



# CULTURAL IDENTITY OF TRIBES OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Jagdish Lal Dawar



# Cultural Identity of Tribes *of* North-East India

(Movement for Cultural Identity Among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh)

Jagdish Lal Dawar

*Head,*  
Dept. of History & Ethnography,  
Mizoram Central University,  
Aizawl



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## Preface

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This book is the slightly revised version of the Project Report titled *Movements for Cultural Identity among the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh since 1950's : A Case study of Aids*, submitted to the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi. I am highly obliged to the authorities of ICHR for granting me the project.

Recalling the names of all who helped and assisted me in the preparation of this book is an almost impossible task; some are likely to be missed. The individuals and institutions I acknowledge below are just those that readily come to my mind; I beg the indulgence of others.

I am highly indebted to Prof. K.N. Panikkar who had supervised my Ph.D. work in Jawaharlal Nehru University and taught me the methods of historical research during 1981 - 1990. I am grateful to Prof. Bipan Chandra who provided me not only encouragement to pursue research but also valuable suggestions from time to time. I am grateful to Mr. Joram Begi, the former Registrar, Arunachal University and Prof. A.C. Bhagabati, the former Vice-Chancellor, Arunachal University for rendering me help whenever I approached them.

In fact, Prof. A.C. Bhagabati's name deserves special mention here since he provided me the anthropological tools for conducting field work and also clarifying and correcting many of my pre-conceived notions about tribal societies in general and of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in particular. I also acknowledge my thanks to Prof. Dwivedi, the Vice-

Chancellor of Arunachal University for reminding me all the time to finish the work in hand as soon as possible. I derive a sense of inspiration from his spirit in encouraging all the faculty members to engage in research activities. But I would be failing in my duties if I don't thank Prof. Tamo Mibang who initiated me into tribal studies. It is he who first of all advised me to do some research on the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. I also thank Dr. Tai Nyori, the controller of Examinations, Arunachal University who is a prominent intellectual of the Adis and a eminent scholar and who has always been helping me in terms of providing the information not only on Adis but also on the other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

Besides I am indebted to large number of my friends and colleagues who had been source of inspiration in terms of discussion on various aspects of society. Some of these are : Bhagwan Josh, Manjit, S.V. Srinivas, N.C. Roy, P.K. Kuri, M.C. Behra, Deepak Mishra, A. Mitra, Sarit Chaudhury, Sucheta Sen Chaudhury, Tana Showren, Ashan Riddi, N.T. Rikam, Deepak Singh and Amarender Senger. I am specifically grateful to M.C. Behra who advised me to get the book published from Commonwealth Publishers.

I also thank the non-teaching staff of Arunachal University, particularly the Library Staff for providing me all types of assistance. I am also indebted to the staff of Nehru Memorial Centre for Contemporary Studies, Teen Murti House, New Delhi for rendering all types of help.

I am very grateful to my brothers Shri Roshan Lal Dawar, Shri O.P. Dawar and Mrs. Sneh Dawar (my sister-in-law) for helping me with secretarial work. Lastly, the entire credit of this book goes to my wife Smt. Usha Dawar, my daughters Shivali and Bhoomika who had to suffer a lot for not providing them sufficient time in domestic chores.

Whatever, the shortcoming left in this book the blame entirely goes to me.

Jagdish Lal Dawar

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# Glossary of Indigeneous Terms

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1. Abang : The sacred lores of the Adis.
2. Apong : Adis' Rice beer.
3. Bango Kebang : A Bango Kebang is one which all constituted with more than one village Kebang. Hence it is powerful.
4. Bogum Bokang : It consists of more than one Bango.
5. Dere : It is an Adi Community Hall in which all kinds of meetings are held, the young boys sleep at night and guests are received.
6. Gangin : Temple.
7. Gam : The village headman. In a village there are more than one gam, a social title for administration and social purposes. The most influential one is known as head gam.
8. Kebang : The village council.
9. Kadens : Friends.
10. Miri : Traditional priest.
11. Ponung : Dance.
12. Mithun : An animal which was used by Adis as an exchange and also for sacrifice during festivals and other poojas.
13. Nyibu Agoms : Sacred lores.
14. Yaba : The Adi elderly people use 'Ya' in place of the first syllable of a girl's name to make it a pet name.

