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# Sadbhavana

## DIGEST



North East Special

# Sadbhavana Digest

## Issue #9, January 2022

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# Editorial

To put together a volume that encapsulates vast histories of not one, but eight states of North Eastern India, is indeed a Herculean task. Add to that, the fact that these states internally have a remarkable diversity of social structures, cultural practices, religious beliefs, livelihood patterns, and political institutions, and what we have at hand is hard to compress into a single readable volume. In addition, we had the task of exploring the Northeast from the point of view of Sadbhavana and the three anchor questions of every Sadbhavana Digest, namely:

Theme 1 - How can we relate to ourselves better?

Theme 2 - How can we relate to other human beings better? And,

Theme 3 - How can we humans relate to nature better?

We have been quite apprehensive to take it up, as both personally, and in the larger political discourse, we are aware of the slippery slope it is for a 'North Indian' to be writing about the North-Eastern States. In that sense, this is in no way an exhaustive list. Our limitations as experts on the subject will inevitably peek through the gaps. However, we have tried to balance this lack with being open minded about the material at hand, and trying to connect it with sensitivity and empathy. We hope we haven't failed entirely in this endeavour.

One of us (Vijay Mahajan) has lived in the Northeast for two years in the 1970s and travelled extensively in all the states there. Vijay understands Assamese and can even speak a bit of it. Since the 1970s, Vijay has visited the region scores of times, has many friends there and has run development projects in many remote districts. He also served as a founding Board member of the Rashtriya Gramin Vikas Nidhi, a development foundation headquartered in Guwahati, which works with NGOs and communities all over the North Eastern region.

The other editor (Ankush Gupta) visited the North East for the first time to prepare for this volume and in the process, spent the last two months reading volumes after volumes of articles, trying to find a way through some thematic elements to guide us through. During his recent visit to three of the eight states, Ankush was genuinely moved with the openness with which he was welcomed everywhere, and the friendly spirit of the conversations that he had with everyone. This volume is a tribute to that spirit.

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To speak of human history, is to speak of a never-ending series of injustices. It has been our attempt however, to find Sadbhavana amidst all of this, for to speak of human history, is to also speak of the many acts of kindness that have changed its course. This volume is also a tribute to the people, who despite all kinds of obstacles, have made the 'choice' to be kind.

For it is not who we are, but our choices that define us. In that way, it is not a North Indian acting as an expert on the subject, but offering a sincere interest in learning more, and welcoming suggestions and recommendations to further his knowledge, that this volume is more about.

To give the reader an overview, we go state-wise here, in alphabetical order:

1.) Arunachal Pradesh- We have chosen two paper on this region. The first is on 'Culture of Friendship among the Apatanis', which indicates how social customs build and maintain Sadbhavana in tribal cultures. This social bonding also helps them live in harmony with Nature. The second is a paper titled "Understanding Patterns – Festivals of Arunachal". We recognise these papers give only a small flavour of the diversity of Arunachal. It's only a trailer.

2.) Assam - We first have a paper on the Satra Tradition promoted by the Bhakti Movement Assamese Saint Sankardeva and popularised by Madhavadeva. Moving forward in history, we have an essay titled 'The Non-Cooperation Movement and the Hindu-Muslim fraternity in Assam' between 1920 and 1922. We carry a video link to a conversation among three individuals from the region, recalling Vinoba Bhave's travels in Assam during the Bhoodan Movement. Coming to contemporary times, we carry a video reading of Gyanpeeth Award winner for 2020, Nilamani Phukan's poem "Every Utterance Has a Meaning". In a sense, this poem addresses the three anchor questions of Sadbhavana, as it implores us to meaning of every utterance - from the chirping of a cicada to the silence of a diya in an old woman's palm.

3.) Manipur - We carry two articles – one on how, over two centuries ago, the Vaishnavite tradition came to the Meitis of Manipur and how it has been assimilated in the local culture. The other article from Manipur is more contemporary - on 'Shumang Leela - A platform for Cultural and Development Communication Discourse'.

