

WOMEN OF NORTH EAST IN PRESENT CONTEXT



DR. PRIYADARSHNI M . GANGTE

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This book focuses on the civil society, specially the women of North East which is the main beneficiary and major part of the democratic and development process that gets sidelined. The first step in resolving the problems of the North East is understanding the North East. However, we have been unable to create a general consciousness of women and their rights as requiring and special attention.

The most stubborn of barriers is the ignorance and lack of knowledge of the region and its people, specially the women which is largely responsible for misjudgment and wrong decisions. Hope this book will help in imparting knowledge that can lead to understanding for understanding generates goodwill and trust.

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About The Author



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Tribes And Women Of Arunachal Pradesh

Quite a number of tribal communities throng the region of Arunachal Pradesh. As many as twenty-five tribes ennoble the state with their own ethnic culture and tradition. Still today these tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are maintaining their own originality in various cultural fetes. The state government too is doing their utmost to preserve them so that these cultures of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh must not go in to oblivion. Arunachal Pradesh is the abode of 26 different tribal communities which flaunt rich tribal cultures.

The way that these tribes lead their lives were more or less the same and those they abided by the similar occupation; the societies are 'casteless'. For better administration, they form their institutes and also select leaders according to their age for distinct social functions.

The experienced leaders of the tribal groups are revered for their position in the community. All the tribes follow 'endogamy' and strictly observe the rule of 'clan exogamy'. With the societies of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, polygamy is highly endorsed and practiced by all. Festivals are an integral part of all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh thereby mirroring the cultural exuberances and artistry.

The artistic acumen of the tribes of The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are furthered by their musical and dance bonanza as well as the vistas of exquisite crafts that they are expert in.

The tribal people of this region are adept in making baskets, smithy work, weaving, pottery, wood carving, painting etc. among the tribal communities, the Monpa tribal groups are reckoned for their artistic ability in painted wooden vessels, beautiful rugs and carpet weaving.

The weavings are marked for their extensive use of bright colours and patterns. Beautiful articles are also made from bamboo and cane by the Hills Miris, Adis and Apatani tribes. Apart from these, the Wancho tribes make attractive figurines from wood and bamboo.

Artistic carvings on them give the articles a different look and luster. Various ornaments are made out of beads are the examples of their artistic bend of mind. Among the several tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, the Adi tribes have two chief groups, namely the Bogum and Bomis, and under each there are a number of sub-tribes including Minyongs, Karkos, Shimongs etc.

The Adi tribes by nature are democratic and organised village council called Kebang. Their traditional dance, Ponung is popular in the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. Adi villages are situated generally on the spurs of hills. Polygamy is socially accepted. Adi women are good weavers. Another important tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is the Aka tribes. The Hrusso or Aka tribes have a rich history linkage.

Their popular belief is that they were related with the Ahom Kings. They are mainly traders and also use black paints in their faces. Hinduism and Buddhism are the main religious practices of Aka tribes. Mainly cultivators, the Apatani tribes produce paddy and fish in large numbers. Round 'nose plugs' and facial tattoos are the identifying traits of ornamentation especially amongst aged Apatani women. However, the younger generation is quite hesitant in adopting this style. Unlike other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the economy of Apatani tribes is stable.

The Singpho tribe has ardent belief on evil spirits. They are mainly farmers and black smiths. Khamba and Membra tribes reside in the northern province of 'West Siang' ardently following Buddhism. Polyandry is prevalent among them. They do farming activities. The Tagin tribes of Arunachal Pradesh reside in the Upper Sunansiri district. Polygamy is prevalent amongst them. Their dress consists of only one piece of cloth.

In addition to these tribal communities, the Khamti tribes are believed to have migrated from the Shan states of Burma. They are the only tribe in Arunachal who have a script of their own, They are Buddhist (Hinayana cult) by religion, and bury the dead in a coffin.

They include Khamyang tribe. Agriculture is one of the main occupations of Bugun or Khowa tribes, just like any other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They are also cordial by nature. Moreover, the Mishmi tribes can be divided into three most important groups namely- Idus or Chulikatas, Digarus or Taroan and Mijus or Kaman. Their women are expert weavers.

Although agriculture is the main occupation of the people, some of them also carry on with the trade of various items like, wild medicinal plants etc. The Monpa tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are simple, gentle, having a robust cultural heritage. They dress in artistic clothes.