# Chapter – 1

## Introduction

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Arunachal Pradesh is bounded by Bhutan on the West, Tibet and China on the North. On its South-East lies Burma whereas Assam stands on the southern boundary. Arunachal lies between 26° 28' N and 29° 30' N latitude and the longitude 91° 30' E and 97° 30' E. It covers an area of roughly 83,578 sq.kms. In 1961, its total population was 2,97,573. In 1971, 1981 and 1991 it was 4.68 lacs, 6.32 lacs and 8.65 lacs respectively.<sup>1</sup> It consists approximately of 26 major tribes and 110 sub-tribes and about 100 dialects (roughly).<sup>2</sup>

### Historical Background - A Brief Outline

Before the British annexation of Assam in 1826, the Ahom rulers had followed a policy of appeasement to prevent the tribesmen from raiding the villages in the plains. The ahom rulers arranged some sort of subsidy called *Posa* to paid by some peasant families in cash or kind or both to the tribesmen. And if this policy failed to conciliate them punitive expeditions to punish the guilty hillmen were sent by the Ahom rulers.<sup>3</sup>

The British continued with the Ahom policy to frontier tribes with certain modifications in the payment of *Posa*. During Ahom rule the tribesmen collected their subsidies directly from the villages while the British officials made an agreement with the different tribes to collect *Posa* directly from the government. British also continued the policy of using military power in case of failure of the policy of conciliation.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of 1860's the British had evolved this policy

towards the frontier tribes of the North-East India which was essentially a policy of non-interference.<sup>5</sup> The introduction of Inner-line in the Lakhimpur and Darrang in September 1875 and March 1876 was basically an extension of the policy of non-interference.<sup>6</sup> However, as a result of developments in Lhasa in August, 1910, Chinese activities on the frontier and murder of Williamson, Assistant political officer, Sadiya in March 1911 at the hands of Abors, the British policy of non-interference was "replaced by a policy of loose political control."<sup>7</sup> According to D. P. Choudhury :

The new policy had two distinct but inseparable aspects. On the one hand, the tribes were to be properly controlled, while on the other, the frontier was to be protected from any Chinese penetration or invasion. One without the other was impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The most important step in this regard was 'definition of Indo-Tibetan boundary.' And therefore, the Indo-Tibetan boundary took a final shape in 1914. It is known as Mac Mohan Line.<sup>9</sup>

In 1921, the Governor-General, acting under the Provisions of the Government of India Act of 1919, designated all the tribal areas of Assam as 'backward tracts.'<sup>10</sup> This regulation, "in effect, barred both the central Indian legislature and the Legislative Council of Assam from enacting legislation for the tribal areas without the express consent of the Governor-General or the Provincial Governor."<sup>11</sup> Thus while the north-east frontier tribal areas "were constitutionally a part of Assam, the Government of Assam was denied a direct voice in the administration and governance of the area."<sup>12</sup> The Government of India Act of 1935, based on the recommendations of the Simon Commission, had done away with the terminology of Backward Tract and rechristened these areas as "Excluded Areas' and 'Partially excluded Areas."<sup>13</sup> The Balipara, Sadiya and Lakhimpur-Frontier tracts of NEFA were all designated as 'excluded areas.'<sup>14</sup> These were to be administered by the Governor of Assam under the general control of the Governor-General and with the assistance of an Adviser of Tribal areas and states.<sup>15</sup>

The question whether the Governor of Assam should be "allowed to retain his discretionary powers with regard to the tribal areas of the north-east India continued to be hotly debated in the Constituent Assembly which formulated and approved the Constitution of Independently India."<sup>16</sup> The Constituent Assembly of India had set up an Advisory committee on Fundamental rights, Minorities, Tribal and Excluded Areas under the chairmanship of Sardar Ballavbhai Patel.<sup>17</sup> For the North-East Frontier Tribal Areas and Assam Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas a sub-committee with five members was set up under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief Minister of Assam. (called Premiers at that time).<sup>18</sup> This sub-committee had submitted its report on July 28, 1947. Since the drafting of the constitution had already begun, the recommendations of the sub-committee were directly incorporated in the Draft Constitution.<sup>19</sup> Its recommendations were :

