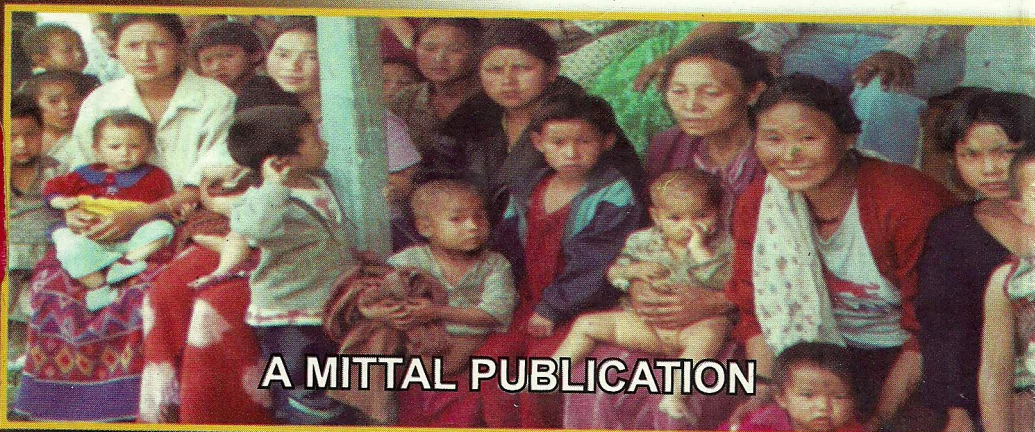




TRIBAL WOMEN OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

V M Rao



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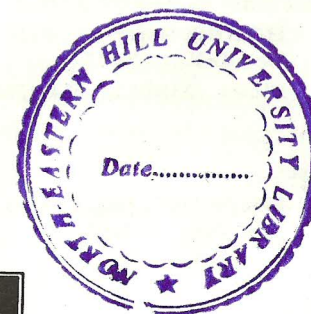
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TRIBAL WOMEN OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

THE AUTHOR

V.M. Rao (b. 1954) holds a doctorate in Dairy Economics and is currently working as Professor and HOD, Department of Research & Publications at Vaikunth Mehta National Institute of Cooperative Management, Pune. He has earlier worked with National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad (1984-88), and Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (1988-92). On a British Council's fellowship, Prof. Rao visited Belgium, France, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, and United Kingdom. He has authored/co-authored five books: (a) *Dairy Farming: Socio-Economic Analysis of Milk Production* (1991), (b) *Castor Economy: A Profile and Analysis of India and International Market* (1991), (c) *International Castor Oil Market: An Econometric Analysis* (1994), (d) *Developing Agro Enterprises among Farm Women: A Case of Amul* (2000), and (e) *Empowering Farm Women through Dairy Cooperatives: A Study in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka*. Besides these books, he has published over 60 research papers. His areas of interest are: (a) animal husbandry economics, (b) agri-business management, and (c) gender related issues. He has completed 16 research studies sponsored by Government of India, ICSSR, and other state governments in the above areas during 1980-02. At present Prof. Rao is engaged in: (a) Evaluation of Women: Dairy Project in Rajasthan, and (b) Integrating Tribal Women into Cooperatives: An Experience of Girijan Cooperative Corporation Limited (Andhra Pradesh).

V. M. Rao

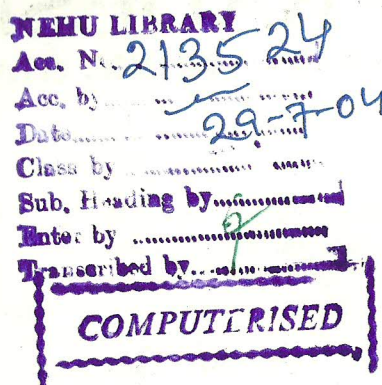


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During 1998-00, I undertook a study on 'Integrated Cooperative Development Project for Arunachal Pradesh' and 75 days were spent in field visits. I visited all 13 districts and 75 villages in that study which gave me a feel of the state, its generous, hospitable, and colourful people. I collected large volume of secondary data from Departments of agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and veterinary, fisheries, education, health, rural development, social welfare, women and child development, NABARD, etc. I am thankful to all officers who provided access to the data. Officials of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics too provided data used in the study and I thank them all. I met Dr. D. K. Bora, Director, Directorate of Research during my field visit to Lohit district. Dr. Bora has shown interest in the study and provided reports/articles/old volumes of Reasurn for my office use. I am extremely thankful to Dr. Bora for his support.

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Conducting field visits in 5 districts drawn from different regions of Arunachal Pradesh is challenging and risky. It is so because there are few lateral roads connecting districts and towns. As a result, one has to journey up north from plains of Assam, come down south, and climb up once again in order to enter other district. Public transport including Pawanhans service is irregular on these routes and

undependable. Heavy rainfall, landslides, inclement weather, and snowfall are not uncommon. I brought 100 kgs of manuscripts, typed, and printed material, 100 photographs, and impressions to last a life time.

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V.M. RAO

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>List of Chart, Maps and Appendices</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1. Introduction	1
Preamble	
Status of Tribal Women	
Objectives	
Methodology	
Organisation of the Report	
2. An Overview of Arunachal Pradesh	15
Introduction	
History and Evolution	
McMahon Line	
Flora and Fauna	
People and Culture	
Arts and Crafts	
Major Fairs and Festivals	
Great Earthquake of 1950	
Indo-China War of 1962	
Developmental Efforts	
Development During 1951-00	
Net domestic Product	
Distribution Various Tribes	
Land use Pattern	
Agriculture	
Horticulture	
Forestry	
Livestock	
Fisheries	
Industries	
Health	

