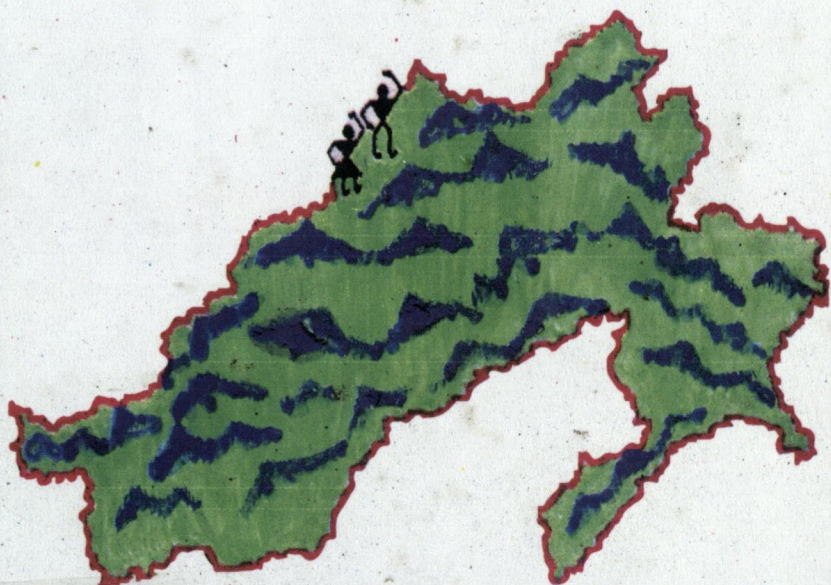


# THE BOKARS

*An Anthropological Research on their  
Ecological Settings and Social Systems*



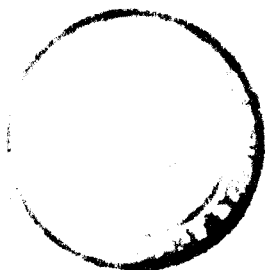
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**KASH BANERJEE**

# THE BOKARS

*An Anthropological Research on their  
Ecological Settings and Social Systems*



BIKASH BANERJEE

Directorate of Research  
Government of Arunachal Pradesh  
**ITANAGAR**

**The Bokars** : *Written by Sri Bikash Banerjee, District Research Officer, Papum-Pare and Published by the Director of Research, Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar - 791111, for and on behalf of the Government of the Arunachal Pradesh.*

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# CHAPTER - 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Bokars, one of the sub-tribes of the Adi cluster, are such a group of people that is perhaps not known even by some other tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh. And they live in such an inaccessible and isolated Himalayan habitation that one has to tramp from Along, the Headquarters of West Siang District, for over ten days continuously through dense forests, steep hills, by the side of some deep gorges and ravines; to reach their abode from where one can enter into the Tibetan province within a day's march more. Precisely, they inhabit in and around the valley of the Yom river in Monigong Circle under the Mechuka Sub-division of West Siang District just below the McMohan Line, the Indo-Chinese frontier demarcation lying roughly in between 27.27 and 29.20 North latitude and between 93.09 and 95.35 East Longitude at an average altitude of 1829 metres above the sea level. Recently one more circle has been created, the Pidi Circle, out of the original area of the Monigong Circle comprising nine Bokar villages only. From the point of view of paucity of wide ethnographic coverage it is an alluring field of research for the anthropologist, where the people are living in such ecological niche which is totally isolated by means of formidable geographical barrier and are reared by very crude and primitive mode of culture. It is desirable on the part of the government too to accumulate detailed ethnographic data of these

border people for future planning.

### **AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :**

It is the first and the foremost duty of a researcher to delineate clearly the aims and objectives of a research programme with a view to complete the study and present the outcome in a meaningful and scientific way. The aim of the present study is to provide a body of scientific knowledge on the society and culture of the bokars and to generously contribute towards refinement and growth of anthropological knowledge of this little known frontier tribe. These basic information and anthropological data of a particular community may precisely be utilised to understand the problems of prolonged ethnic isolation and regionalism, to pursue and implement different kinds of developmental schemes as per their compatible ecosystem and formulate future hypothesis and action plan towards undertaking of further intensive research works.