4.) Meghalaya – From here, we have chosen Janice Pariat, someone whose work is beautifully rooted in Meghalaya. Pariat's poem 'Diver Myths' is both contemplative as well as discursive: "... there is water— from which to fish for flowers and failure." We also carry a link to a video interview with Patricia Mukhim, the Editor of Shillong Times. Patricia also founded Shillong, We Care, an NGO which fights against the militancy in the state of Meghalaya. Patricia Mukhim continues to voice her strong political opinions and advocates for the freedom of press despite several hardships.

5.) Mizoram - Here we carry an article by William Singh on the Young Mizo Association (YMA). It illustrates the pros and cons of identity based civil society associations. While the YMA has done a lot to preserve and promote traditional culture, customs and mutual help practices of Mizos among the youth, it also tends to do so in an exclusionary way and thereby other ethnic communities in the same landmass are marginalised and alienated.

6.) Nagaland – Though we are painfully aware of both the long history of separatist violence in Nagaland as well as the recent tragic incident, we present two alternative views of Nagaland – one in the form of a link to an interview with Gandhian pacifist Niketu Iralu, who worked for decades with Rajmohan Gandhi in Panchgani on the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) Movement (now renamed Initiatives of Change, IoC). Next is an article on ‘The Naga way of Art’ which gives an overview of arts and crafts through which Naga communities interact with each other as well as with nature and maintain Sadbhavana.

7.) Sikkim - The article from here is titled ‘The Folkloristic History of ‘Blood Brotherhood Treaty’ and its Role in Ensuring Peaceful Coexistence in Sikkim’. It uses oral history to demonstrate a very poignant point regarding this quasi-mythical treaty.

8.) Tripura- We have chosen Chandra Kanta Murasingh, Tripura’s greatest poet and creative soul, introduced by Tapan Dey, in a brief but evocative introduction. This is followed by a poem by Chandra Kanta. We have added the translation here, but the link to the original is also given. Along with this, we have two videos - one providing a brief collage of the 19 tribes of Tripura, and the other is about the prevailing ethnic tension and its reasons around the tribal language Kokborok.

We hope the readers find this issue informative and enjoyable.

### **Ankush Gupta and Vijay Mahajan, Editors**

We would like to record our appreciation of Diana Rajkumari, a long term associate of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation who has been working with children in Manipur and Assam. Diana helped arrange a number of meetings for Ankush during his visit, which are recalled below by Ankush in first person:

Between 11- 14 December 2021 I was in Imphal, Manipur. I met Ms. Diana Rajkumari and with her help visited theatre doyen Ratan Thiyam's Institute 'Chorus Repertory Theatre', which was celebrating its annual theatre event. I went on the opening night where Ratan Thiyam's 'Poorvarang' was performed. They were very busy because of the festival but I managed to have brief interaction with some artists there.



Images from Theatre Event Opening Ceremony (left) and Poorvarang (right)

Looking at my disappointment to not being able to have a prolonged conversation with Ratan Thiyam, Diana ji asked me if I would like to meet someone to discuss theatre and performance with. I instantly agreed. Calls were made and the meeting was fixed. As I waited in the courtyard of his house, I asked her the name of the gentleman we were about to meet. She spelt it out for me - Lokendra Arambam. I was delighted!

In 2008, while working on my first production in Delhi - 'Sunderdas', I was introduced to Lokendra Arambam's production of Macbeth by Prof. HS Shiva Prakash of JNU. It was one of the most brilliant productions I had ever seen. The way it worked with bodies, structure, space, time- it has been a huge influence on me and my work. I remembered Lokendra ji had come to JNU where I did my PhD and had seen one of our rehearsals. He had also given us some very useful suggestions regarding the light design.