Education		
Banking and Credit		
Tourism		
Cooperatives		
Summary		
3. Developmental Programmes for Women	63	
Introduction		
ICDS		
Growth		
Impact		
New Initiatives		
ICDS in Arunachal Pradesh		
ICDS in the Study Area		
IRDP		
DWCRA		
Mahila Swayam Siddha (MSS)		
Balika Samridhi Yojna (BSY)		
Udisha		
Kisor Shakti Yojana		
National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)		
Summary		
4. Profiles of Selected Districts	79	
Introduction		
Lohit District		
Dibang Valley District		
Upper Siang District		
Lower Subansiri District		
West Kameng District		
Summary		
5. Martial and Economic Status of Women	101	
Introduction		
Age of Respondents		
Level of Education		
Marriage		
Forms of Marriage		
Size of the Family		
Jhum Cultivation		
Household Income		
Usage of Iodized Salt		
Sanitation		
Summary		
6. Workload and Participation in Decision-Making	121	
Introduction		
Women's Work		
Distribution of Workload		
Exchange Labour		
Factors Affecting Levels of Workload		
Decision Making		
Summary		
7. Awareness about Local Organisations	133	
Introduction		
Respondents' Visit to Selected Places		
Awareness About Cooperatives		
Awareness About Health Care Centre		
Awareness About Anganwadi Centre		
Awareness About Government Loans		
Summary		
8. Self-Help Groups in Study Area	151	
Background		
Self-help Groups		
SHGs in Arunachal Pradesh		
AKEYAA SHG		
Respondents Preference Towards SHGs		
Summary		
9. Case Studies	163	
Introduction		
Mrs. Tsering		
Akhalu Kri		
Ngasi Umpo		
Semeru Mihu		
Kiptak Modi		
Oming Apang		
Biku Yapap		
Nara Yashi		
Tsering		
Lang Droma		
Summary		

10. Summary and Recommendations	185
Introduction	
Objectives	
Methodology	
An overview of Arunachal Pradesh	
Developmental Programmes for Women	
Profiles of Selected Districts	
Marital and Economic Status of Women	
Workload and Participation in Decision Making	
Awareness About Local Organisations	
Self-Help Groups in Study Area	
Case Studies	
Recommendations	
For Women to Act	
For Men to Act	
For NGOs to Act	
For State to Act	
For Centre to Act	
Summing up	
Appendices	199
References	213
Index	219

LIST OF TABLES

2.1 Major Fairs and Festivals of Arunachalis	26
2.2 Profile of North-eastern States of India	34
2.3 Occupational Distribution of Workers (%) in North-eastern India	35
2.4 Net State Domestic Product at Factor Cost by Economic Activity, 1981-00 (Current Prices)	35
2.5 Growth in Population, 1961-01	36
2.6 Tribe-wise Distribution of Population, 1961-91	37
2.7 District-wise Population, 1981-01	38
2.8 Concentration of Various Tribes and Potential Across Districts	39
2.9 Changes in Sex Ratio and Literacy, 1961-01	40
2.10 District-wise Distribution of Few Developmental Indicators	40
2.11 District-wise Classification of Land-use, 1997-98	41
2.12 District-wise Annual Rainfall, 1992-99	41
2.13 Changes in Area (hectares) Under Major Crops, 1978-00	43
2.14 Changes in Production (tonnes) of Major Crops, 1978-00	43
2.15 Changes in Area (hectares) Under Horticultural Crops, 1994-00	44
2.16 Changes in Production (tonnes) of Horticultural Crops, 1994-00	45
2.17 Distribution of Forest Area (sq. km.), 2000	46
2.18 Trends in Livestock Population (lakhs), 1979-98	48
2.19 Particulars of Veterinary Institutions, 2000	49
2.20 Growth in Production of Husbandry Products, 1989-98	50
2.21 Progress in Fish Production, 1991-01	52
2.22 Performance of Health Facilities, 1972-01	53

2.23 Development of Educational Institutions, 1956-01	54
2.24 Enrollment of Boys and Girls in Various Stages of Schooling, 2001	54
2.25 Performance of Credit Delivery System Across Districts, 1997-98	55
3.1 Status of Coverage of ICDSs in Arunachal Pradesh, 2001	67
3.2 District-wise SNP Beneficiaries in ICDS Projects, 2000-01	68
3.3 Grievances Reported by ICDS Staff	71
3.4 Source-wise Distribution of Loans under IRDP, 1991-01	73
3.5 Progress of DWCRA in Arunachal Pradesh, 1991-99	74
3.6 Selected Blocks for KSY in Arunachal Pradesh	76
4.1 Progress of IRDP in Lohit, 1994-01	81
4.2 Progress of DWCRA Activities in Lohit, 1994-99	82
4.3 Progress of IRDP in Dibang Valley, 1994-01	84
4.4 Progress of DWCRA Activities in Dibang Valley, 1994-99	85
4.5 Progress of IRDP in Upper Siang, 1994-01	88
4.6 Progress of DWCRA Activities in Upper Siang, 1994-99	88
4.7 Progress of IRDP in Lower Subansiri, 1994-01	91
4.8 Progress of DWCRA Activities in Lower Subansiri, 1994-99	92
4.9 Progress of IRDP in West Kameng, 1993-01	95
4.10 Progress of DWCRA Activities in West Kameng, 1993-99	95
4.11 Summary of Salient Features of Selected Districts	96
4.12 Proportion (%) of Rural Population Served by Different Amenities in Selected Districts	98
5.1 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' by age	101
5.2 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' by Level of Education	102
5.3 Variations in Dialects Across Selected Tribes	103
5.4 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' by Age at Marriage	104
5.5 Frequency Distribution Respondents by Forms of Marriage	106

5.6 Frequency Distribution of Respondents Opinion on Preferred Qualities of a Husband	107
5.7 Average Living and Expired Children and Family Planning Measures Adopted in the Study Area	108
5.8 Frequency Distribution of Jhum Lands Owned by Respondents	110
5.9 Some Facts About Jhum Cultivation Among Respondents	111
5.10 Frequency Distribution of Possession of Yaks/ Mithuns/Cows Among Respondents	112
5.11 Frequency Distribution of Annual Family Income of the Respondents	113
5.12 Responses on Type of Salt Purchased	114
5.13 Frequency of Purchase of Salt by Respondents	115
5.14 Quantity of Salt Purchased (kgs/month) by Respondents	115
5.15 Respondents Opinion Regarding Usage of Iodized Salt	116
5.16 Point of Purchase of Iodized salt Among Respondents	116
5.17 Reasons for not Using Iodized Salt	117
5.18 Source of Water Among Respondents	117
5.19 Pairs of Dresses Owned by Respondents	118
6.1 Frequency Distribution of Work-load (hours/day) of Respondents	122
6.2 Activity-wise Distribution of Work-load (hours/day) Among Respondents	123
6.3 Some Facts on Exchange Labour Among Respondents	125
6.4 District-wise Employment Functions	127
6.5 Decision Makers in Household Activities Among Selected Districts	129
7.1 Respondents' Visits to Selected Places	133
7.2 Some Facts About CGS, LAMP, and other Cooperatives by Respondents	135
7.3 Suggestions to Improve Working of Cooperative	136
7.4 Some Facts about Health care Among Respondents	137
7.5 Frequency of Visit/Year of Shamans/igu/lama by Respondents	138