They follow Buddhism and each house has a tiny 'chapel' close to it. The list of tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh includes the name of Nishing tribes. The Nishing tribes are the biggest groups of people inhabiting the Lower Subansiri district. The men wear 'cane bands' just about the waist. They think that after death, his spirit goes to the 'village of the ancestors'. Amongst various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Sulung or Puroik are considered to be one of the ancient tribes in the area. Their apparel and dresses are simple, and they follow the 'spirit culture'. In comparison to the other tribal groups, the Sherdukpen tribes are less in number and are good traders.

Few people also take up agriculture as their occupation. Their religion is a fascinating mesh of Mahayana Buddhism and some tribal 'magico-religious' customs. The Wancho tribes inhabit the western part of Tirap district, bordering Nagaland. 'Head hunting' was usual practice with them in the primitive times. Their society is divided into four classes - the Wanghams (chiefs), the Wangpana, the Wanggae and Wanggaas. They have a strict sense of the law and a village council protects the law and order of the society.

The entire tribe is divided into about forty confederacies of villages. Tattooing is a social custom among them. They believe in two local gods, namely, Rang and Baurang. The women are good weavers and only the family members of the village headman carry out with it. They are proficient in wood carving also.

The Nocte tribes of Arunachal Pradesh profess Vaishnavism. They also ardently follow the Bareghar Satra of Nazira, Assam, Naga Narottam. Amongst various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Noctes are famous as salt producers. They are agriculturists, cultivating betel leaves on a commercial scale.

The Yobin, also called Lisus, are quite few in number mainly residing in the distant eastern most corner of the Tirap district. Arunachal Pradesh is a land of beautiful handicrafts comprising a wide variety. From the viewpoint of the art and culture the state may be very conveniently divided into three zones i.e.

1. the Buddhist tribe
2. the central part (from east Kameng in the west to Lohit in the east) and
3. the eastern part of the territory.

The people of the first zone make beautiful masks. They periodically stage pantomimes and masked dances. They also make exquisite painted wooden vessels and silver articles.

Carpet making is a speciality of the Monpas, the Buddhist community. Carpets with exotic designs of dragons, geometric and floral patterns are made here. Carpet weaving has today become a major occupation of the womenfolk and with an increase in demand, production of the carpets is now being undertaken on a large scale.

CANE AND BAMBOO WORK

Those of the second zone are expert workers in cane and bamboo. The cane and bamboo industry of the state has made a name for itself. As a matter of fact most of the domestic requirements are made of these materials hats, baskets, canes vessels, cane belts - woven and plain, bamboo mugs and carvings, a wide variety of ornaments and jewellery items are all crafted by workmen. The shawls and jackets, shoulder bags and coats all stand for the perfection that the people have attained in this art.

WOODEN CARVINGS

The people of the third zone are famous for their wooden carvings. The Monpa wood carver scoopes out beautiful cups, dishes and fruit bowls and magnificent ceremonial masks for dances and pantomimes.

Another tribe that is framed for this art is the Khamptis who carve out beautiful religion images, figures of dancers, toys and other objects. They weave beautiful bags and loin cloths too. Goat's hair, ivory, boar's tus, beads of agate and the stones as well as of brass and glass are specialities of the people of this zone.

WEAVING

Weaving is the occupation of the womenfolk throughout the territory. They have an excellent sense of colour. The basic colours that dominates the weaves are black, yellow dark blue, green and scarlet - all put together in the most fascinating combinations.

Originally natural dyes were used which today have given away to synthetic dyes. The designs are essentially geometric varying from a formal arrangement to lines and bands. Items that could make excellent buys are Sherdukpen shawls, Apatani jackets and scarve, Adi skirts, jackets and bags, Mishmi shawls, blouses and jackets; and Wancho bags.

ORNAMENTS

Crafting ornaments is another art widely practised by the Arunachalis. Besides multicoloured beads, feathers of birds and wings of the green beetles are also used as embellishments. The Akas make bamboo bangles and earrings which are occassionally decorated with pokerwork designs.

SOME OTHER CRAFTS

Paper making, smithy work, carpentry, pottery and ivory work are the other crafts practised by the Arunachalis. The Monpas make paper locally, from pulp of trees called Sukso or the other paper tress. This hand made paper is used for writing religious prayers on them. Hunting, fishing also form the subsidiary occupations.

