the mind and the realisation dawned that surely this area hides more than meets the eye.

On digging deeper, it was learnt that Tirap and Changlang districts are amongst the active belts of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) (NSCN-K). The primary objective of the NSCN-K is the establishment of a "Greater Nagaland" comprising the Naga dominated areas of the neighbouring states within India and contiguous areas in Myanmar. The group reportedly generates its funds by indulging in kidnapping, extortion and other nefarious activities. At present, though the group is in a ceasefire with the Indian government, its silent involvement in aiding the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) with logistic support cannot be overlooked. Nor should the reports of the presence of active ULFA training camps in the Yunnan Province be undermined.

The spurt of activities of ULFA along the Tinsukia, Dinjan and Dibrugarh belt speaks volumes for itself. These are areas which are at almost a stone's throw from the launch pad and have been witness to a lot of bloodshed, especially in and around Tinsukia. The massacre of non-tribal (Bihari) labourers in and

around Tinsukia and Makum areas, which captured the national headlines, was reportedly perpetrated by ULFA sneaking into the Tinsukia area through the Changlang district from Myanmar, using the NSCN-K as conduits. Though the district is marked by the presence of the security forces, a complete sanitisation is physically impossible because of its dense vegetation, terrain and the local sympathisers of both insurgent groups. Many in the remote villages have their wards working with the insurgent groups, either by choice or by force. In both cases, however, poverty is the driving factor.

Yet another unique aspect of the district is the movement of Burmese nationals from Pangsau village across the Pangsau Pass down to Nampong in India for marketing. Twice a month trade thus happens between Indians and Burmese, with the Burmese purchasing mostly salt, turmeric and kerosene from the Indians. An Assam Rifles post conducts the necessary checks during such days. However, such a free flow of movement of people does not apply to Westerners. The governments of both countries keep a careful watch on the presence of Westerners in the border areas. The border is officially closed and in crossing the border without permission, one risks arrest or problems with the insurgents, who knows! But across the border on the Burmese side is the famous “Lake of No Return”. The name itself is capable of giving birth to some Hollywood blockbusters on the lines of “The Bridge on the River Kwai”. This lake derives its name from the fact that hundreds of aircraft found their resting place in the depth of its tranquil waters.

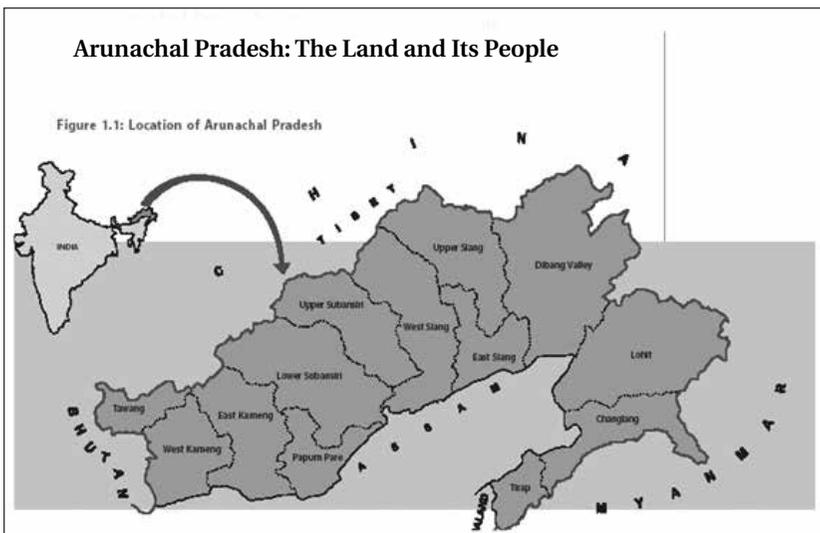
As if all this is not enough, the district also houses the easternmost point of India, Vijoynagar (if Bhet Dwarka can be called the westernmost, Indira Point the southernmost and the Siachin Glacier region the northernmost). Vijoynagar comprises 16 villages and, strangely, is air-maintained even till date. Approximately 55 percent of the population consists of retired Assam Rifles personnel, with the balance 45 percent comprising civilians of the Lisu tribe. The settlement of Assam Rifles personnel began in 1960. Why and how this remote corner of India was chosen for settlement of retired personnel confuses one.

The villagers depend on *Jhoom* cultivation for their livelihood and the day-to-day requirement of groceries is met by a few shops. These shops bring their stores from Dibrugarh by air or from Miao on foot. It takes around six days to travel to Vijoynagar on foot from Miao. The vital air connectivity is irregular and has limited capacity as compared to the requirement. With even telecommunication facilities not available as a basic necessity in such a remote area, the presence of the Special Intelligence Bureau and police is eye-catching. The villagers have no access to health care, water supply and other basic amenities.

This remote, strategically, historically and economically important district which also houses the Namdapha Tiger Reserve, reminds one of an unopened treasury. If developed to its fullest, it can generate valuable income not only for its people but the government exchequer as well. But the ground reality as of now is of mismanagement and neglect. Such precursors are the seeds of disturbance in the form of militancy and people's rights being violated, which in the area under consideration have already been sown.

The issue of granting citizenship to the Chakmas and Hajongs who had migrated to Arunachal Pradesh from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) between 1964 and 1969 has been rotting in the files only.

The anti- foreigner movement which swept across the whole of the Northeast, at one point of time affected the Chakmas and Hajongs and saw their rights and facilities being withdrawn. Today, they face (a) denial of citizenship; (b) denial thereby of the right to franchise and, therefore, almost all the constitutionally granted Fundamental Rights;(c) violence against women and children in the name of customs and tradition. The socio-economic condition of the Chakmas and Hajongs remains pathetic, to say the least. Finally, who can ignore the rights of those who have fallen to bullets in the area, be it civilian or security forces' fatalities?



Source: *Arunachal Pradesh Human Development Report 2005*