7.6 Respondents Preference Towards Doctor and igu/lama	139
7.7 Respondents Awareness about Presence of Anganwadi Centre in the Village	139
7.8 Awareness of Respondents about Activities of Anganwadi Centre	140
7.9 Opinion Regarding Working of Anganwadi Centre	141
7.10 Respondents Opinion about Sincerity of Anganwadi Worker/Helper	141
7.11 Opinion Regarding Benefits Availed from Anganwadi Centre	142
7.12 Respondents Opinion about Requirements of Anganwadi Centre	143
7.13 Frequency of Visits by Gramsevika to Anganwadi Centre	144
7.14 Factors Against Availing a Loan	145
7.15 Respondents' Opinion about Performance of Assets	145
7.16 Repayment of Loan by Respondents	146
7.17 Respondents' Opinion about Preference to Avail a New Loan	146
7.18 Some Facts on Individual Loan Requirement	147
8.1 Progress in SHGs Credit Linkage, 1993-01	153
8.2 Status of SHGs Promoted by Gyanodaya in Arunachal Pradesh	153
8.3 Respondents Awareness about Self-help Groups	158
8.4 Respondents Willingness to Form a Self-help Group	158
8.5 Respondents Confidence about Organising Self-help Group	159
8.6 Opinion on Activities to be Organised through Self-help Groups	159
8.7 Respondents Opinion to Undergo Training Managing of Self-help Groups	160
8.8 Respondents Opinion Regarding Leisure Months for Training on Self-help Groups	161
9.1 Activity-wise Average Working Hours/day by Kri	166
9.2 Average Annual Income of Oming Apang	173

LIST OF CHART, MAPS AND APPENDICES

CHART

3.1 Organisational Chart of Deputy Director (ICDS)	69
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LIST OF MAPS

1.1 Location of Arunachal Pradesh in India	6
1.2 Location of Various Districts of Arunachal Pradesh	7
1.3 Location of Selected Villages in Lohit District	8
1.4 Location of Selected Villages in Dibang Valley District	9
1.5 Location of Selected Villages in Upper Siang District	10
1.6 Location of Selected Villages in Lower Subansiri District	11
1.7 Location of Selected Villages in West Kameng District	12
2.1 North-East Frontier Tract, 1919	18
2.2 North-East Frontier Tract, 1947	19

LIST OF APPENDICES

1.1 District-wise List of Selected Villages	201
1.2 Officials Contacted	203
2.1 Chronology of Changes in Nomenclature of Various Regions of Arunachal Pradesh	208
2.2 List of Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh	210

1

INTRODUCTION

Preamble

Scheduled tribes constitute the backward segment of the Indian society. The tribal population in India is generally designated as *adiwasis/adibasis* implying original inhabitants. They constitute 8.08% of the total Indian population (Office of the Registrar of General and Census Commissioner, 1994). They are a virile people who went astray sometimes. Once late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said, "in the tribal people, I have found many qualities which I miss in the people of plains, cities, and other parts of India". Pandit Nehru suggested five broad principles for the welfare of tribals : (a) plans in consonance with tribals own genius, (b) safeguarding tribals lands and forests, (c) imparting training to shoulder responsibilities, (d) close coordination between developmental officers and tribals, and (e) evaluation of tribal welfare activities with reference to qualities and character of the human beings involved. Compared to other categories, incidence of poverty is high (53%) in tribal population and literacy is the lowest (16.35%). Realising these inequalities, the constitution has provided certain privileges to tribals under Article 275. It was felt that the concern for tribal development should be oriented towards bridging the gap between tribals and non-tribals so that they become equal partners in development programmes.

The concept of Tribal Sub-plan was introduced during Fifth Five Year Plan (1976) to facilitate monitoring of development programmes for Scheduled Tribes. This was followed by the Integrated Tribal Development Projects

(ITDP) to control, direct, and manage the development activities of various tribals (Verghese, 1983). At the end of Seventh Five Year Plan, the Tribal sub-plan strategy was implemented through 191 ITDPs, 269 pockets of tribal concentration, and 74 primitive tribal group projects (Planning Commission, 1993). These programmes were continued during Eighth and Ninth Five Year Plans. Further, State Tribal Development Cooperative Federations were established to undertake collection and marketing of minor forest produce in such a way as to ensure reasonable returns to tribals. These state level cooperatives are federated to form Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation Limited (TRIFED) at the national level.

Status of Tribal Women

In the tribal socio-economic set up, it is the women¹ who occupy dominant role rather than the men, consequently their social status is much higher when compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country. However, contribution of tribal women to the family starts from childhood and continues unabated till their death. While the ratio of male and female workers to the total population of the country is 5:1, it is 3:1 for tribal population. Among the non-tribal women, 12% are workers and it is 21% among tribal women (Mukhopadhyay, 1992). Among Mishmis, Nishis, Adis, Monpas, Apatanis, etc. of Arunachal Pradesh, women play a major role in agriculture, collection of fuel wood, collection of roots, vegetables, and tubers which supplement family diet and look after livestock. Thus, a woman's initiative is foremost in tribal family affairs.

The primacy of the female principle is reflected in the general belief among various tribes that Mother is the origin of everything. The myths and beliefs of Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, Noctoes, Singphos, Mishmis, Tangsas, Adis, Sherdukpens, Monpas, Nishis, and many other tribes of Arunachal are based on female divinities. The feminine principle is so overbearing that sun is considered a female and the moon a male; fire is female and ashes male.