With a view to help developing arts and crafts and to substantiate the livelihood of the people, local boys and girls are imparted training in specially set up crafts centres. The rich heritage of art and crafts of Arunachal Pradesh is sure to add colour to the cultural heritage of the country.

PERFORMING ARTS

The dances, performed by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, have been broadly divided into four groups. The first group is the ritual dances which may again be divided into five sub-groups. The first sub-groups includes those dances which form part of the various rituals performed to secure prosperity, good health and happiness of the dancer, his family, village or the whole community.

The second sub-group comprises of those dances performed in ceremonies related to agriculture and domestication of animals to secure a good harvest and increase of domestic animals respectively. The third sub-group is associated with the funeral ceremony when the soul is guided by a priest to its abode in the land of the dead and to prevent it from haunting its old residence. It is generally believed that if the soul returns to its old home the bereaved family suffers diseases and deaths.

The fourth sub-group consists of the fertility dances. These are magical in the sense that the imitation of the movements of coition is believed to promote fertility. War-dances make the fifth sub-group, which are on the decline with the stoppage of internecine feuds and raids. In the old days, when an expeditionary party was successful in killing an enemy or more, the victors used to perform a ceremony on return, so that the spirit of the slain could do no harm to the slayer.

Only among the Idu Mishmis, the victim's family also used to perform rites praying for success in taking vengeance. Dance formed a part of this ceremony. The war-dance used to be prevalent among almost all the non-Buddhist tribes. The second group is the festive-dance which forms the recreational part of a particular festival.

The third group is the recreational dances which do not form part of any particular festival or ritual. These are performed on occasions which inspire its participants to express their mirth through these dances. The fourth group is the pantomimes and dance-dramas which narrate a mythical story or illustrate a moral.

THE WANCHO DANCES

The Wancho tribes perform dances during appropriate occasions like festivals, ceremonies etc. Ozele festival of Wanchos is celebrated in February-March after the sowing of millet. It lasts for four days and was observed in Longkhau village.

The dance is performed from about 9 p.m. to 11 p.m. inside the chief's house. Among the male-folk, boys, youths and adults take part while among women, only girls and those young married women who have not joined the husband's family, take part in the dance.

THE IDU MISHMI RITUAL DANCE

The Idu Mishmis have a ritual-dance and a fertility-dance. The ritual-dance is performed by the priest or priestess in the ceremonies of Ai-ah, Ai-him, Mesalah and Rren. The fertility-dance is performed on the last day of the Rren ceremony. There is no definite myth about the origin of this dance.

According to local tradition, the first priest who officiated in a funeral ceremony was Chineuhu and his brother, Ahihiuh, was the first priest who officiated in the other three ceremonies in which this dance forms a part. This dance is associated with the priestly office. Besides the priest, there are three or four other dancers who are selected from amongst the spectators.

In addition it is the usual dress which consists of a loin-cloth, a short-sleeved coat, and a sword slung on the right side, a leather bag slung on the left side and a few bead-necklaces, the priest wears a few other articles. These articles are an apron with particular designs, a head-band decorated with two or three rows of cowries, a necklace studded with the teeth of tiger and bear and a few metal bells.

A priestess wears these special articles in addition to the usual Mishmi woman's dress of a skirt, a long sleeved coat and bead-necklaces. The priestess is generally accompanied by female dancers. The accompanying dancers wear the usual dress. The dancers stand in a line, the priest is second either from the right or left.

During the dance, one dancer standing at one end of the line plays a small drum slung from his neck. The priest and the other two dancers play a very small semi-globular

single-membrane drum, striking it with a bamboo-stick which is kept tied to the drum with a string.

The fifth dancer, if any, plays a horn bugle. When there are five dancers, the priest stands in the middle of the line. He sings a line of invocatory song while all the others play the musical instruments, flex the knees bobbing up and down and alternately raise the right and left heels and stamp these on the ground in time to the drum-beats.

When the priest finishes singing the line, others repeat it in chorus. Again the priest sings another line of the song which the others repeat in chorus and thus it goes on. The priest does not demand any money for his priestly services, but the performer usually remunerates him according to his ability. The remuneration may also be paid in kind, e.g. with handloom coat, brass utensils or pigs.

