

THE MIKIRS

FROM THE PAPERS OF THE LATE

EDWARD STACK

INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE

SOMETIME DIRECTOR OF LAND RECORDS AND AGRICULTURE, AND
SECRETARY TO THE CHIEF COMMISSIONER, ASSAM

EDITED, ARRANGED, AND SUPPLEMENTED

BY

SIR CHARLES LYALL

(Published under the orders of the Government of
Eastern Bengal and Assam)

ILLUSTRATED

LONDON

DAVID NUTT

57, 59, LONG ACRE

1908

language (probably Assamese) also spoke the speech of their tribe, being bilingual like other non-Aryan races in Assam; and the 809 persons in Darrang, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and elsewhere, returned as speaking Mikir, though not as Mikirs by race, must really have belonged to the tribe. Since 1891, when the number of Mikirs was returned as 94,829, there has been a considerable falling-off, due to the terrible ravages of the disease called *Kālā-āzār* * in the Nowgong and Kamrup districts.

The Mikirs inhabit in greatest strength the hills called after them, the isolated mountainous block which fills the triangle between the Brahmaputra on the north, the Dhansiri valley on the east, and the Kopili and Jamuna valleys on the west and south; this tract is now divided between the Nowgong and Sibsagar districts. They are also found in considerable numbers on the northern skirts of the Assam Range, in Nowgong, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and Kamrup, and were once numerous, as testified by the local place- and river-names, in North Cachar. They have settled in the plains, and taken to plough cultivation, in Nowgong and Kamrup, and have also established recent settlements of the same kind north of the Brahmaputra in Darrang. The great bulk, however, remain a hill tribe, occupying the forest-clad northern slopes of the central range of Assam, and practising the primitive method of cultivation by axe, fire, and hoe.

In the Mikir Hills there are summits which attain 4,000 feet, but the greater part of the block is of much lower elevation. The rock is chiefly gneiss and granite, with few traces of overlying formations; and the whole is clothed with forest growth, chiefly of bamboo, figs of different species, cinnamon, *Artocarpus*, *nahor* (*Mesua ferrea*), and a few other trees valuable for their timber. The soil is light, and soon exhausted by cropping; it is naturally most fertile in the valleys, where the deepest deposits are found. The Mikir Hills, in 1886 when Mr. Stack wrote, had been very little explored by Europeans, and their interior was almost unknown. To the north, from Koliabor to Kaziranga, they abut on the Brahmaputra, only a narrow strip of country, traversed by the southern Grand Trunk road,

* This is the official spelling. The real name is *Kalā-jwar*, pronounced *Kōlā-jōr* (or *zōr*), which means "black fever."

intervening between them and the river. This strip has few inhabitants and little cultivation, and is covered with high grass and cotton tree (*semal*) jungle, the haunt of wild buffalo and rhinoceros. To the east is the great Nāambar forest, a dense area of high trees occupying the Dhansiri valley from Dimapur to within ten miles of Golaghat. To the south-west is the valley of the Jamuna, now traversed by the railway from Gauhati to Lunding, a region of tall grass and sparse tree jungle. The plain which is formed by the alluvial valley of the Kopili (or Kupli) river and its affluents, the Jamuna and the Diyaung (the latter coming from the North Cachar Hills), next intervenes; and to the west the land rises again in the northern skirts of the Jaintia and Khasi Hills. Here the country is of the same character as in the Mikir Hills, but better known. It consists of a series of plateaus or shelves rising from the level of the valley, composed of gneiss and granite, and covered with a red clay soil, the result of the decomposition of the metamorphic sandstones which overlay the igneous rock. The jungle here also is chiefly of bamboo, with a few patches of valuable forest, chiefly *sāl* (*Shorea robusta*), still surviving; but most of the larger timber has been destroyed by the secular practice of axe and fire cultivation.

It is in this hilly country, and in the plains at its base, that the Mikir people are found. The region is continuous, and is distributed, as the figures just given show, between the districts (from east to west) of Sibsagar, Nowgong, North Cachar, the Jaintia and Khasi Hills, and Kamrup. It is malarious and unhealthy for unacclimatized persons, with a very moist climate, and is wanting in the breezy amenities of the higher plateaus of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills; but (save during the recent prevalence of *Kālā-āzār*) the inhabitants appear to have acquired some degree of immunity against the noxious influences of the locality. Side by side with the Mikirs dwell, in the Mikir Hills, the Rengma Nagas (who are recent immigrants from the eastern side of the Dhansiri); in the Jamuna and Diyaung valleys, the Dīmāsā or Kachāris; in the Jaintia Hills, the Kukis and Syntengs; and in the Khasi Hills and along the Nowgong and Kamrup borders, the Lālungs and a few settlements of Khāsis.