Women have freedom to choose their spouse as among Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. The family of the bride is

compensated by bridegroom's family as the former suffers a loss of their daughter due to her marriage. This is dowry-in-reverse practice and a testimony of the importance of women. Further, women of this region are independent to a great extent. Their talent finds fulfillment in running the household chores, tending infants tied to their backs while working in the Jhum fields/forests or shopping or even fetching water from a far off source. Women play a major role in Jhum cultivation, providing nearly 70-75% of labour. They spend considerable time in forests for their livelihood and are called guardians of bio-diversity. Their contribution is much more than the menfolk in running various errands and attending to multifarious responsibilities like sowing seeds, watering fields, fencing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and preservation of grains/meat/forest produce.

These women are excellent weavers and repositories of cultural and folk traditions. The Bihu dances of Assam, the Bamboo dance of Mizoram, Ponung dance of Arunachal Pradesh, and Hozaigiri dance of Reangs of Tripura have been retained and practised in popularity without contamination from pop and modern variations. The women of the region are hard working and scorn idleness (Bawa, 2001). A popular ballad of Arunachal Pradesh describing the first woman you know-your mother-is given below:

Hi-yun yun-sin la
Ane gu-min-si
Gu-min hi-re-go
Ir-men-la-ju-ka

Built around the motif of cotton picking, this ballad sings of a woman's life; her joys, her sorrows, the inevitability in her life and the hope (Araham, 2000).

Although there are no signs of matriarchy in Arunachal, women hold a high and honourable position. They work on equal terms with men in jhums and make their influence felt in tribal councils (only few tribes have this practice). Women can become shamans and their intimate relations with the unseen world gives them great authority. Adi women, with daos in their hands and wearing sacred ornaments, often lead the ceremonial dances. There was an Aka Rani, wealthy and

powerful, and the wives of great Wancho and Nocte nobles are very fine ladies, possessed of a natural grace and dignity; they have many privileges and social duties (Elwin, 1959).

Realising the importance of women and their problems, Government of Arunachal Pradesh passed a bill for constitution of state commission for women (2002). The bill aims at providing for the constitution of a women's commission in the state to improve the status of women and to enquire into unfair practices affecting women and matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. It is hoped that such an act would go a long way to protect the fundamental rights of women enshrined in the constitution. The commission has been vested with powers of civil court and its proceedings would be deemed to be judicial. It would submit annual reports to government covering rights and other issues of women. Recommendations of the commission would be placed in the assembly to cause necessary action within 60 days. The government is also required to consult the commission on matters affecting the women of the state. It would work as a watch dog to protect and promote the privileges of women (Kumar, 2002).

Despite their massive contribution, there is no comprehensive study which looked into the socio-economic conditions of these women. A mention about studies conducted by Dutta (1975), Mishra (1991), and Pandey, *et al.* (1997) are in order here. These studies were aimed at socio-economic status of women of Arunachal. Mishra's study was exclusively about the Mishing women of Upper Subansiri and East Kameng. Pandey, *et al.* (1997) provides a description of almost all tribes of Arunachal. Above studies are not empirical and hardly any quantitative data are available. It would be difficult to make meaningful comparisons in the absence of quantitative data. Such an analytical study not only helps in understanding living conditions of tribal women but also provide reasons for success and/or failure of the various developmental programmes being implemented by Government of India/Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Such a study also would provide answers for intervention mechanisms required to uplift tribal women.

Objectives

The overall objective of the study is to capture the socio-economic conditions of tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh. Specific objectives of the study are:

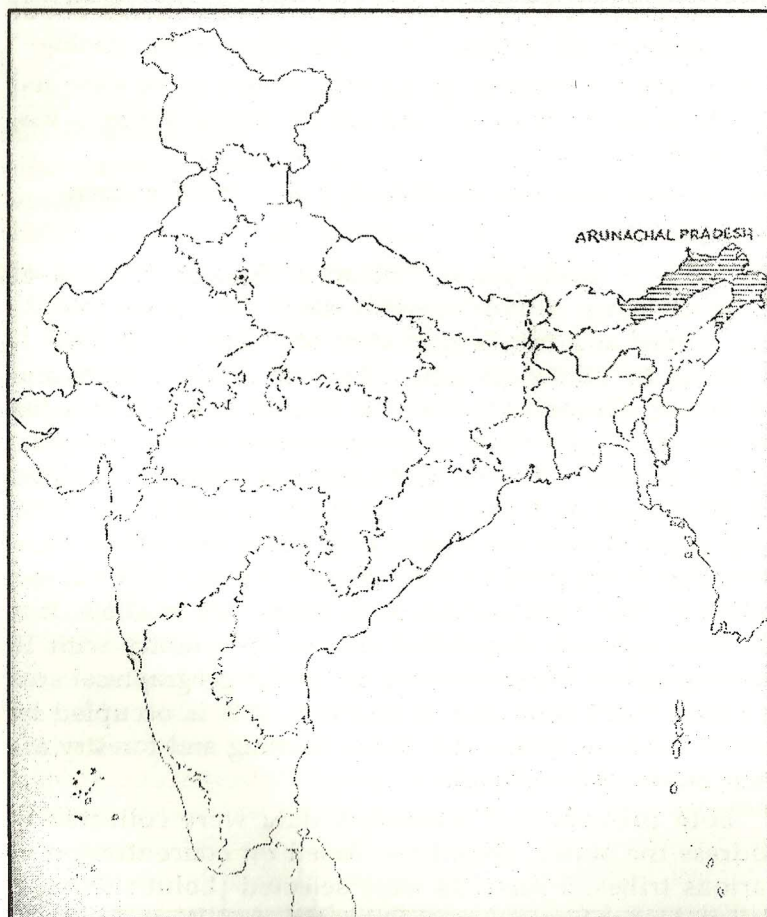
1. to review various governmental programmes for development of tribal women in the state,
2. to study martial, and economic status of selected women,
3. to analyse time allocation, and participation in decision-making process of tribal women,
4. to understand the awareness of respondents about cooperatives, health, ICDS, and government loaning,
5. to observe working of self-help groups in the state and to suggest a financial package for strengthening SHGs, and
6. to document case studies on typical tribal women.