We recommend that when the Central Government which now administers these areas (and which we consider it should continue to do with the Government of Assam as its agent) is of the view that the administration has been satisfactorily established over a sufficiently wide area, the Government of Assam should take over that area by the strength of a notification.<sup>20</sup>

The recommendation thus had two parts, namely : (1) Immediate replacement of the 'Governor' of Assam by the 'Government' of Assam as Agent to the Central Government'; (2) Full merger of the Frontier Tracts with Assam at a future date after administration had been fully installed over the whole area.<sup>21</sup> The first was realised by the India Provisional Constitution order of 1947, and remained effective until the position was reversed.<sup>22</sup> The second part was "never to come about as the political fortune and circumstances rapidly changed in the post-independently period."<sup>23</sup>

The 1950 Constitution virtually re-enacted the provisions of the Government of India Act 1935 as they applied to the excluded areas.<sup>24</sup> The other most important factor which possibly influenced the decision against direct extension of

the Government of Assam to the Frontier Tracts was the emergence of Communist Government in China in 1949.<sup>25</sup> India's recognition of Tibet as an autonomous region of China had greatly changed the geo-political perspective of the international border in the north of the region.<sup>26</sup> The authority of the Governor of Assam acting in his discretion over the North-East Frontier Tracts as Agent to the Central Government was restored under the Constitution. A new and significant development was appointment of the external Affairs Ministry to act as the administrative agency for the President, and was, therefore, granted ultimate responsibility for the administration of this sensitive area.<sup>27</sup> On January 26, 1950, the adviser to the Governor of Assam assumed direct charge of the administration of the North-East Frontier Tracts, though his Secretariat was not separated from the Secretariat of the Tribal Affairs Department of the Government of Assam until June 1950.<sup>28</sup> After the separation, the civil servants of the Assam cadre were gradually replaced.<sup>29</sup>

The promulgation of the North-East Frontier (Administration) regulation, 1954, inaugurated a full-scale and integrated administration for the entire area under the designation of the North-East Frontier Agency-NEFA for short - for the first time.<sup>30</sup>

The constitutional separation of NEFA from Assam was finally brought about by the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971 which converted it into a Union Territory under a Chief Commissioner.<sup>31</sup> Early in 1971, "the Agency Council recommended a change of name in favour of 'Arunachal Pradesh' for NEFA against minor opposition from a section of NEFA students."<sup>32</sup> So NEFA came to be known as Arunachal Pradesh now-on-wards. It was declared a State in 1987.<sup>33</sup>

### **Cultural Zones of Arunachal Pradesh**

Verrier Elwin divided the NEFA into three main cultural areas :<sup>34</sup> (a) People of western Kameng, namely Monpas and Sherdukpanis who are inspired by Buddhist ideas.<sup>35</sup> They are to a "great extent under the influence of lamasery of Tawang."<sup>36</sup>

Both these tribes "combine in their religion and mythology traditional tribal ideas with the Buddhist theology."<sup>37</sup> In fairly close "geographical proximity live the Buguns (Khowas), Hrussos (Akas) and Dhammais (Mijis) who, although not Buddhists, share some aspects of their neighbours' cultures."<sup>38</sup> The Membas and other tribes living along the northern frontier may be conveniently grouped with them and so may be the Buddhist Khamptis and Singhphos.<sup>39</sup> (b) The central area is populated by a large number of tribal groups : Nishing (Daflas), Tagins, Hill Miris, Apa Tanis, Adis (Abors), Mishmis (Idu, Digaru and Miju). (c) The third group inhabiting the eastern Arunachal Pradesh is comprised of : Wanchos, Noctes and Tangsas. Noctes have "adopted a very elementary form of Vaishnavism."<sup>40</sup>

