

**THE**  
**IDUS OF MATHUN**  
**AND**  
**DRI VALLEY**

**TARUN KUMAR BHATTACHARJEE**



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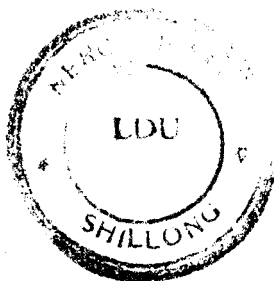
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He has made special studies on some of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and published a few books on the Land and People. He has made a special study on Idus of Mathun and Dri Valley and this book as a result of his detailed observation on the tribe.



Other publications by the Author  
**Myths of the Shimongs of Upper Siang.**  
**The Tangams of Northern Siang.**

# **IDUS OF MATHUN and DRI VALLEY**



BY

**TARUN BHATTACHARJEE**

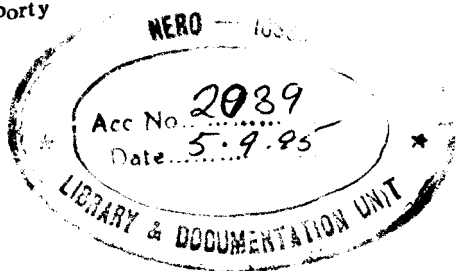
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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### THE LAND :

The Mathun and the Dri valley lie in the Northern region of Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh. The two valleys form part of the famous Dibang Valley which is considered as one of the most formidable terrain where precipitous ridges, gurgling rivers, land slides, deep and narrow gorges inspire awe in the mind of the travellers. Scattered in the verdant valleys enclosed between towering hills there are the settlement of Idus, misnamed as *Chulikqta* Mishmies and appears to many as 'unpredicable as the unstable hills.'

The worst part of the Dibang Valley is the middle belt which was badly mauled by the Great Earth Quake of 1950. The hills are yet to settle down and land slides are common feature. But after this inhospitable middle belt the terrain abruptly changes to broad and wide valleys drained by Dri and Mathun rivers. Situated at an average elevation of 1500 meters, these regions are some of the most beautiful areas in the entire Arunachal Pradesh. Here the lush green carpet of bushy grassy land, studded with few and far between trees with sloping gurgling, many hilly brooks and falls, surrounded with forests, towering mountains keeps a visitor spell bound. Higher elevation are studded with big lakes on which one can see the floating lumps of snow in crystal clear water, frozen falls in winter. Here the snow eagle descends and musk deer 'gallop in the wilderness,' *Takins* graze in herds,

beautiful Imperial Pheasants 'bent branch of a tree with its weight,' Majestic conifers and poplar trees line the river banks and miles after miles sprawling grassy land unfold a paradise on the face of the earth.

Five hundred square kilometer region lie between longitude—96° E and Latitude 28° 50' N approximately. The people who are all Idus, live in 29 villages in both the river valleys. The total population is only 1500, a figure much low compared to the available land for settlement. The Mathun and the Dri are the two principal snowfed perennial rivers originating respectively from Noroekhopra and Mendi mountain ranges. The rivers are fast flowing, deep and not fordable even in winter. Mathun, after flowing for about fifty miles in southward course meets the Dri down the slope of Anini near Matuli. The river is thereafter known as the Dibang which flows down to the foothills where it meets the Brahmaputra. There are number of mountain chains skirting the valleys. Twin peaks of Dishindi lie on the west, Mendi, Awandi on the North East, Akhandi on the East, Noroekhopra on the north, Abroka on the west. The mountains are enveloped in deep snow except for brief period in summer.

**Flora :** Amongst the trees of economic interest which are found in the valley area are Fir (*Abies spectabilis*) Oak (*Quereus sp*), Birch (*Betula utilis*), Poplar, gonsoroi (*Cannamomum-cecicodaphne*), Dhuna (*Resiniferum*), Chestnut (*Castanopsis*). A small stemmed bamboo (*Bambusa pallida Hill*) which is hard and durable is also found in the area. Besides cinnamon, Tezpat, wild cardamom, wild tea plants are also seen.

But the cedar is the monarch of high range. This majestic tree is found over an altitude of 9000 ft. with luxuriant growth but due to difficult terrain extraction of timber is not easy. This trees dwarf in size with the gain of altitude. At 13000 ft. it is just reduced to a mere bush. Two species of Rhododendrons are also seen upto 12000 ft. along with

Thuja and Junipers. Tree line fades away over 14000 ft. where it is replaced by grass which withers with the onset of winter.

The tree belt is not extensive in the valleys. Patches of forest are seen in sheltered belts. Fierce winds which blow over open valleys act as deterrent. Open valleys are covered with grass and ferns. Extensive bamboo growth is found in sem-sheltered area.