DIGARU MISHMI BUIYA DANCE

The Digaru Mishmis have two types of dances called Buiya and Nuiya. The Buiya dance has two types of movements and it is performed for entertainment while the Nuiya is a ritual-dance performed by a priest. Buiya dance is performed on any festive occasion like the Duiya, Tazampu and Tanuya festivals which are performed for the prosperity and good health of the performer and his household.

This dance may also performed after a feast arranged by a family to entertain the fellow villagers who co-operate with it opening a new field. The dance is performed in the passage which runs along one side of the house from the front to the rear. Men and women take part in this dance.

There is no limit to the age of the dancers although generally children and old persons do not take active part in the dance itself but merely sit by, as spectators. There is no special costume for this dance, so they perform this dance wearing their usual dress. The dancers get no remuneration. There is no formal training but they learn the dance movements by imitating those of the elders.

THE KHAMPTI DANCES

The Kamptis, who are Buddhists, have many dance-dramas through which they unfold some stories or depict mythical events bearing ethical lessons. These dramas are generally staged during the religious festivals of Potwah, Sankian or Khamsang, constituting the entertainment part of the festivals.

The dance is called ka and the dance-drama is called kapung (ka-dance; pung-story) and actually means a story depicted through the dance. The rehearsal of a drama starts about one month before a festival. This may be done in the monastery or in any house of their choice.

The well-to-do-villagers invite the drama-party when the drama is staged in the front courtyard or in some suitable open space near their house. Women do not take part in the drama. The female role, if any, is played by a man in woman's costume. After the performances, the party is given a remuneration of seven, fourteen, twenty-eight or forty-two rupees-always an amount divisible by seven. They purchase with this money the costumes and masks used in the dramas. The surpluses, if any, are shared by the members of the drama party.

KA FIFAI DANCE-DRAMA

The Ka Fifai drama is woven round the theme of the traditional belief that ghosts appear and kidnap girls or men and trouble them. The participants in the drama consist of a man, his daughter who is kidnapped, the ghost who does the kidnapping, the Ministers of the State who make preparations for war against the ghost, the King of the stage in which the girl's father is a subject, and the king's men who go out to capture the ghost.

PONUNG DANCE (ADIS)

Adi village has a rich cultural life. The tribal people are famous for their Ponung that is dancing with the accompaniment of songs. A group of girls dance in a

circle holding each other by stretching their hands over each others shoulders while the leader-usually a man called the Miri-dances and sings in the centre-holding aloft and shaking a sword like musical instrument called 'Yoksha'. First he sings a line and then it is repeated in chorus by the maidens rhythmically in circle at a low pace. On all important occasions ponung is arranged.

SADINUKTSO (AKAS)

The Akas have a number of dances and songs for the different socio-religious festivities. One of the well known dance among the Akas is the Sadinuktso. A member from the boy's group comes forward, gives his performance for a short while and recedes. A girl then comes and she also dances all alone. This relation goes on till all the boys and girls of the group have danced. No song is sung with this dance. It is generally performed in marriages, guest, and entertainments or on the construction of a new house.

In the traditional Indian system, the acceptance of lifestyle indicators such as tobacco use and alcohol consumption varies between socioeconomic groups and between genders.

The present study is designed to estimate the prevalence, and the socioeconomic and demographic correlates, of tobacco use and alcohol consumption among ever-married women in India. The nationally represented cross-sectional survey of NFHS-II, which was conducted between November 1998 and March 1999, is used as a tool in this study.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE SOCIETY

The present study covers a sample of 90 303 ever-married women in the reproductive age-group in India. Univariate and bivariate techniques were used for analysis of data. The overall prevalence of smoking and tobacco chewing among ever-married women in India is 2.6% and 11.6%, respectively.

About 2.8% of women in India drink alcohol. There is interstate variation in the prevalence of these behavioral factors. More than three-fourth of the women in Mizoram are users of chewing tobacco; Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are the other states showing a high prevalence of tobacco chewing among women.

It is to be noted that more than half of the women in Arunachal Pradesh were users of alcohol at the time of the survey. States like Kerala, New Delhi, Mizoram, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh showed a comparatively low prevalence.