The aims of this book are both ethnographic and analytical. This study has been an attempt to conceptualise the intricate social and cultural values, and notions on social structure, family and clan organization, kinship, political organization and religion. Besides, attempt has also been made to understand their traditional economy in relation to the adjustment process with the ecology and the position of women in their society. Under certain broad framework the study will be encompassing the following enquiries as well :

- 1) Who are the Bokars and what is their origin and migration ?
- 2) How they differ from other ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh ?
- 3) How they adjust with the physical environment to shape

their culture and economy ?

- 4) What is their language form and structure ?
- 5) What are their world views and how they communicate with the supernaturals ?
- 6) What are the features of their traditional village polity ?
- 7) What are the constraints they are facing in all round economic, social and political development ?
- 8) What are the distinctive characteristics of their culture and its integrating aspects ?
- 9) What is the level of traditional technology ?
- 10) What are the social, material and attitudinal changes that have come about ?

## **METHODOLOGY**

For collection of data the standard anthropological methods and techniques, and the guidelines provided by Williams (1967) and Notes and Queries on Anthropology (1954)' were mainly employed and followed. Information were obtained by observations - participant and non-participant, through interviews - individual as well as group interviews and genealogical method. As one of the important methods of ethnoscience, the ethic and ethical views of the culture have also been recorded.

Not only group discussions and interviews were held among the Bokar people, but also some non-Bokar persons residing in Bokar area for a long time as government servants were interviewed to share their ideas and observations. Persons from all possible age groups were interviewed so as to understand the generational variation in their world of views and norms,

and to study the process of adjustment with some newer concepts and alien culture entering in their community. The interviews were conducted inside the house of the people mainly in night time and whenever occasion arose.

### **PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS :**

At the first sight, the Bokars look very sturdy and well built. This holds for both males and females. Their skin colours may be described as being usually a light yellowish brown. The complexion of the Bokar people sometimes varies to some considerable degrees according to the locality or the particular ecological niche. Commonly, the complexion of the women and the people who inhabit the uplands is of a somewhat lighter shade and inhabitants of a few villages situated at high plateaus possess pretty gipsy complexion that is seen in the Southern Europe. On the other hand, some people who live in some lower settings are found to be somewhat swarthy. The nose is somewhat depressed, the nostrils being often large and prominent. The forehead is broad and the space between the eyes is often considerable. Eyes are of medium size and in colour black or brown. Eyelids are somewhat obliquely set and epicanthic eye fold is marked as it is found in Mongols. Jaws frequently are prognathous and heavily built, mouth is large and lips are found to be thick with some moderate variation. Hair is black and straight. It is quite the exception to see a beard and moustache.

The Bokars are usually medium in stature with bodies well nourished and muscular. The trunk is long in proportion to the rest of the body, and broad at the waist; calves are very highly developed. The women are also well built and well nourished and they usually carry domestic loads almost as heavy as men