Methodology

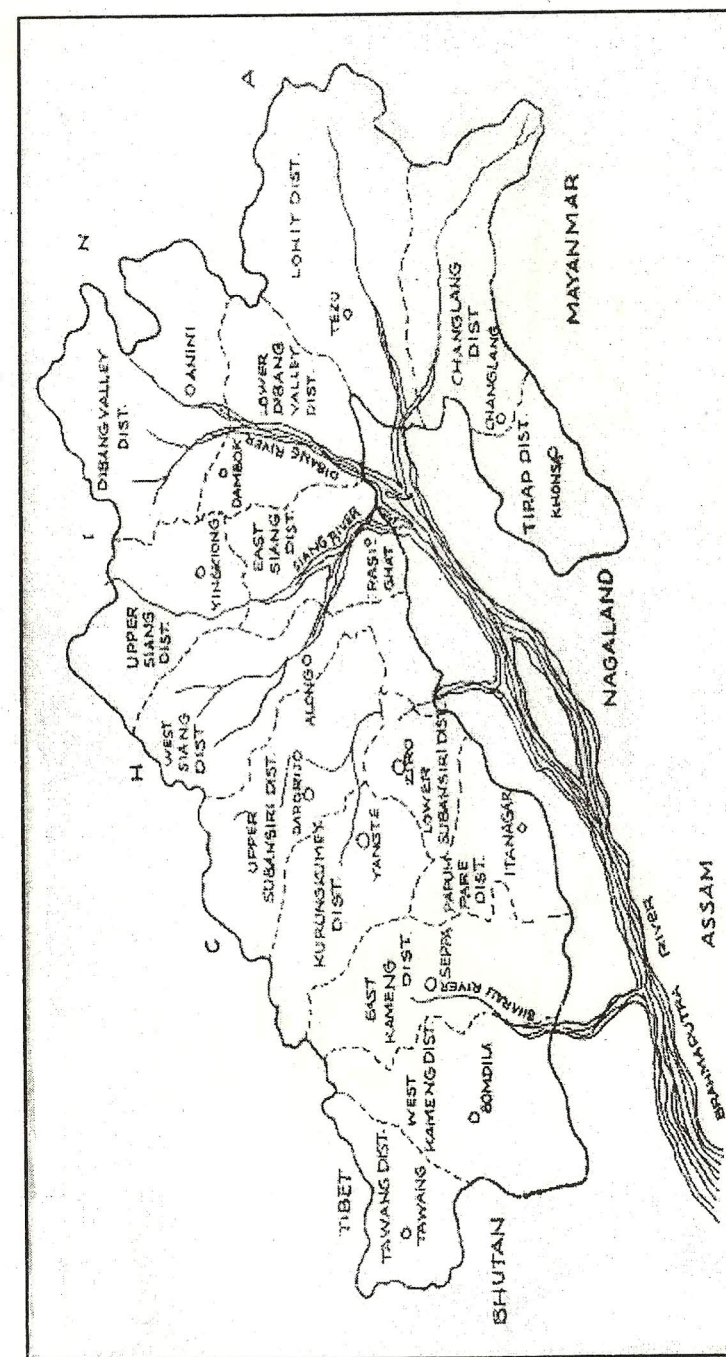
The study is conducted in Arunachal Pradesh. It is one of the seven sisters of north-eastern states. The region (NEFA) was formed as a full-fledged state on February 20, 1987. It is skirted by Bhutan in west, Tibet and China in north and north-east, Myanmar to east and Assam in south. It is the largest state, area-wise, in north-eastern region. Monpas, Akas, Apatanis, Adis, Miris, Wangchoos, Mishims, Nocktes, etc. of mongolian descent live here (Dutta, and Dutta 1990). Total population of the state is 10.11 lakhs, and 64% of them are tribals. In all, there are 3257 villages of which 3176 villages have less than 1000 population. Literacy rate is 41.6%. It is the most sparsely populated area of the country with 10 persons/sq.km. However, only 4% of the geographical area is under cultivation and as much as 63% is occupied by forests. Farming (slash and burn), hunting and forestry are their means of livelihood.

Both primary and secondary data were collected to address the stated objectives. Based on concentration of various tribes, 5 districts were selected (Lohit², Dibang Valley, Upper Siang, Lower Subansiri, and West Kameng), and 8 Anganwadi centres drawn from two Integrated Child

