

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

The **MONPAS** Of Tawang
In Transition



BIBHASH DHAR

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GEOPHIL PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Dedicated to my
Parents

Foreword

The 84,000 sq. km. expanse of Arunachal Pradesh in the Eastern Himalayas is justly famous for its rich assembly of cultures and communities. Among the indigenous inhabitants, the Monpas of Tawang District in the extreme north west of the State occupy a distinctive and, one might say, unique position. The Tawang Monpas have created a life-style in the misty highland habitat in which the inspirations emanating from *Mahayana* form of Buddhism blend with their specialized economy, cultural activities, social institutions and moral order to create a harmonic whole. The Tawang Monastery acts like a fountain-head of their culture. Hemmed in between Tibet-China in the immediate north, the Brahmaputra Plains of Assam in the far south, Bhutan in the west and the Nyishi and other tribes-inhabited areas of Arunachal Pradesh in the east-south-east, the Tawang Monpas present a case of cultural autonomy and culture contact simultaneously.

Dr. Bibhash Dhar, a trained anthropologist with quite considerable experience of field research in various parts of the country, has been wise in choosing to portray the character and tenor of social change among this fascinating people. ***The Monpas of Tawang in Transition*** has turned out to be a very readable and informative account of how a mountain people have internalized new forces and factors of socio-cultural changes within a relatively short period of time. This has happened without too great sacrifices being made

in the age-old ethos and culture. The old and the new seem to combine in a harmonious way.

The pages that follow are not merely readable but carry the flavour of authenticity and painstaking research. It is a book to be read and consulted by everyone interested to know about Arunachal Pradesh and its people. For the anthropological community, the book should prove to be of great ethnographic value.

Dr. Annada C. Bhagabati

Former Vice-Chancellor of Arunachal University
& Retired Professor of Anthropology,
Dibrugarh University and
Gauhati University

Preface

The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh are colourful people living in the high altitude border areas of the district of Tawang and West Kameng. The Monpas differ from the other tribes of the state in their religion, technique of building stone houses and their tradition of trans-Himalayan indigenous trades through the caravan routes. The people wear warm, appropriate and aesthetically pleasing dresses. Verrier Elwin (1957) observed, "the Monpas are great gentlemen, their way of life is higher than that of many of us." It may be mentioned here that till date except the descriptive ethnographic work by Neeru Nanda, published in 1982, there is no other reasonably good account of the Monpa life and culture.

In recent years, especially after 1962, the year of the Sino-Indian border conflict, a sharp rise in the modern economic opportunities in the Monpa country is noticed. A large-scale influx of people from the pan-Indian scenario has ushered in enormous changes due to contact. This has resulted after the development of a network of road communication. Soon, the whole Monpa traditional static life came to be changed overnight following the Chinese aggression in 1962. The Monpas are known to the world at large as a highly religious minded community who professed Buddhism from the twelfth century and their life and culture is known to revolve round the majestic Tawang monastery which is one of the largest, functional Tibetan-Buddhist monasteries of the world, built in the seventeenth century.

The Monpas are also known for their tradition of long

distance indigenous trade in the markets of Assam, Bhutan and Tibet in the pre-independence days. They were thus known to quite a few number of communities in the Himalayas but perhaps were not that known in the other parts of India.

The present attempt is thus an endeavour to understand as to how a community which was under the ecclesiastic authority for centuries before independence and was relatively lesser known to this part of the country is in transition within a span of three decades giving access to the secular, Western concept and ideology and material elements.

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This work is based on field investigations undertaken in the Monpa habitations of West Kameng and Tawang districts of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The work was supervised by Professor K.C.Mahanta of the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University. To him I owe the greatest debt of gratitude as he helped me find a clear approach to the subject that made this study possible. Errors and stains whatever is there are, however, all mine.

I remember with gratitude the inspiration given to me by late Dr. D. N. Majumdar of Gauhati University, Guwahati, under whom I have the privilege to study for two years. It was Dr. Majumdar who suggested that I undertake the work among the Monpas.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the Arunachal Pradesh administration for their continuous help and the facilities extended to me by the local officials of Tawang district and the sub-divisions of Kalaktang and Dirang. My thanks are due to my innumerable Monpa friends to whom I am highly indebted and feel that a simple offering of thanks is quite insufficient. My sincere thanks to messers Nawang Thinley and H.Chakrabarty. I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Miss Kesang of Tawang for her great help and co-operation in course of the field work.

I shall be failing in my duty if I do not mention appropriately Dr.K.S.Singh, the Director General, Anthropological Survey of India for his permission to do the work. Professor Annada C. Bhagabati, former Vice-Chancellor of Arunachal University is kind enough to go through the manuscript of this work and write a forword note on it. I shall ever remain grateful to him.

My thanks also go to my friends Shri K.K.Gupta and Shri Anupam Datta who took the pains of typing out the manuscript and arranging the same. For fruitful suggestions to enrich the academic contents of the book I am indebted to Dr. Siddheswar Sarma, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Last but not the least I gratefully acknowledge the help and co-operation of my wife, Sona, son, Abhinandan and my brother, Simon. I also put on record my deep sense of appreciation of all those who directly or indirectly helped me to complete the work with their many acts of assistance and co-operation.

BIBHASH DHAR

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About the Book

Arunachal Pradesh, the largest state in the conglomeration of the states of the Northeast region of India, is the habitat of about twenty-five major colourful tribesmen group. It is considered the anthropological treasure of the country. The state is full of geographical and cultural diversities. The Monpas are a band of colourful tribesmen group of the state and are found in the high altitude regions on the western border. They differ from the other tribes of the state by their technique of building houses. The Monpas are acclaimed mountain agriculturists, they believe in the Tibetan-Lamaist type of Buddhism since time immemorial, they rear livestock in the mountain meadows, they are also expert long distance caravan traders through the mountain passes and are quite known in the Arunachal Himalayas. In spite of all the diversities the community has achieved, till date no systematic anthropological information is available on the people. The Monpas at present are on a phase of transition after the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 that has ushered in the wave of modernization that has entered the Monpa country through their contact with the people of the pan-Indian region with the establishing of the offices of both the State and Central Governments and the setting up of the network of road communication along with other facilities brought in by modernization. The present work is an attempt to systematically study the socio-cultural life of the Monpas in the remote past and also examine the changes that have entered the life-style of the people through a study conducted in the township of Tawang, the district town of the Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh, for the benefit of the social scientists and the students of anthropology.

Particulars

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About the Author

Dr. Bibhas Dhar, M. Sc. Ph. D., born in 1954, has obtained his Master's degree in Anthropology from the Gauhati University, Guwahati in 1975 and Ph. D. from the Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh in 1993. He started his career in anthropology in 1976 as a Research Assitant in the project *Tribal Unrest and Inter-Ethnic Tensions In N. E. India*, formulated and run by Gauhati University, Guwahati. In 1978 he joined the Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh as Assistant Research Officer and was posted in Bomdila in the West Kameng District. He extensively toured the Monpa habitats of Kalaktang, Dirang and Tawang. In 1980 Dr. Dhar joined the Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India, and was posted at Port Blair in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and worked among the Onges of the Little Andamans and also on the urban situation at Port Blair. He has also worked among the Abuj Marias in the Bastar District during his tenure of posting at Jagdalpur in Chhattisgarh. Dr. Dhar is presently posted at the North East Regional Centre of the Survey at Shillong, Meghalaya, as an Anthropologist. He has two books and about thirty research papers to his credit published in Indian and Foreign journals of repute. He is also associated with a few scientific institutions and organisations.