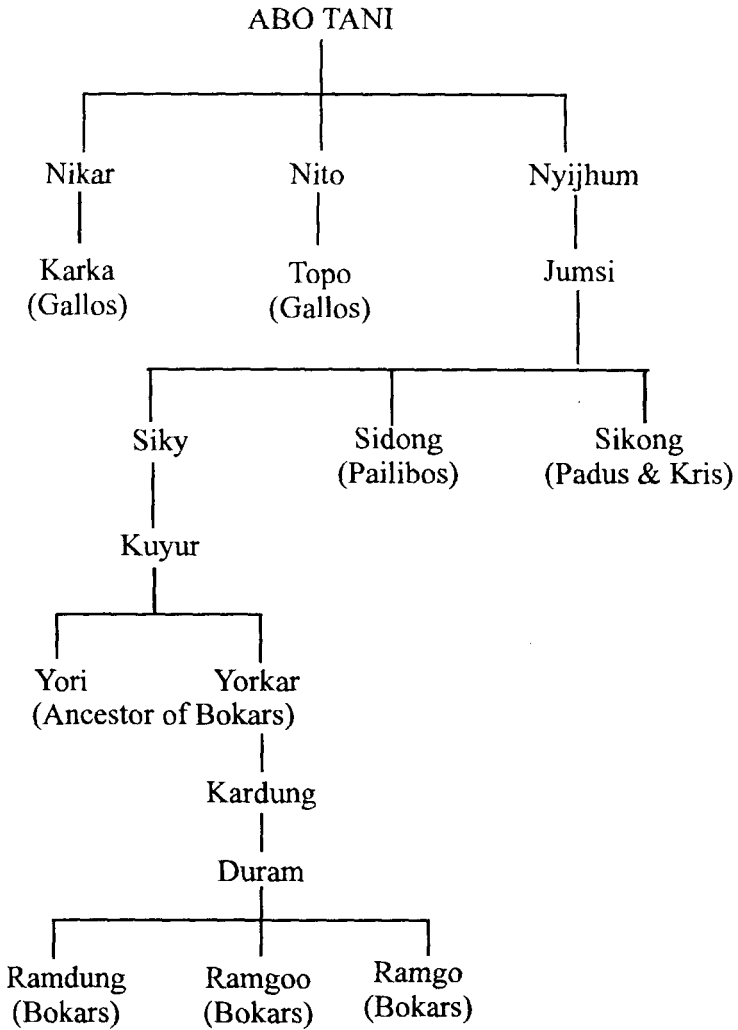
do. The people are cheerful in disposition and are light-hearted by nature. The Bokars are industrious and good tempered, but are occasionally prone to sudden outburst of anger. They are fond of songs, music and jokes. The Bokars are simple and straightforward people, and are quite truthful and honest. They are, however, hard drinkers and consume large quantities of home made beer distilled from rice or millet. Rice beer, **Oh:**, is not only used as a beverage, but also for ceremonial purpose.

### **ORIGIN AND MIGRATION :**

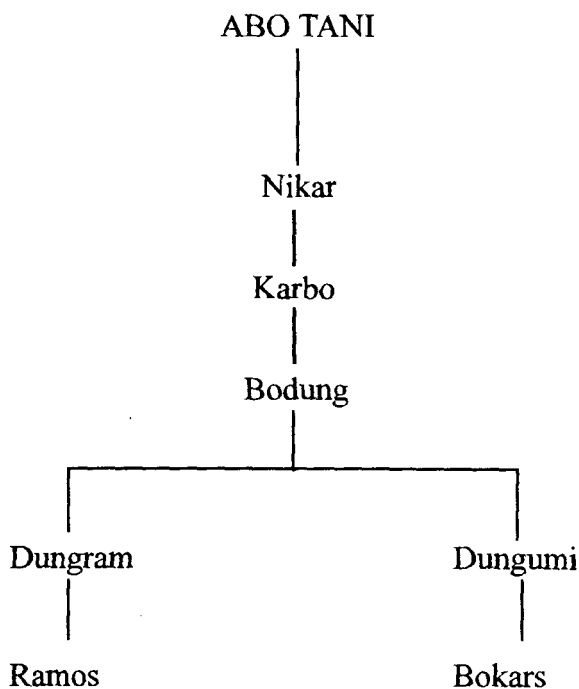
The origin of the Bokars is a very vexed question. Whatever we find about their origin is totally based upon their oral history since not only the Adis, but most of the other tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh do not have a written history. Their oral history is being transmitted from generation after generation in the form of myths, legends and folk tales wherein chance of deletion or deviation and exaggeration can not be ruled out.

Like most of the Adis, the Bokars also trace their origin from **Abo Tani**, the first human being - their ancestral father. According to their tales, **Abo Tani** had several sons; viz., **Nikar**, **Nito**, **Nyijum**, etc. and from **Nyijum**; **Jumsi** and **Siky** came. Kuyur was born from Siky, and Yori, Yorkar were from Kuyur who were direct ancestors of Bokar. From Yorkar, Kardung and Duram groups of Bokars came.

The following genealogy depicts their origin as it goes :



According to yet another popular belief, the Bokars claim their descent from **Nikar**, one of several sons of **Abo Tani**. The follower of this doctrine believe that, **Karbo**, the eldest son of **Nikar** was the father of **Bodung** who had two sons - **Dungram**, the elder one and **Dungumi**, the younger son. The Bokars descended from **Dungumi** and the Ramos came in a direct line from **Dungram**. Their genealogy goes like this:



From both of these genealogies we find that the Bokars are closely akin to the Ramos which made us inquisitive about the Ramos. According to the Ramo myth; **Seeching's** (the earth) son was **Chesen**, **Chesen's** son was **Sentung** whose son was

Turi. And **Turi** was the father of **Tani**. **Tani** was having at least twelve sons, one of them was **Nijom**. **Jomse** was the son of **Nijom**. It is believed according to the oral literature of the Ramos, Jomse was the common fore-father of the Ramos, Bokars, Boris and Pailibos.