The odds for use of chewing tobacco is three times higher among older women, for smoking it is more than five times higher, and for alcohol consumption the odds are twice that in younger age-groups. Educational attainment is negatively associated with tobacco chewing, as demonstrated by the high prevalence (14.1%) among illiterate women.

Compared to the Hindus the chance of being a user of any form of tobacco is higher for Muslims, Christians, and some other religious groups, whereas the odds for alcoholic consumption are higher for Hindus. Sikh women are unique in that they neither use alcohol nor any form of tobacco.

Schedule tribe women are 10.5 times more likely to use alcohol than forward caste women. Lower standard of living is significantly associated with the higher prevalence of these indicators. The odds for smoking are three times higher for women from lower socioeconomic strata.

Addressing the socioeconomic and demographic correlates could be an important step for anti-tobacco movements, especially in the community setting. The positive association between lower socioeconomic status and the prevalence of these indicators is likely to increase the disease burden among the poor, who may not be able to afford the costs involved in the treatment of these avoidable lifestyle-related diseases.

Anti-tobacco programmes should concentrate on the socioeconomically and demographically backward groups and special attention must be paid to smokeless tobacco use among women. For many observers, Arunachal Pradesh is an 'island of peace' in India's conflict-prone northeast. In recent years, however, the state has seen a spurt in violence. All sections of people in Arunachal have not been equal participants in the state's development and the resultant disquiet has boiled over.

The shift from a natural resource-based economy to one based on the market has also led to significant changes in resource utilisation, with another significant repercussion: women's control over resources has declined. Women, of course, are not an undifferentiated category and impacts of development would be uneven not only among different sections of the society but also within women as a group.

That said, women played a significant role in the traditional economy of the indigenous communities: agriculture, forest-related activities like gathering forest products of a wide variety and household-based manufacturing.

Commercialisation of agriculture has already taken root in many parts of the state. But agricultural production in Arunachal is still at a subsistence level; increase in yields have more to do with clearing forests and bringing them under the plough than with a rise in per acre productivity.

The implications are many. Uncontrolled expansion could accelerate deforestation. It also means an increase in the work burden for women as they have to bear the responsibility to collect forest products such as fuelwood, fruits, vegetables, and roots for household consumption. This might have serious implications for the overall well-being of women.

Land in Arunachal is largely community-held and there aren't clear-cut private property rights. This worked

fine when agriculture was practiced in the traditional ways. But commercialisation has encouraged powerful people to bring more land under their control. The transition from need-based to market-based processes does not bode well for women.

Their control over household income is imperilled. At present marketisation is low and participation of households in businesses quite limited. But horticulture and cultivation of vegetables and fruits is increasing, and men are getting a toehold in trading and business, though women are the main producers.

Changes in the production pattern due to commercialisation might also lead to decline in per capita production of staple foods and a decline in per capita availability of food grains at the local level.

Arunachal Pradesh Human Development Report 2005 shows that gender-discrimination in intra-family distribution of food is not very significant in Arunachal Pradesh, but these egalitarian aspects are now under threat. Occupational diversification among women in Arunachal Pradesh is abysmally low.

Literacy rate has improved, but women generally are confined to agriculture and the few who have moved out have mostly taken up low-paid jobs in the service sector. It's true that this means women are moving from unpaid household work to wage work but it is difficult to assess whether this implies opportunity or distress.

The only silver-lining seems to be the entry of large number of tribal women into retail trading of various kinds. Many believe that tourism and hydro-power will be the pillars of future development of Arunachal. The development in tourism, in the past few years, has been phenomenal, thanks to government initiatives.

Sectors like trade, hotel and restaurants as well as transport communications have received a fillip. Some educated males with financial resources and excess to

education, have gained from this. Development of tourism till now has had little impact on women in general and rural women in particular.

The only visible impact seems to be the emergence of few small scale retailing units catering to tourists, with a resultant increase in demand for handicrafts made by women. But experience of other countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, shows that women have been victims of flesh trade and other forms of violence, when the tourism sector expanded. Besides, the ecological impact of uncontrolled mass tourism could be substantial for the rural people who depend a lot on these resources, for food, fodder, fuel wood, medicines and a large number of other products.

Similarly much depends on the kind of technology that is used for hydro-power generation. If the rich biodiversity and environmental wealth of the state is not properly taken into account in the cost-benefit analyses, the result could be more destructive than progress of any kind.

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