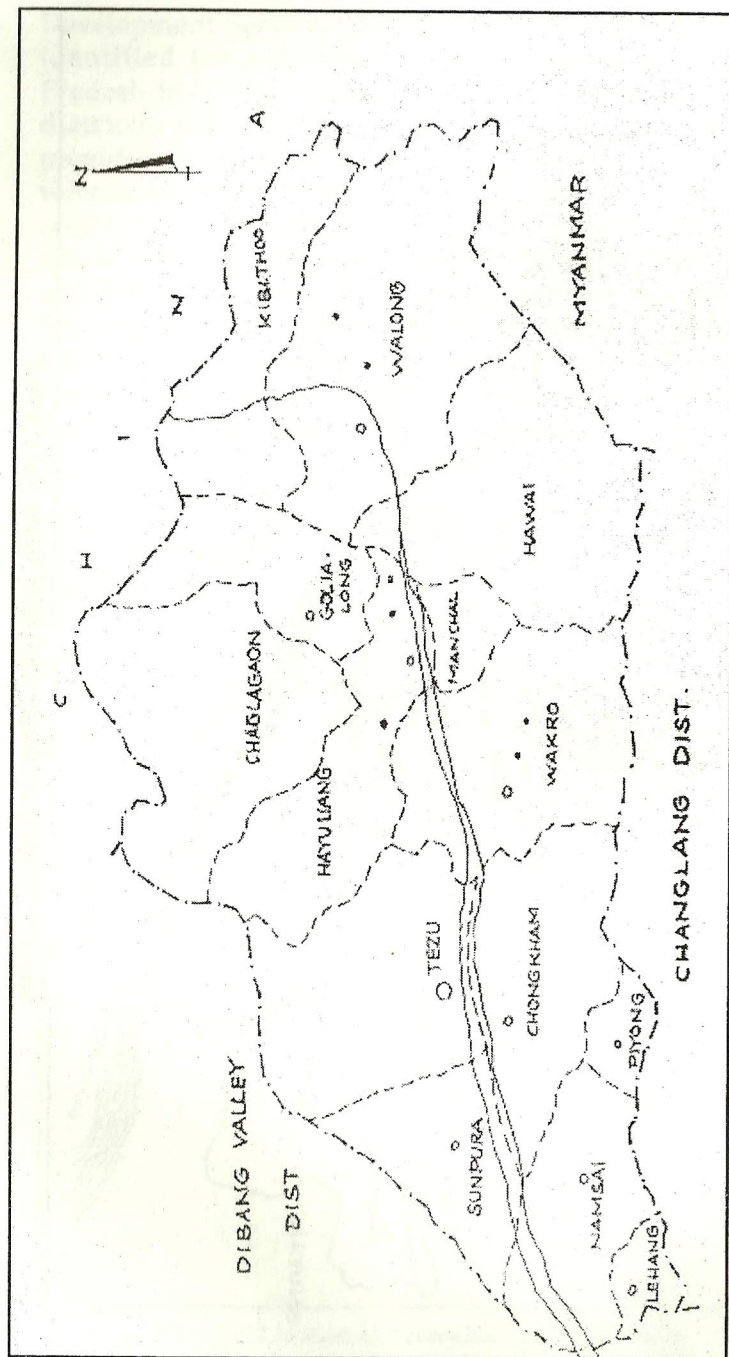
Development Services (ICDS) area from each district were identified for a detailed study. Location of Arunachal Pradesh in India, various districts of Arunachal, selected districts, and corresponding villages for the study are provided in Maps 1.1 to 1.7. A moderate sample of 5 tribal women were interviewed from each selected Anganwadi centre. Thus, the sample includes 200 women respondents spread over 40 Anganwadi centres, 10 ICDS project areas, and 5 districts. Presence of Anganwadi centre, number of households in the village, spread of distance from district headquarter, and concentration of a major tribe are the



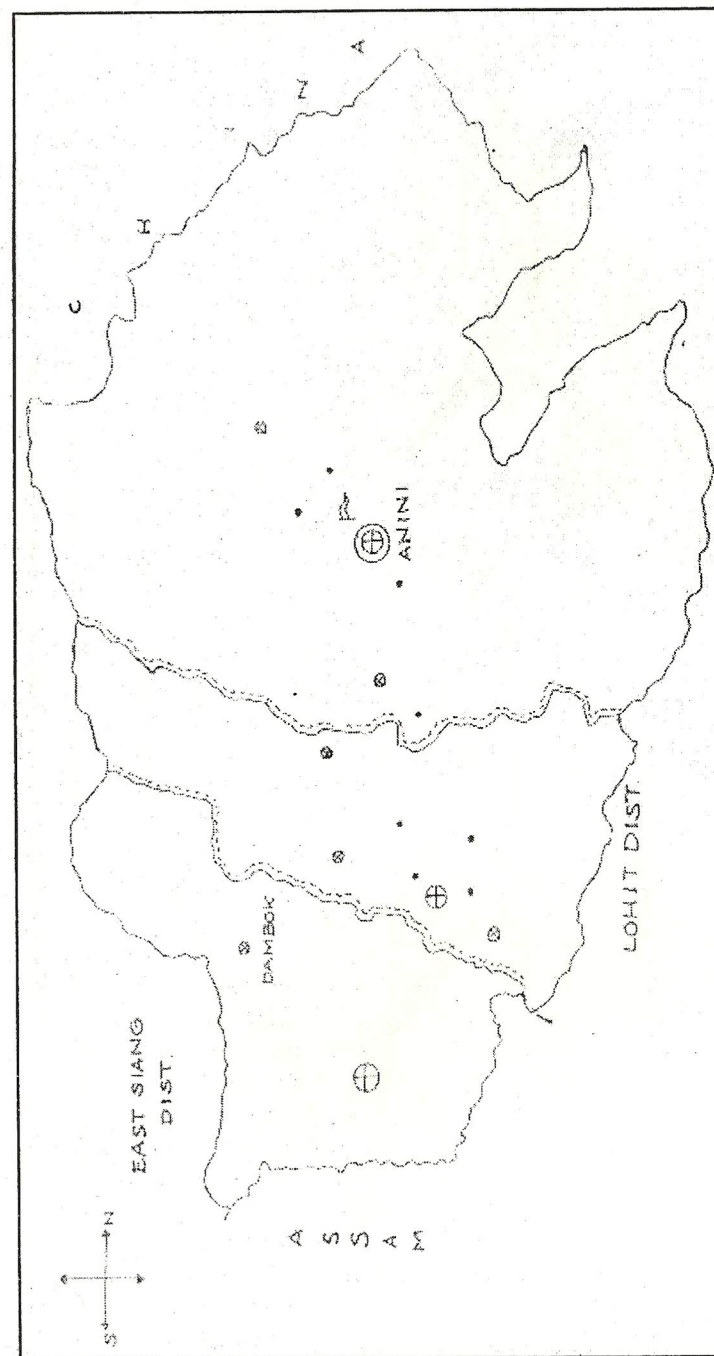
Map 1.1: Location of Arunachal Pradesh in India