All the grass and fern withers during winter. Careless lighting of fire raises an inferno and miles of valley land and hills are scorched by the immense heat which causes soil erosion and land slide.

Bamboo forests extend up to 12000 ft. but cane is found only in certain belts below 7000 ft. There are four species of bamboo seen. The common species which grow prolific in the valley area is 'Abrato' (*Bambusa Pallida Hill*). This is a small stemmed bamboo is hard and durable and is used practically for all purposes. This bamboo forest extend throughout the valleys. The people find it advantageous to cultivate *Jhum* by clearing the forest as rapid regeneration follows immediately after the field is abandoned.

'Braduto' is a poisonous species found over 7000 ft. It has thick thorns on the Nodes. Injury results in bad sores not easily healed. The bamboo is used for preparation of traps.

**Kaluto** : This bamboo is available over 7000 ft. It is used for making arrows, bows, bamboo dishes and small baskets for girls.

**Manoto** : Grows over 10000 ft. small diameter and very hard used for fence materials for the traps for musk deer.

**Aruto** : It is of big stemmed bamboo specially planted near the village by individual owners, used as water container, strainers, baskets, for mats preparation. This bamboo is not allowed to be cut without permission of the owner.

Only one species of cane '*A-Rhu-To*' is found in sheltered belts in certain areas and is used for construction of bridge, animal traps, baskets and head gears as well as mats.

**Medicinal Plants :** There are varieties of medicinal plants which are specific for different types of ailments. The valleys and the hills are literally dotted with such plants and perhaps much more remain unidentified. The Salubrious climate encourages the growth of such plants. A few which are known to the people and others which are identified are listed below :—

**Coptis Tita (ARO) :** It is a well known medicinal plant found over an elevation of 7000 ft. in shady and moist places. The plant resembles fern. Its roots are taken out and sold to the market outside at considerable profit. The plant belongs to the family *Ranunculaceae*. The drug is said to contain a high percentage of *Alkaloid Berbarine*.

**“Areechapana” :** This small herb is found over an elevation of 3000 ft. The leaves are crushed and the juice is applied on cut injury to stop bleeding.

Also leaves, after being warmed over the fire are applied on swelling resulting from sprain.

**“Arunggaru” :** A creeper which has a milky sap. A specific medicine for dog bite. It is cut and applied to the bitten portion. A rite is performed before application. An *Igu* is called who propitiates the spirit. He stretches his hand, open the palm where it is believed, medicines in shape of drop of water collects. He then rubs it on the affected part and applies the herb which is supposed to heal the injury.

**“Angotama” :** This herb is found over 3000 ft. This herb is used as a specific for fever. The juice is squeezed from the leaves and applied on the body. The twigs are twisted into a rope and tied round the waist during the night to induce sleep.

**“Arcashapana”** : It is a specific for the treatment of fractures. It grows over 3000 ft. and is a rare plant. This plant can be identified by only a few people who know it and gather the plant on payment. It is believed that during collection there is rain followed by a rainbow.

The plant is uprooted and crushed. After being heated over the fire it is applied to the affected part where it sticks like gum. The milky sap inside the roots penetrates through the affected part and is supposed to heal up the wound.

**“Arounni”** : Also a herb found over 3000 ft. The leaves are crushed and applied to cut injury as for cure.

**“Tamatama”** : A herb found over 4000 ft. It is used as a specific for toothache. The stem is cut and applied to the affected tooth before sleep.

**“Anoru”** : A herb found over 4000 ft. Specifically used for sores, especially rashes on the skin. The leaves are crushed and applied to sores.

**“Cheteka”** (*Solanum khasianum*) : A prickly herb found at altitudes below 6000 ft. The fruits which are small and used by the people, when dry, for treatment of toothache. This is perhaps an exotic plant brought from outside. Pure Idu name is not found. This is identified as a medicinal plant for supplementation of production of Solosodine for manufacture of steroidal hormones.

**“Amugi”** : A small herb found over 4000 ft. Leaves are used as vegetables and pickles, as well as medicine for stomach trouble especially in indigestion.

**“Ilima”** : Also a herb. Leaves when crushed give out smell like Iodine. Used for treatment of skin rashes

**“Elomana”** : Wild Garlic found over 10000 ft. used as medicine for stomach troubles.

**Collection of Aconite (Mra)** : The aconite is collected from a shrub which grows in the snow range. Just

before the onset of winter the plants wither and aconite is formed in the tubers. People while going for hunting to high ranges collect the poison. A symbolic action of death of the animal is shown by the digger when tubers are brought out.

This signifies that when an animal is shot by a poisoned arrow, that animal should succumb to the toxic action of the aconite.

On return to the village the tubers are kept under the granary (*Aka*) shed. The preparation is also made there. A special stone is kept for grinding the aconite for extraction of poison. This stone is kept duly covered with bamboo net and leaves.