The problem of finding original habitat, and route and causes of migration has not yet been studied satisfactorily for the entire Adi group of people. During British regime, some of their administrative officers and a few amateur anthropologists made several contradictory hypotheses. However, it was believed generally that all the present day's Adi people came from beyond the northern lofty mountain ranges. Interestingly, Roy (1966) for the first time propounded that the Adis had migrated from south (some Naga areas in between the Indo-Myanmar frontiers) to the north finding some affinities of the Adi culture to that of the trans-Brahmaputra hill people and some dissimilarities with the Buddhist Tibetan culture. But he had a mistake of ignoring the pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist culture in that territory (Nyori, 1993). In fact, Buddhism was introduced in Tibet during the reign of Sangtsen Gampo (A. D. 634-650) and it took many centuries to spread in all parts of the country (Stein, 1972); whereas most of the Adis and their allied people appear to have migrated from Tibetan region before or just after the introduction of Buddhism there (Nyori 1993). Nevertheless, Roy (1966) reported, regarding the Bokars, that their ancestors lived in Mate somewhere in Tibet and due to the pressure of increasing population they started migration and settled near about Tadadege, a place which is at present known as Pui. There are several views and version regarding their place of diffusion, settlement and route of migration. One claims that their ancestors came down from Tibet and settled near the

Shimang river, presumably near the source of the Sike river, a tributary of the Siyum river. On the other hand, another one believes that the Bokars originally came from Samelo, near Lhasa, from where they were driven out by some more powerful group of Tibetans and ultimately settled down on both sides of the Tungula pass in the Tumi and the Nayu valleys. According to Dhasmana (1979), the Ramos and the Bokars came from Same-Segong in Tibet and they were the Bokars who first crossed the Domla Pass near Monigong and settled in the area near Tadadege. Thereafter, the Ramos came and constructed a bridge over a river, and then both the groups, the Ramos and the Bokars, crossing the river settled in Monigong area.

Dhasmana (1979) recorded that there were two brothers, Ame Pane and Brime Mane, the sons of Seeching, residing in Same-Segong in Tibet. Brime Mane failed in his cultivation and decided to leave Same-Segong. Before leaving he called his two sons, Topo and Karbo, and ordered them to shoot their arrows. Topo's arrow hit the Karka area and Karbo's arrow hit the Monigong area. Brime Mane alongwith Karbo and his followers migrated towards the Monigong area and later on they came to be known as the Bokars. The Bokars were followed by the Ramos and both of these groups lived at Monigong for long. Afterwards, there was a quarrel between them, in consequence of which the Ramos had to flee and they went down to Mechuka.

#### **POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC PECULIARITIES :**

According to Census 1991 report the entire Bokar area is populated by a number of 3173 persons. Out of this, male population is 1494 and the female is 1679 who are living in some 575 households distributed in 42 isolated villages located in some inhospitable slopes and highly jagged terrain at

considerable altitude. Here the sex ratio, i.e., number of females per 1000 males, is interestingly very high. Generally, sex ratio is found lower than 1000; according to 1991 census it is only 872 in the West Siang District whereas it is 1124 at Monigong. It is very much interesting to note that almost all the villages in Bokar area have the sex ratio over one thousand and some have extremely high ratios. The following table shows sex ratio in a few Bokar villages alongwith the circle, district and state level data.