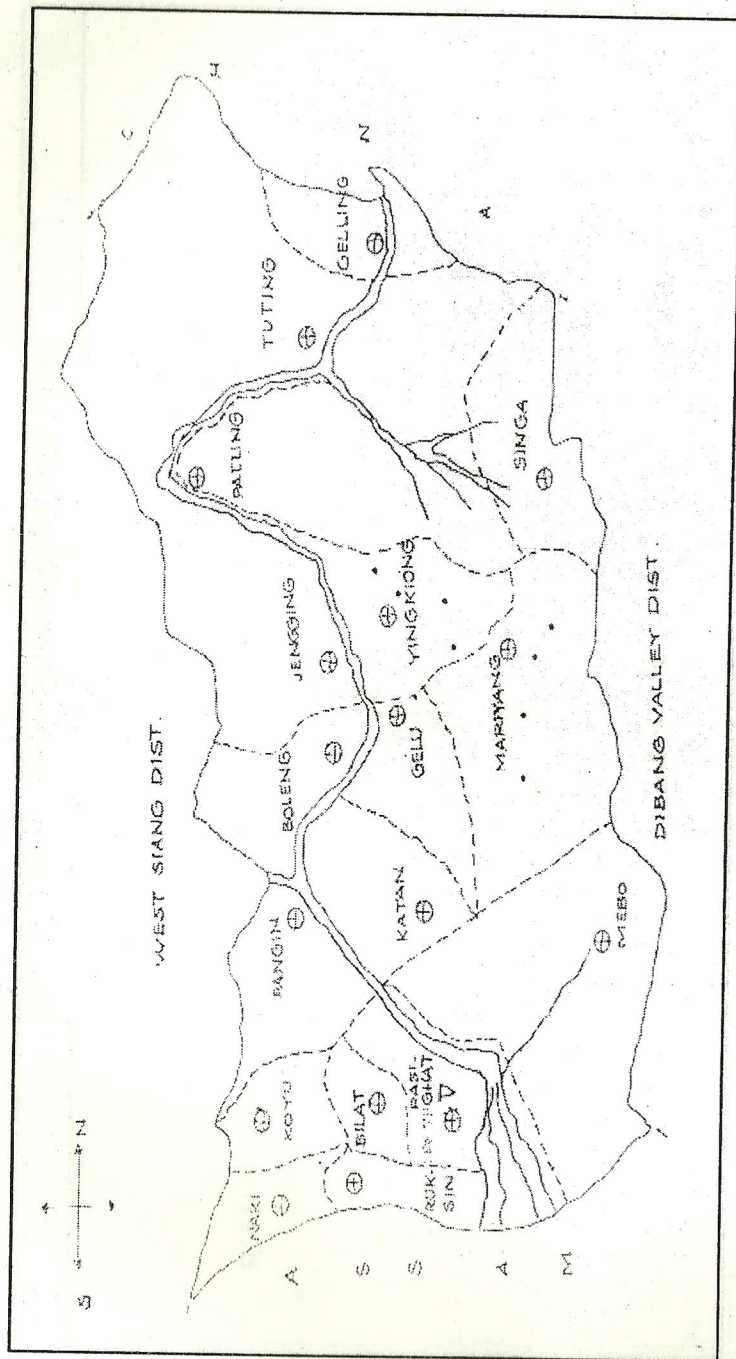
Map 1.2: Location of various districts of Arunachal Pradesh



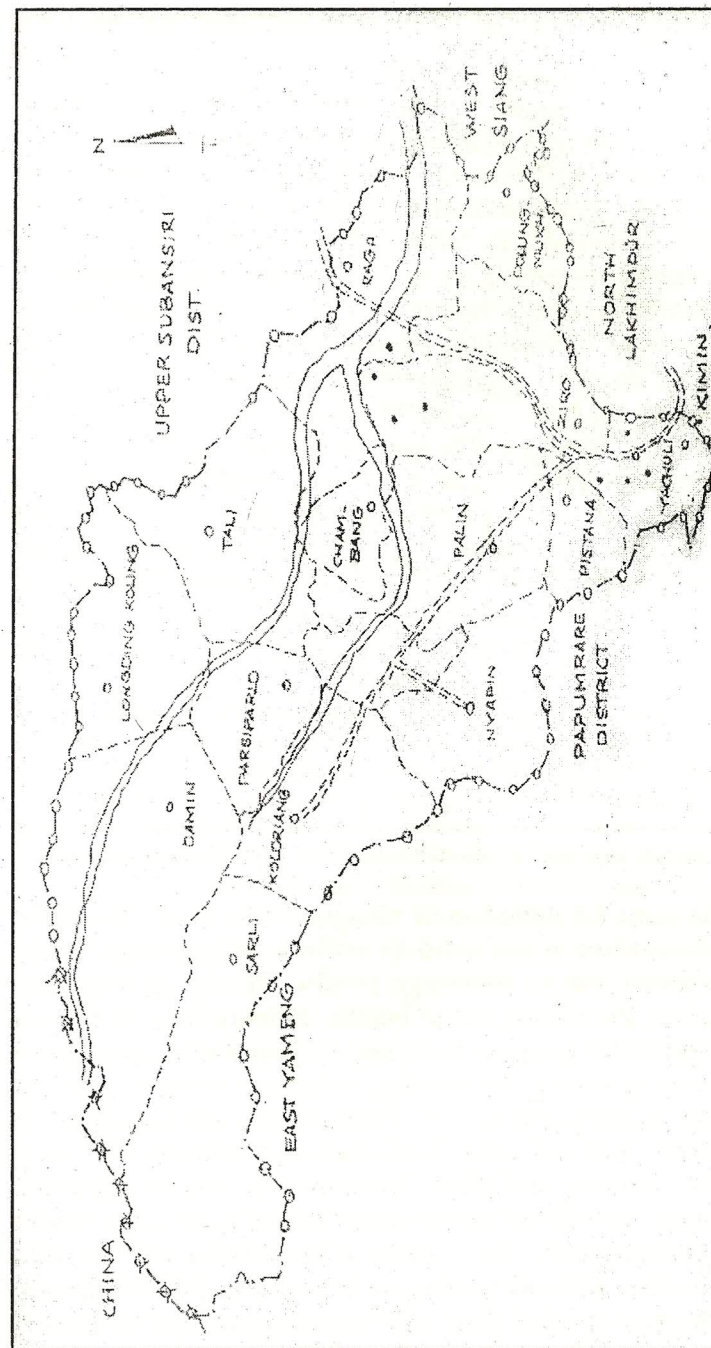
Map 1.3: Location of selected villages in Lohit district