On the day of preparation fruits or vegetables with sour taste, bamboo shoots, tubers, entrails of animals are not eaten. It is believed eating of any of these will defeat the preparation.

The aconite is crushed on the stone by frequent spitting to moisten the substance and make it into a paste. The juice of a fruit '*Epiiba*' which has a burning taste is also applied.

After the preparation the poison is smeared in the shaft just below the arrow head with the help of a fern twig. The arrow head is a triangular blade of iron made razor sharp for easy penetration through skin.

#### **Treatment of accidental swallowing of aconite :—**

If any one accidentally swallows poison a little quantity of yeast '*Pa*', fruits of '*Anachi*' tree, cured bamboo shoot '*Aposhu*' are mixed and forced down the throat of victim which induces vomiting and poison comes out.

But if an *Igu* is called he will attend to propitiation which supposed to free the victim from the toxic effect of poison.

**Fauna** : Except in the inaccessible areas and the high ranges there is rapid depletion of animal life because of indiscriminate poaching. Even birds are becoming less in numbers in valleys. An Idu will seldom spare a small bird if he can shoot at it.

There are beautiful species of birds which are mostly found in high ranges. During winter migration, the birds come down from the mountains and on return journey take temporary shelter in the hills near by where they fall into the trap of ever vigilant hunter. Following is the description of birds found in the area :

**'Pidi'** : A heavy bird. The feathers are beautiful. It lives in snow range. The feathers are made into a fan and used by the Igu and others

**'Peba'** : Also a heavy bird but slightly smaller in size than Pidi. It has separate nesting place though live in the same range with Pidi. It only follows Pidi before and after migration.

**'Poko (Ng)'** : It is a small bird of brown and green colour. It has a melodious voice and whistle as 'Ku-Koooo-Ku-Koooo'.

**'Pera (Ng)'** : It is smaller in size than Poko.

**'Aru'** : A black bird with a red tuft. It comes to the valley at the beginning of winter and leaves for the mountain at the close of the season.

**'Poko'** : Its habitat is just below the snow line. It frequents the valley in winter as well as in summer. It has separate salt lick 'Pako-Ani'. They fly in flocks and sit on the branches so much so that the branch bends down due to weight.

**'Idiku'** : A small bird lives on the fringes of high range.

**'Eshabro'** : Same as Idiku.

**'Pratecha'** : This bird lives below the snow range. Migrates to the valley during winter.

**'Prashigu'** : A small black bird. It has white marking on its neck. It is a beautiful bird.

**'Idietaru'** : Snow eagle Lives in very high altitude. Never comes down to valley even in severe winter but descends only a little when heavy snow falls on the range.

Animals in high ranges include the *Takin (Akru)*, musk deer '*Ala*' and two species of mountain goats '*Ami*' and '*Mare*' besides Himalayan black bear and Tigers. *Takin (Buducrus)* is a hefty animal with a pair of horns protruding from fore head. *Takin* prefers to move in herd along with the bulls sometimes sixty to hundred in numbers. During snow fall it migrates to lower altitude.

**'Musk Deer'** : is an extremely agile animal which 'gallops in the wilderness with casual indifference' but seldom comes down from the snow range even in severe snow fall.

Mountain goats are found below the snow line in difficult terrain. The hoof is fitted with hooks to enable the animals to move across the cliffs.

*Flying Fox Kame* is also found in the hills near by along with barking deer *Manjo* and wild boar *Ame*.

**'Raptiles'** : There are various species of snakes and lizards. During summer months the valley area swarms with snakes of all descriptions except Cobra and Python. It is surprising how in such a cold climate snakes abound in prolific number.

Most of the poisonous snakes belong to the viperine interval group. *Ajumbo* which is seldom seen, lives in deep forest. It is probably krait with jet black body.

**'Aprumbo'** also has a black body with white rings at interval.

**'Etambo'** : The Russel's viper is met near the shady places. People while taking an oath refer to this snake. If false oath is taken it is believed that the guilty person will be bitten by the *Etambo*.

'Bithimbo' : is a green viper commonly met every where.

RITUAL FOLLOWING SNAKE BITE : Though snakes ('*Tabu*') are plenty cases of snake bite are rare. Snake bite is a bad omen. If a snake is seen it may be killed but should not be left half dead. One whose wife is pregnant should not see the snake being killed and he himself should avoid killing it.

If a person is bitten by a snake he should not tell anyone except an *Igu* who also keeps the information to himself. If it is known that a person is bitten by a snake, strict taboo should be observed. For ten months no chilli or any other articles which have burning taste should be taken.