**Table : 1. Sex Ratio in Different Bokar Villages, Monigong Circle, West Siang District and in Arunachal Pradesh.**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Sex Ratio</b>
Sukudom	1636
Punning	1531
Jereling	1352
Yorkudom	1342
Chengo	1241
Ruku	1184
Lungte	1163
Didu	1158
Gapur	1087
Hirong	1038
Monigong Circle	1124
West Siang District	872
Arunachal Pradesh	861

From the above Table it is seen that the sex ratio of the far interior, inaccessible and isolated villages situated at highly jagged and terrible mountaineous terrain shows a conducive

reading to the Bokar women. But it is quite low at circle as well as district level. Plausible reasons of the higher reading of sex ratio among the Bokars living in incompatible ecological niches may perhaps lie with their adaptability and/or selection processes and institutionalized social and economic behaviour. Menfolk, from the very young age, are used to go to dense forests for hunting and collecting purposes. In consequence of having hardly any experience at the tender age many young boys die during their initial adventure. But the woman does not go to forest far away from their home, and hence, accidental premature death among them is almost nil which consequently gives female members of the community adumbrated in the sex ratio. Besides this, imbalanced parental care may possibly cause higher sex ratio among the Bokars. A birth of a male child is necessary among the Bokars, because, according to their belief only the sons, the families being patrilineal, perpetuate their line of inheritance and upkeep their lineage. But they gladly accept birth of a female child. On the contrary, after having one or two sons as many as female births are desired events because the woman brings prosperity and happiness into the family. Bokar women do a multitudinous work outside the home for agriculture, husbandry, collection of woods and fodder, and jungle fruits from the nearby forest areas apart from their heavily routined household activities. The most important consideration for the women is of their economic value. Females are considered much more valuable than the males because, during their marriage, their parents get a high bride-price in terms of **mithuns**, cows, pigs, valuable ornaments and household properties, foods and beverages, etc. Therefore, it is observed that probably considering the economic values of a women, female children get at least slightly better parental care than their brothers which consequently lead to check the female child

mortality. Hence, number of females in the family as well as in the community is more than the males. Due to greater number of females, high prevalence of sexual offences like adultery and brawling related to the illegal and surreptitious sexual connection with more than one women is found in Bokar community.

High sex ratio among the Bokars is not an exceptional case in this district. It is also found in many remote isolated villages in Payum, Rungong, Kaying, Darak and in some other circles where high bride-price is also demanded for a bride and incidentally economic institution is also the same as that of the Bokars.

#### **FOOD AND DRINK :**

The food habit of an isolated group of people is largely shaped and developed by the ecological influence and climatic conditions of the particular area they live in. Nature nurtures the particular types of forest and vegetations, and provide shelter to some faunal species peculiarly adapted to that type of forest which ultimately present a natural food-chain in a particular ecology. As far as humans are concerned technology based culture come into play its role within the natural food-chain. As per the present level of technology, the Bokars used to exploit their nature by means of doing largely the slash and burn cultivation (jhum), which is practiced on rain fed gentle mountain slopes, in order to get their staple food rice (ame) and millet (tammi). These two crops not only provide them the main food item in lunch and dinner, but also the vitally needed beverage, the **Oh:** or the **Opo**. Besides rice and millet, maize (pepo), pumpkin (bumse), potato (pobche), sweet-potato (kore), etc. are also produced in jhum cultivation. In the nearby cultivable land and in kitchen garden, they used to grow laisag

(guying), ginger (take), chilli (jaluk), gourd (ujuk) and potato which are used as vegetables with cooked rice (ame monunam). Maize and millet are next important cereals to rice.

Rice with boiled vegetables, adding only salt and some green chillies, alongwith home-made beer is the normal day to day meal in both lunch and dinner. This diet is enriched with meat (idin) and fish (ongngo) frequently. The surrounding forests provide them a huge quantity of meat. The Bokars used to go to hunt very frequently since the forest is full of birds and animals. Bear (sotum), deer (sodum), monkey (sebe), rat (kobung), samber (sibi), squerrel (keling), jackle (sopiang) and such wild animals (motum somen) are killed in the forest in order to get meat. Apart from these animals, a large variety of anonymous birds including a few species of wild hen (motum rokne) are also hunted for the purpose of getting meat. Sparrow (purup) and pigeon (tangki) are killed nearby the home for the same purpose. The Bokars usually go to the rivers and streams too for catching fishes and other aquatic species. Currently, they use oil (guying mergi) and onion (jakuk), ginger (take), green chilli (jaluk) and garlic (talap) as their favourite condiments. Any other spices are unknown to them. Only the salt (olo) is used extensively, even a spoon of salt is poured into the boiling water and rice under heat.