Meeting Sri Lokendra Arambam

As we spoke, I was just mesmerized by his calm and soothing voice, his infectious laughter, and the vast treasure of knowledge that he shared without any inhibition (including ideas for plays that he wants to do and papers that he wants to write). I'm still overwhelmed by the kindness and warmth that he showered upon me. During our conversation, we spoke of the performance history of Manipur, and especially the role of women.

I very briefly got to attend the 'Under the Sal Tree' performance festival and meet Ima Sabitri Heisnam and Dr. Usham Rojio. Dr. Rojio is coming out with a book on her works coming year. In that brief, yet meaningful conversation, we discussed her landmark work Draupadi, her views on theatre and performance and I also saw rehearsals of their performance. This way, I was lucky enough to touch the trinity of Manipuri Theatre (Thiyam-Kanhaiyalal-Arambham) in just one trip, which I think was quite lucky on my part.



Image from Under the Sal Tree festival, (right) Dr. Rojio Usham with Ima Sabitri Heisnam

**From 14th to 16th December 2021, I visited Guwahati, Assam and Shillong, Meghalaya**

In Guwahati met Diana ji's parents, especially her mother who told me about her work with the INTERACT program. It was really heart-warming listening to her experiences, the journey that we have made, and the lives Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has touched.

We then went to IIM-Shillong to meet Prof. Sanjeeb Kakoti. He was extremely warm and gracious to us. We had a long and deeply philosophical conversation about the state of Indian academia, our respective journeys, and his work on the history of development in Assam and the Northeast.



Meeting with Prof Sanjeeb Kakoti, IIM Shillong

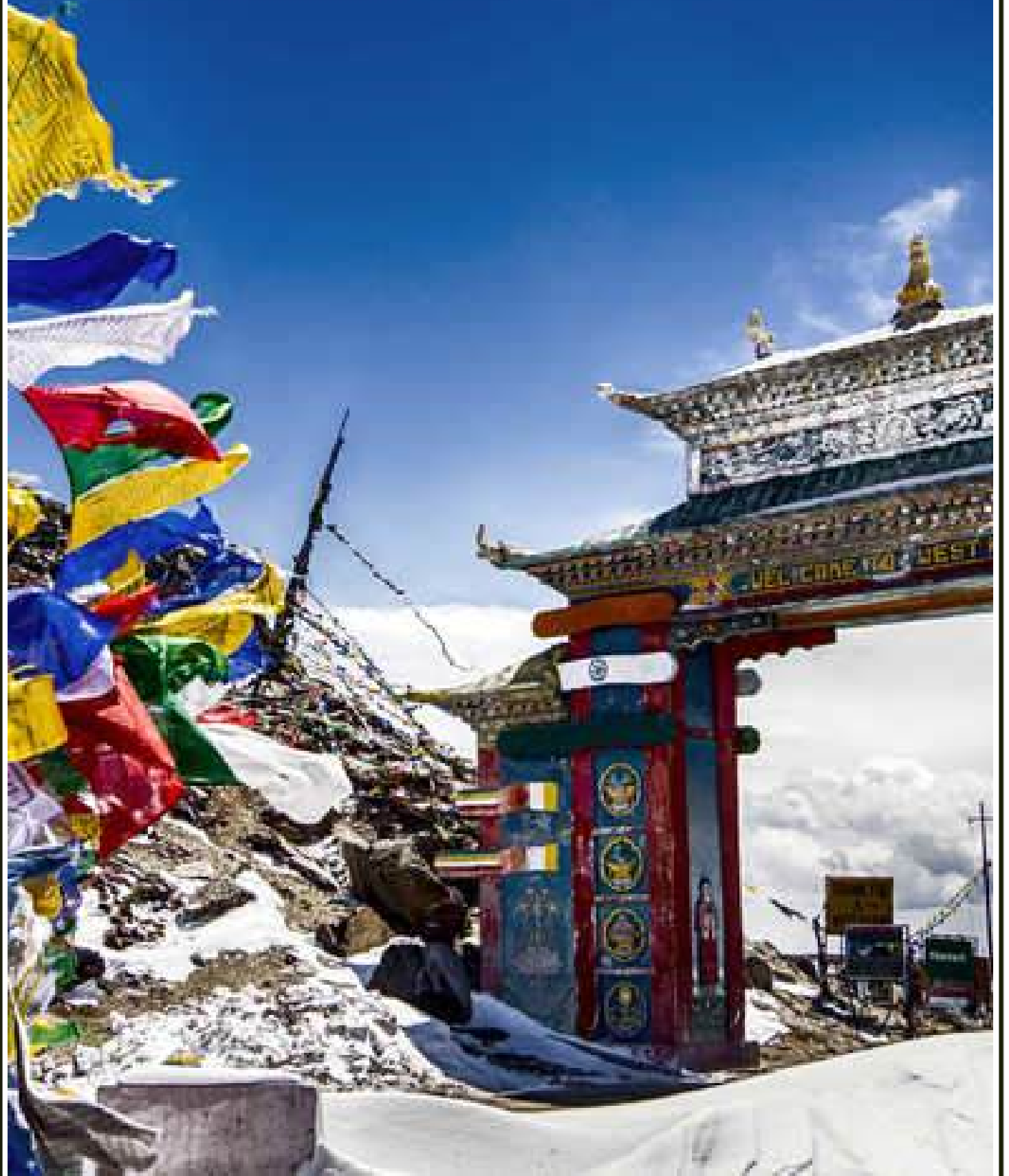
With Diana ji's help, I was able to meet Ms Rita Palmei, an extremely well-read philanthropist, who guided me towards a series of important books and articles to learn about the history of various North-Eastern states. She is herself working on a program around disability and was very happy to connect us with organizations working in this field in the North-East. She has an extensive knowledge of literature and history of the region.