For five days the victim's house will not be visited by anybody. Inter village traffic is also restricted. In such cases when people of the village want to have communication with people of other village, a special structure '*Laro*' is constructed on the boundary and conversation takes place from either side but neither any food will be interchanged nor will there be any physical touch. For five days in the house no creeper, twisted bamboo or wood will be brought. But if no information leaked out then restriction is followed by the victim and the *Igu* is for five days only. That is why a snake bite victim seldom informs any one in spite of terrible pain or swelling. The person will always have a cover story to tell such as a fall from a rock or tree.

Immediate first aid is applied by deep incision and blood is drawn out. In rare cases a bite from a poisonous snake may result in death.

The snake bite victim contacts the *Igu* who arranges detailed propitiation to the spirit. At first the *Igu* holds the *K(Ng) ali* in his hand and blows through his extended hand so that the spirit responsible is disturbed and goes away. One shrub '*Athumbro*' whose leaves have a sour taste will be collected. The *Igu* after chewing the leaves sweeps over the body

of the victim so that poison should not spread. The *Igu* then grinds a little 'K (Ng)Ali' and with his saliva smears it on the affected part.

If the snake bite victim dies the body will be brought to the house and the same death rituals will be followed as in case of natural death.

If a snake is seen coming to the house it is a bad omen. The *Igu* will be called who will attend to special rituals for the appeasement of the spirit responsible.

Snake eating is not so common. One species of non-poisonous snake, the 'BOCHOMBO', is a favourite with old people.

**Leech :** Leech abounds specially in shady and moist places in the valleys and hills. Common brown leech (*Kepe-mendekhi*) is met with in lower elevation while higher up in the hill another species '*Kepelimba*' of an inch in length, green with faint white stripes is found. This leech is hard to shake off once it gets hold and easily draws at least half an ounce of blood. Its bite is so painless that it is noticed only when it has surfeited itself and the blood trickles down.

**Climate :** The *Idus* divide the year into two seasons. Tidu and Vishidu-summer and winter. Rain falls almost throughout the year though heavy showers do not occur except on a few days in summer. The force is much lesser than in the foot hills area where a single, heavy shower brings flood. The total precipitation comes to 2960 mm spread over 250 days on the average.

The winter is severe with deep frost and occasional snow fall. From mid October to April the season lasts when rain also adds to misery. Usually snow up to a few inches falls during January but nearby hills are always covered with heavy snow which melts only after April.

The summer is very pleasant especially when the sky is clear. There is no feeling of heat even during June and

July and warm garments are necessary in the evening. As there is no torrential shower, rain is not much of a hindrance. There is frequent break in weather followed by sun and rain. During summer lush green vegetation spring up everywhere which add to the beauty of the landscape.

As the valleys are open, forceful winds can sometimes be expected, but not to the extent that they can uproot the trees. Moreover, the wind does not allow heavy tree growth and forest is only seen in sheltered belt.

The salubrious climate, however, is very, good for health. There is few incidence of sickness and people are quite healthy inspite of poor living.

**COMMUNICATION** : The paths are narrow-barely enough for foothold. It is tortuous and passes through terrain sometimes without consideration to alignment.

Exposed roots of trees and over hanging branch appears a sufficient obstacle but *Idus* are fast travellers—a narrow path enough to hold the foot does not deter them to cover the considerable distance. The same consideration of security is the prime reason as to why no initiative is taken to make a wider path over easy gradient.

While inter-village travel is easy, the hunting tracks are more difficult. These often run over great heights through rough terrain.

The streams are forded with log bridges. Sometimes a single tree is put over such obstacles. *Fir* and *Poplar* trees which are available in plenty in the area, are best suited for log bridges.

Suspension bridges span the wide rivers. The *Idus* do not adopt elaborate technique of construction with a foothold. These are single rope bridges and construction is made as follows :—

A string of split cane is tied to a pebble which is thrown to the other bank to the people who wait to catch it. It may be that in a single attempt the crossing is not done. If so, repeated throws are made till the pebble with cane reaches the other side. As soon as the cane is received it is taken to the bank high up where it is secured to a tree. The whole canes are then pulled across, three or four of these being made into a single cable and tied to the tree which is firmly anchored to the ground. On the other side the people will pull the cable so that the required tension is reached.

The end is then secured to a tree or if a required tree is not available, the cable can be tied to boulders.

A large cane ring is then made round the cable and attached to a string.

While crossing the body is tied firmly to the ring and head thrown backwards. The crossing is done by hand and feet propulsion. Pig and other small animals are also passed over with the same technique but Mithuns are swam across.

The single cable bridge often appears dangerous especially over turbulent rivers like the Dri and Mathun. To the newly initiated it definitely tells on the nerve as the downwards glance is sufficient to scare him with the thought of death if the hold on the cable snaps. Bridge lie very high on the river.

Now 2 days, however, with the help of the Government this type of bridges are being rapidly replaced by wire rope with elaborate hand and foot rest. Bridle paths averaging 4 to 5 ft width are also constructed in easy gradient, connecting most of the villages.