Rice, millet and maize are brewed at home without exception of a single household with a view to prepare beer everyday. This is the most favourite and delicious drink for them and according to their views it is the indispensable nutritive food item which provides them energy, vigour and vitality. It holds good amount of societal prestige and honour in consequence of which it is offered to all the guests as a gesture of hospitality. It is an essential ingredient in all socio-religious functions.

Now a days, the Bokars take tea but without adding milk and sugar. Peculiarly, in some households use of salt in tea in lieu of sugar has been noticed. Ginger is also used in black tea. Very recently, some young people are using powder tin-milk and sugar with tea.

### **SMOKING :**

The Bokars are very much fond of smoking and pipe-smoking is a common sight in Bokar area. They may forget to take a meal in a day, but they never forget to smoke tobacco. For the purpose, tobacco is grown in kitchen garden and pipes are made by themselves of wood and roots of bamboo. They also have got metallic pipes brought in barter from Tibet and from the neighbouring tribe like Membas of Mechuka and Tuting valleys. Almost every Bokar person, men or women, young or old, rich or poor, loves to smoke. Very recently, cigarettes have become popular among the young lads, but the girls are averse to smoke cigarettes. However, unlike some other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh opium smoking is not at all favoured by the Bokars.

### **DRESSES AND ORNAMENTS :**

Once Verrier Elwin (1988) described that, "Adi art is almost entirely confined to the decoration of their own persons, that is to say it is expressed in the weaving of fabrics, the making of hats and the forging ornaments. The Adis have an extraordinary interest in cloth;..... They are very sensitive to fashions and quickly adapt new ones, not always of the best." The Bokars are not the exceptions to this. They are very much fashionable and their traditional dress is also very colourful. Though their dress pattern is having affinity with the Gallos, yet it is of archetypal form by which one can identify their ethnicity.

The Bokar male dress is very simple but fascinating. The menfolk wear a black or dark-blue woollen coat and a slip of cloth made of goat's hair or coarse wool, through which the head is passed and which hangs down upto the knees. This dress is locally called as **sube** or **sera**. The lower part is covered simply with a piece of loin cloth (**hogen**). Like most of the Adis., the menfolk of the Bokars too are very much fond of wearing hats (**dumlup**). They wear a cane hat known as **takum** and a hat made up of hide called as **bortakum**. Their cane hats are very fine in artistic works as well as very hard, almost like a helmet. During rainy season, they used to wear a long hide-jacket on back side which is called **rara**. A bamboo finger ring (**lokceng singdu**) is worn on the thumb of their right hand specially by those Bokar men who used to go on hunting frequently. This ring facilitates the shooting of arrows. A dao, **yok** or **yopsa**, is always kept with them hanging from the shoulder by means of a cane string. Sometimes, Bokar menfolk use a girdle (**serek**) too like that of the women. They also like to wear, specially during the festivals, ornaments like bangles (**kimbung**), necklace made of costly Tibetan beads (**pobje**) and ear-rings (**metur ralungs**).

The female dresses of all the Adis are really beautiful and fascinating. The Bokar women wear a skirt to cover the lower part, from waist to knee, called as **jopo**, popularly known as **gale** among the lower Adis. Length and breadth of the **jopo** varies, but on an average it is of 105 cms. and 75cms. respectively. The traditional colour of the **jopo** is white with having horizontal and/or vertical colour bands, almost like the **gale** of the Gallos. Sometimes, such bands are enhanced by a sort of hatching-rows of frets, dots and single lines of different colours. A number of natural herbal dyes (**TAMEN**) are known

to them - such as; black (ONGNGO LINNAM), yellow (LIBO LILONE), madder or the red (BALANG LINNAM), dark blue and green (JEMENNE LINNAM). Eventually these dyes are fast and often give them most attractive results. A red dye is obtained from the root of a herbaceous plant, the madder, *Rubia tinctorum* and *Rubia sikkimensis*; and the dark blue being obtained from a clubbed moss, the *Strobilanthes flaccidifolius*. Now a days, the Bokar women are weaving their **jopo** in several colours. In fact, they are very much interested in colour and insist on getting varieties in shades from outside markets, which has modified their traditional colour-schemes in recent years.