However, Parul Dutta and Syed Ishteaque Ahmad, the editors of volume XIV *Arunachal Pradesh* of the People of India Project have divided the cultural fabric of Arunachal Pradesh broadly into five cultural zones. These are : "(a) The Mon cultural zone, which covers the Tawang and Sherdukpens. The Akas, Mijis and Khowas also belong to this zone. (b) To the east of the first zone lies the Nishi cultural zone encompassing the Bangnis of the East Kameng district, the Nishis of the Lower and Upper Subansiri districts and two unique communities—the Sulungs and Apatanis. Other groups living in the zone include the Nas, Tagins, Mikirs and Hill Miris. (c) The Adi cultural zone extends from the eastern part of the Upper Subansiri district to the western boundary of the Dibang Valley district, covering all the Adi sub-groups as well as the Khambas, Membas and Mishings/Miris. (d) The Mishmi cultural zone, covering the districts of the Dibang Valley and Lohit, is predominated by the three groups of the Mishmi community, and among them lives a small community—the Zakhrings/ Meyors. Other communities in this zone are the Khamptis, Khamiyangs, Deories, Chakmas and Tibetans who are settled in the plains bordering Assam. In the past, the Khamptis and Khamiyangs have functioned as liaison between the Mishmis and people of Assam. (e) The nocte-Tangsa cultural zone is spread over the Tirap and Changlang

districts. The major communities of this zone are the Noctes' Wanchos and Tangsas, with the Singhpos, Sonowal Kacharis, Lisus and Nepalīs being the small groups inhabiting the area."<sup>41</sup>

Why is this difference between the two approaches, that is between Elwin and the editors of *People of India* series? Firstly, the two works were written during different periods, the former in 1958 and the later one in 1995. The Na tribe mentioned in the second cultural zone by the editors of *people of India* series was discovered in recent times. The Chakmas were settled in Arunachal Pradesh in 1964 and are given the status of refugees till today, so is true of Tibetans. The Nepalīs were settled after Indo-China war and they are the descendants of the ex-soldiers and are not considered as the indigeneous group. The Lisus have not been recognized as the tribe by the Arunachal State Assembly. The Mikirs, Sonowal Kocharis and Deories are regarded as the tribes of Assam. Secondly, Verrier Elwin divided NEFA into three broader cultural areas on the basis of indigeneous beliefs and practices while the editors of the *People of India* series have not taken this into consideration and that seems to me the basis of discrepancy between the two authors.

### **The Adis**

The tribes belonging to the central areas of Arunachal Pradesh : The Nishis, Tagins, Hill-Miris, Apatanis, Adis and Mishings (also in Assam) are grouped into Tani group of tribes. All of these tribes claim themselves as the direct descendants of their great legendary Human Father, called ABO TANI. The people of these tribes "are the ardent believers of a faith, called Donyi-Polo. By Donyi, they literally mean the Sun and Polo stands for the Moon. The conjugation of DONYI and the POLO becomes a strong channel of socio-cultural aspiration of the Tanis."<sup>42</sup>

The Adis, the subject of this study, constitute one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They are found in the three Siang districts, *i.e.* East Siang, West Siang and Upper Siang, the eastern fringe of the Upper Subansiri and the South-

western part of the Dibang valley districts. These areas lie, roughly speaking, between the subansiri river on the west and the Dibang valley on the east, Tibet on the north and parts of the districts of Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh of Assam in the South.<sup>43</sup> The Census of India, 1971 puts the number of Adis at 93,496 out of the total population of 4,69,511 of Arunachal Pradesh and thus they formed about 20% of the total population of the State.<sup>44</sup>

"The word Adi" says Elwin "covers a large number of tribal groups, united by a language that inspite of dialectical variations is fundamentally everywhere the same, and by a similar culture and temperament."<sup>45</sup> The Adis are divided into two broad groups : (a) Padam-Minyong group consisting of ten sub-tribes : the Minyongs, Padams, Pasis, Panggis, Milangs, Karkos, Shimongs, Tangams, Ashings and Boris;<sup>46</sup> (b) The Galo group comprised of four sub-tribes : Galos, Pailibos, Ramos and Bokars.<sup>47</sup> The two groups occupy almost two equal halves of the total area of the Adis. The rivers Sido and Siyom, roughly speaking, form the dividing line between the two groups, leaving the first group on the eastern and the second on the western halves.<sup>48</sup>

