

TRANSHUMANTS

OF

ARUNACHAL HIMALAYAS

THE PANGCHENPAS AND
THE THINGBUPAS
OF TAWANG DISTRICT

BIBHASH DHAR



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Dedicated to
The People of Arunachal Pradesh

Foreword

Arunachal Pradesh, as the name implies, is the land of rising sun. It is the largest state in the north eastern region of India, accommodating a very rich assembly of tribal cultures and communities. The state is blessed with breath-taking variety of floral, faunal, physical and cultural diversities. There is also diversity in the traditional tribal economies and religious beliefs and practices. Arunachal Pradesh is endowed with the perennial snow covered peaks in the north and lush green picturesque valleys further down south and east. Heterogeneity is noticed in different cultural practices of the tribal communities. The people are basically agriculturalists. But at present many have taken up different modern economic pursuits. A number of tribal communities of the state have strong faith in their indigenous belief systems, while some have expressed faith in introduced religions. Amidst communities well adapted to the traditional agricultural economy, there are a few small tribal communities that survive on specialized pastoralism known as transhumance. These high altitude communities are known as Pangchenpas and Thingbupas. They live in isolated and serene high altitude habitats in Tawang District of the state. Transhumance is not practised by any other tribal community in Arunachal Pradesh. This specialized and one of the oldest economies of the world is slowly in the process of disappearance.

Dr. Bibhash Dhar, a trained anthropologist with long experience of work among the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, has aptly chosen to portray the unique

lifestyle of the brave and versatile Pangchenpas and Thingbupas of Tawang District. They live in an isolated part of the district. Their life is full of hardships. Dr Dhar's attempt here to study and understand these people is admirable. The economy based on moving with livestock and family from one serene and inaccessible mountain location to another with the change of season is indeed unique. The book is a first-hand account on the people. It is a systematic anthropological study of transhumant communities and the work is the first of its kind in this part of the country.

The pages that follow not merely sketches the life style of the people, but also compares various aspects of their economy and lifestyle with communities who practise transhumance in other parts of the world. The book is an outcome of sincere and painstaking research. It is worthy of serious attention of anthropologists and other scholars interested in the region and tribal life in general.

Dr. Annada C. Bhagabati

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Preface

Study on transhumance or nomadic pastoralism is still in its infancy at least in the Indian context. Transhumant societies existed in the past in the climatic regions that never supported agriculture. It is true for such societies even today. The snow-capped peaks in the state of Arunachal Pradesh are the extension of the Eastern Himalayas. This sierra, also termed as the Arunachal Himalayas, are the habitats of the four transhumant communities found near the Sino-Indian border in the Tawang district of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. They are the Pangchenpa, Thingbupa, Magopa and Luguthangpa. All these are the numerically small and least known communities in the anthropological world. They are still largely isolated from the national mainstream and are not covered by either the print or the electronic media due to the obscure location of their habitats that ranges between seven thousand to twelve thousand feet above the mean sea level. These pastoral nomads move upto an altitude of around sixteen thousand feet above the mean sea level for grazing their livestock during the short summer. Here an attempt has been made to study only two of the least known communities, namely, the Pangchenpa and Thingbupa while the other two could not be reached due to extreme remoteness and inaccessibility of their habitats. It is the first ever attempt made by a student of anthropology to study the people in spite of the constraints of remoteness, inaccessibility, language barrier and limitation of time. A researcher can get only a month's time to conduct any field investigation on these high altitude transhumant groups because with the onset of short summer

they move out for the mountain pastures and return only with the arrival of winter after a good grazing. They move out with the herds, flocks and their families giving their permanent villages a deserted look. The month of May is the only time for an anthropologist to interact with the people and conduct field investigations.

A unique feature observed with the studied communities is that they since the traditional days possess a wonderful socio-political organization that functions by remaining mobile with the people as they wander from one mountain meadow to another away from their permanent villages. Such a socio-political system is essential to help the people to lead an organized and regulated life as for most part of the year they remain outdoors. Importantly, such a system has not been reported or described by any scholar, known to have worked on the transhumant situations in the global context. The people are still found to continue with their age-old economy of nomadic pastoralism with their small herd size and are largely ignorant about the improved breeds of herds and flocks that would have given a better yield in their pastoral productions. No official agencies or NGOs have yet reached the people to contribute and assist them in marketing their products. However, the Bhutanese from Bhutan visit them to exchange their horse-loads of millet for butter. The people are ignorant about animal insurances. They accept it to be their fate whenever they lose animals that slip down the steep braes and die while on the move from one mountain pasture to another. The people are yet to receive any sort of veterinary help that they so urgently require for the treatment of their herds and flocks. In spite of all such constraints, the people show their enthusiasm to continue with their economy of transhumance whereas in other parts of the world the economy is facing a fast decline.

Filled with alphabetically arranged references, glossary of

tribal words, maps showing the locations of the study area and a few photographs of the people depicting their economy complete the work. It is presumed that the scenario of pastoralism, especially the nomadic type, in the global context with special reference to the two least known tribal communities of the state of Arunachal Pradesh would generate some interest among the students working on pastoralism and inspire them to take up such work in right earnest and update the same. The present study is not claimed to be an exhaustive one as the work has been carried out largely under the constraint of time. It is also a book for the general readers interested to know about the life and culture of the small and unreported tribal communities with habitats in the remote regions of India.

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