Meeting with Ms Rita Palmei



# Arunachal Pradesh



# Culture of Friendship Among the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh

Dr Sarah Hilaly

## Introduction

Friendship in its common usage signifies the relationships between people that are based on mutual affection, spiritual closeness, and common interests. Friendship has a personal aspect to it, which is characterised by voluntariness and individual selectivity, internal closeness or intimacy and stability (None, 1970- 1979). It becomes imperative to distinguish between friendship as a social system, a moral sentiment and a specific form of interrelationships. Depending on whichever dimension of friendship one seeks to explore, either exploring its social or psychological aspect, one can derive the actual meaning of friendship.

Earliest treatises on the institution of friendship are found in Greek philosophy and poetry. (Carpenter, 1917: 3). The philosophers sought not only to understand the custom itself but also explored the inner sentiments which inspired these customs. Here, the reference point was the literate and state society of Greece where the interpersonal friendship-comradeship provided succour to the intellectual endeavours. Plato had brought in the idea of love-friendship, thus, barely distinguishing it from erotic love within the philosophical discourse (Carpenter, 1917: 15). Aristotle tried to extract friendship from the realm of eroticism by making a clear distinction between friendship-comradeship and love-friendship by declaring that friendship was a highly individualised relationship not containing nuances of the erotic (Carpenter, 1917: 59). Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics writes thus:

Friendship is a thing most necessary to life, since without friends no one would choose to live, though possessed of all other advantages. . . . Since then his own life is, to a good man, a thing naturally sweet and ultimately desirable, for a similar reason is the life of his friend agreeable to him, and delightful merely on its own account, and without reference to any object beyond it; and to live without friends is to be destitute of a good, unconditioned, absolute, and in itself desirable; and therefore to be deprived of one of the most solid and most substantial of all enjoyments (Carpenter, 1917: 57-58).

Aristotle's discussion of friendship, therefore, provided the basis for the stoic idea of the 'cosmopolitan' community of wise men. To him, friends were the philosopher's reference-group, and therefore, they provided the intellectual stimulus to the philosopher in his discourses. It was, therefore, a group of few sustained by common interests forming the cultural and intellectual base of society. There was, however, no ritualistic aspect assigned to

it. There is an aspect of symmetry and structure in the type of friendship he alludes to. The relation between friends was regarded as on the same plane with that of brothers. No treatise on morals would have been thought complete, had this subject been omitted.