Weaving is the exclusive monopoly of Bokar women presenting a great difference from other parts of India, where much of it is in the hands of men. They use a very simple and small loin-loom (UCUM CUMNANE ATENG AYENG). Instead of reed, a wooden sword (HOKBE YARONE ESING) is used to beat up the weft; and the weaving is done by the help of bamboo made thread beam, **tapin** and a loose rod made up of a bamboo-split or a fiddle wooden piece, called as **tapin lumnane**. In almost every household such a loom is found to be seen in action. Earlier, they used thread extracted from the hair of the horse, goat, etc. Cotton threads and wool came from Tibet in barter economy. Presently wool and cotton threads come from the Along market.

The upper part of the female, in the very olden days, used to be covered with a piece of hide and by means of a few long necklaces. Later on, they started to put on a blouse locally known as **ome kedu**. Very recently, the Bokar women also wear the gent's T-shirts and ordinary shirts to cover the upper part. As such, there is no traditional upper garments of any type of the womenfolk. However, they have been very much fond of

ornaments. They adorn themselves with bangles (kimbung), earrings (nyeme tidin), girdles (buklu) and with necklaces made up of costly beads (pobje). Their bangles are made of brass, copper and silver. A few bangles are found to be made of a mixed metal and most of them have been brought from Tibet. A large number of **buklu** is found to be decorated with metal disc and beads. Generally, a Bokar woman wears all of her traditional dress alongwith ornaments during ceremonies and festivals.

### **WEAPONS :**

Weapons are a part of integrated social life and an indispensable possession of the Bokars. These are having immense importance in their economic life too. Weapons have been used mainly for war and chase as well as in hunting expeditions. Almost all the weapons are of short range type, except the bow and arrow, and are belonging to the individuals or families, All and sundry loves and possesses weapons, some from lower Adi tribes and some from the Membas of Mechuka valley through barter. Another source of getting the weapons is the bride-price. Swords (YOKCE) and daos (OYOK) are also gifted alongwith the bride-price.

The bow (UYI) and the arrow (UPUK) have been remaining a principal weapon among the Bokars. Its effectiveness may range between 75 and 200 yards at least. Making of bows and arrows is not an easy task though most of them are expert in it. In fact, from the very young age they learn the art. Bows are made of splitted bamboos and the string is made from bamboo cane. The arrows are made of hard but thinly splitted bamboo pieces in different types. Simple bamboo made arrows are used for killing birds. Its length varies from 57 cms. to 65 cms. and

thickness is found to be within the range of 4.5 to 6.5 mms. Sometimes an arrow is made of a bamboo shaft fitted with an iron tip (MORA). Its size is just like of the former one, but the length of the iron tip is ranged between 3.5 cms. and 5.5 cms. It is mainly used for killing smaller and medium size animals. Often, this iron tip is smudged with poison (MODIK or KETMO) prepared from the roots of certain plant found in extreme high altitude. However, the Bokars do not like to divulge the name and/or the identifying characteristics of the plant. The modik is used to hunt big games like bear and tiger.

A dao (OYOK), dagger, is a very common item of weapon or tool among them. The blade is made of iron and the tang is from wood. The length of the iron-blade and the wooden-tang ranges in between 35cms. and 42 cms., and 12 cms. and 17cms. respectively. It is also used by the menfolk as an item of adornment. The **oyok** is having multitudinal functional aspects. Unlike a sword, it is used for both fighting and domestic works, such as, felling of trees, cutting of fire-woods, certain carpentry jobs, cutting of meat, etc. Swords are brought from Tibet during barter-trade mission. Its length varies from 60 cms. to 70cms. and it is made of very good quality of iron. These were mainly used in raids and inter-village war. During war in the olden days, an arm guard (LABUNG) and a body guard (MURGAM) made of hide of mithuns were also used to protect themselves. For protection, the Bokar warriors did also use a shield (HATAK) made of bamboo and cane. But the good quality shield was made from the hide of the mithuns (APIN GA MONAM).

The Bokars used spear, locally called as **ningbu**, too in the olden days during war and raids. Spears were procured from Tibet and used in war when arrows were exhausted. Now it is a rare item and only the well-to-do Bokars possess a spear.



Office of the Circle Officer at Monigong.



The Monigong Village



A Bokar House in the way of Ruku Village, Monigong



A Bokar Woman Brewing beer in an Evening Gathering.