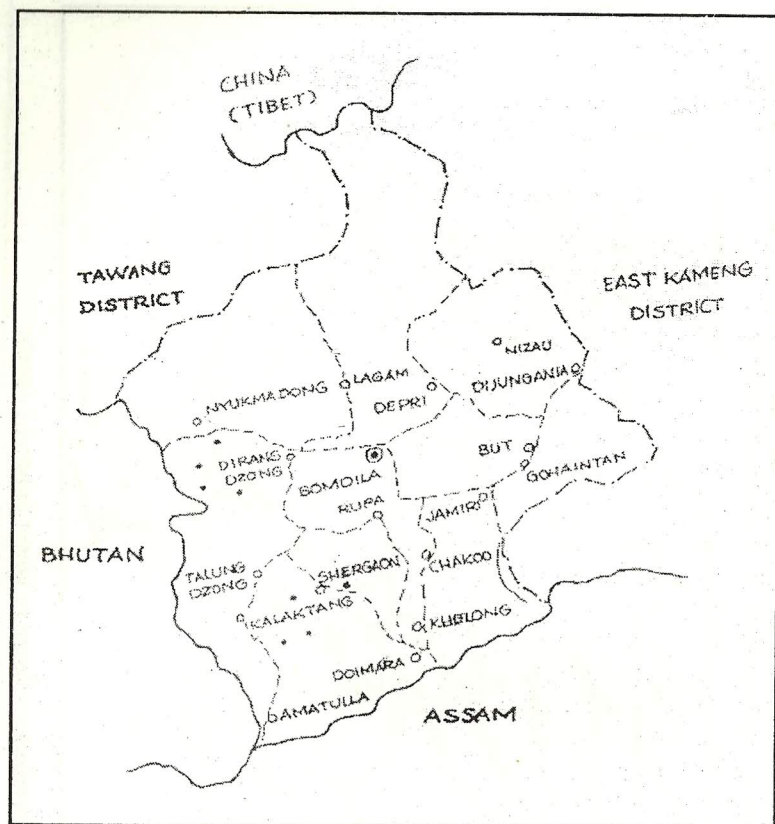
Map 1.4: Location of selected villages in Dibang Valley district



Map 1.5: Location of selected villages in Upper Siang district



Map 1.6: Location of selected villages in Lower Subansiri district



Map 1.7: Location of selected villages in West Kameng district

criteria used for inclusion of villages in the study. Pre-tested questionnaires were used to collect data on age, tribe, educational status, marriage profile, family income, time allocation, awareness about health, cooperatives, ICDS, and developmental programmes, role in household, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, collection of forest produce, decision making process, etc. Primary data are supported by secondary data collected from state departments like social welfare, women and child development, family planning, education, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, health, rural development, etc. Extensive discussions are also held with senior officers incharge of various developmental programmes to elicit their opinions/suggestions to improve status of women in the society. Data are collected during

October 2001-May 2002 and in all 80 days are spent in the field.

Organisation of the Report

The report is presented in ten chapters. Chapter 1 is devoted to introduction to tribal world, status of tribal women, need for the study, objectives, and methodology. A profile of Arunachal Pradesh is presented in Chapter 2. Various developmental programmes aimed at women of Arunachal are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides profiles of selected districts and assistance provided to women under IRDP and DWCRA. Chapter 5 deals with martial, and economic status of women. Workloads, and participation in decision-making process among tribal women is covered in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 is devoted to study awareness of respondents about cooperatives, health, ICDS, and government loaning. Working of women self-help groups is studied in Chapter 8, and individual case studies of selected women are presented in Chapter 9. Summary and recommendations comprised Chapter 10.

NOTES

1. According to Biblical description of creation of women, the word female was made from its root word 'male'. According to another group of scholars origin of word female is from the latin word 'femina' for woman. From that beginning came femella, which passed into French as femelle and then into English female.
2. Initially, Tirap district was formed part of the study. However, due to insurgency and the resultant disturbances, it was replaced by Lohit district.

The present Arunachal Pradesh is a conglomeration of 25 tribes and over 100 sub-tribes. For a variety of historical and cultural reasons, they were kept out of the mainstream for centuries together resulting in a primitive economy of the region. Topography and climate too contributed their share to keep them aloof. Though the society is patriarchal, women are the major bread winners. Except in policy making, they have considerable freedom in their day-to-day life.

However, very little is written about these simple, hard working, and beautiful women.

The book is an in-depth study covering various socio-economic dimensions of women in Arunachal Pradesh.

The author has performed a challenging task of collecting data from far-flung areas spread over five districts with a minimum of logistics. The study has covered five major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, and the author has conceptualised, and has indeed displayed a deep sense of commitment to a sensitive subject.

Coverage of issues has been very thorough. A number of workable suggestions are proposed to bring these women into the mainstream, and bring about their emancipation.

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V.M. RAO (b. 1954) holds a doctorate in Dairy Economics and is currently working as Professor and Head, Department of Research & Publications at Vaikunth Mehta National Institute of Cooperative Management, Pune. He has earlier worked with National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad (1984-88) and Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (1988-92). On a British Council's fellowship, Prof. Rao visited Belgium, France, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, and United Kingdom. He has authored/co-authored five books: (a) *Dairy Farming: Socio-Economic Analysis of Milk Production* (1991), (b) *Castor Economy: A Profile and Analysis of India and International Market* (1991), (c) *International Castor Oil Market: An Econometric Analysis* (1994), (d) *Developing Agro Enterprises among Farm Women: A Case of Amul* (2000), and (e) *Empowering Farm Women through Dairy Cooperatives: A Study in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka*. Besides these books, he has published over 60 research papers. His areas of interest are: (a) animal husbandry economics, (b) agri-business management, and (c) gender-related issues. He has completed 16 research studies sponsored by Government of India, ICSSR, and other state governments in the above areas during 1980-2002. At present Prof. Rao is engaged in: (a) Evaluation of Women: Dairy Project of Rajasthan Cooperative Dairy Federation, and (b) Integrating Tribal Women into Cooperatives: An Experience of Girijan Cooperative Corporation Limited (Andhra Pradesh).

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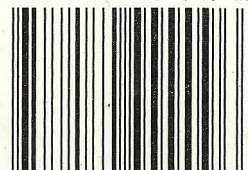


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