The Adis were known by the word 'Abors' earlier. The origin of the word 'Abor' has been interpreted variously.<sup>49</sup> According to one interpretation, it is Assamese in origin meaning savage, independent or hostile.<sup>50</sup> A second explanation is that "the name is an Assamese adaptation of an original Adi word which has since fallen into disuse."<sup>51</sup> A third interpretation is that it may have "some connection with Abo, the first man, according to Adi mythology, to whom they trace their origin."<sup>52</sup> The Assamese used the word in two senses. In the wider sense it meant independent, unruly, savage and so on, and as such it applied indefinitely to almost all the hill tribes on both sides of the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>53</sup> In its narrower sense it meant particularly the hillmen living between the Subansiri and the Dibang. Today it is used only in the second sense.<sup>54</sup>

The Adis have dropped this nomenclature 'Abor' and prefer to be called as 'Adi' which in their own language,

literally means 'hill' and thus in its extended and final sense 'the people living in the hills' or briefly hillmen'. Elwin says "they themselves have suggested and the administration has accepted, that they should be called Adis or hill men."<sup>55</sup> Its history goes back to the first Bogum Bokang Kebang held on 21st and 22nd March 1949 at Pangin village.<sup>56</sup> The leaders who organised this Kebang were : late Kuttik Moyong, retired political Assistant, late Kep Taying Ex. Agriculture Inspector and late Tamik Dabi Ex Area base Superintendent.<sup>57</sup> In that "Bogum Bokang the issue of the use of the derogatory word Abor was discussed and a resolution was adopted to supplement the tribe name Abor with Adi which means the Hill-men."<sup>58</sup>

All the sub-groups, namely : Minyongs, Gallongs, Pasis, Padams, Milangs, Karkos, Simmongs, Boris, Bokars, Komkar, Ramo, Railipos, Ashings, Panggis, Tangams were "included in the general Adi banner."<sup>59</sup> The matter was referred to Administration of NEFA and was approved.<sup>60</sup> Since then, they have been mentioned as Adis in various records and research monographs.<sup>61</sup> In a way it was the first important step towards forging of larger identity as well as cultural identity *vis-a-vis* the nomenclature provided by the 'other'.

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2. See the Census of 1971, 1981 and 1991, *op. cit.*
3. See G.D. S. Dunbar, 'Abors and Gallongs', *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. 5, pp. 15-16, cited in D. P. Chaudhury, *The North-East Frontier of India, 1865-1914*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 1978, p. 29; E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Kolkata, 1926, pp. 124, 126, 152-153, 157-58, 183; S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Gauhati, 1949, pp. 31-34; A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, Kolkata, 1884, pp. 7, 21.

4. See. D. P. Chaudhury, *op. cit.* pp. 30-32.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-41.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-87.
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9. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-160.
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17. B. N. Bordoloi, 'Administration of Tribal Areas *vis-à-vis* the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India—the Founding Fathers' Views', *Vivekananda Patrika* (date and issue not mentioned), pp. 14-15.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
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20. Shibanikinkar Chaube, *Hill Politics in North-East India*, Quoted in J. N. Chaudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 317.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
33. Chandrika Singh, *Emergence of Aurnachal Pradesh as a State*, Delhi, 1989.
34. Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*, North-East Frontier Agency, Shillong, 1958, p. xiii.
35. West Kameng district has been further divided into two : West Kameng and Tawang.
36. Verrier Elwin, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.* pxv; also see File No. 25, 1977-78 of Adi Cultural and Literary Society, Pasighat, p. 7.
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44. Census Report, 1971, Series-24, Arunachal Pradesh (District Census hand Book, Siang District) p. 19.
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51. D. P. Chaudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
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61. *Ibid.*

This book deals with the official nationalist discourse of 'integration' and its dialogue with the newly emerging intellectuals among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh since 1950's. In the process of this dialogue emerged an agenda of resistance against the officially sponsored 'cultural hegemony' and a process of identity formation. However the book argues that the identity formation is a process and therefore critiques the essentialist concept of identity.

Jagdish Lal Dawar : M.A. (English)  
Delhi University, M.A. (History)  
Rajasthan University, M. Phil, Ph.D.  
Centre for Historical Studies, School  
of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru  
University, New Delhi.

Presently Reader, Department of  
History, Arunachal University,  
Itanagar.

His doctoral work was on Premchand  
and he has authored several articles  
on the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.  
Presently he has been taking, keen  
interest in the area of 'cultural  
studies'.



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