Cicero, in his treatise on Friendship, (as cited in McCloskey, 2004: 2) tells us "Friendship can only exist between good men. For there is nothing more lovable than virtue," and also, "I can only advise you to prefer friendship to all other things within human attainment". The context here was the treatise on the friendship of Laelius and the younger Scipio Africanus, which Cicero commemorates in a dialogic format in his *De Amicitia*. It traces the trajectory of their legendary friendship, which began in their boyhood and continued without interruption till Scipio's death (Peabody, 1884: 9-11). The Christian philosophers and theologians discussed the importance of friendship. St. Augustine states that: "No one can be known for who he is except through the friends he has." St. Augustine's mentor, St. Ambrose, says that "a friendship that can end was never a real friendship"(McCloskey, 2004: 2). In the history of philosophy, we find friendship being explored at the level of ethics.

The close links of friendship and philosophy are deep in classical philosophy, and the consubstantiality of the friend and the philosopher was taken for granted. Among the 19th century philosophers Nietzsche, in his discussion on issues of political philosophy, viewed friendship with a spirit of ambivalence (Thompson, 2007). While stressing on the necessity of friendship, he showed a certain degree of this distrust which was his crucial strategy. His works contained references to agnostic friendships instead. In fact, as he discusses the master-slave morality, he links friends and enemies within the values of master-slave morality.<sup>1</sup> The subject elicited sentimental discourses about the love and loyalty between friends providing a touch of the ineffable practically constituting it into an elusive subject (Rezende, 2007: 8). This overview of the place of friendship in the realm of ethics, typical of Western modernity<sup>2</sup> bore strong moorings on individuality and volition. This treatment of friendship failed to encapsulate its essence as a social relationship profoundly impacted by social and cultural factors.

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<sup>1</sup>The German romantics, who created the modern cult of friendship, viewed it as a refuge from the egoism of the bourgeois world. The Utopian socialists advocated the establishment of friendship among all people. The first empirical studies on friendship by psychologists and sociologists were begun in the late 19th century.

<sup>2</sup>The term modernity is highly contentious as each society is different with its nuanced socio-cultural values; ethnicity, consumption patterns, etc. (see Appadurai, 1996). The word 'modern' is derived from the Latin word 'modo' which means 'just now' (Appignanesi et al., 1995: 6; Bhattacharyya, 2009: 79). While the notion of modernity is linked to 'Enlightenment thinking', the process of modernity is connected to varied forms such as the application of science and technology, urbanisation, the process of economic liberalism (neoliberalism), multi-culturalism, ethicality, etc. (see Appadurai, 1996; Appignanesi et al., 1995; Bhattacharyya, 2009). In this article, I try to highlight the ethical issues of the culture of friendship amongst the Apatanis. This article also tries to display how the process of modernisation has gradually entered into the Apatani community through India's urbanisation, the economic reforms of the 1990s, also known as neoliberalism (Bhattacharyya, 2009).

It is essential to contextualise my area of study as being an exploration of an institution in the light of the complex of enmeshing of relationships in tribal societies. According to Marcel Mauss, in a tribal society, the "social phenomenon contains all threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these total social phenomenon, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression; religious, legal, moral and economic" (Mauss, 1966:1).

As my area of exploration is a community- based society, I seek to understand friendship as a social institution which is crucially enmeshed into the social fabric of the Apatani. As in pre-literate societies, friendship was not regulated as in modern western societies, instead was profoundly embedded and regulated within the asymmetrical structure or was constituted as a blood relationship resembling kinship. The paper seeks to understand the cultural history of the Apatanis, by exploring an important institution of social cohesion, which continues to exist despite being exposed to outside cultures and religion. It is within this framework of understanding that I shall try to posit my study of the pre- literate Apatanis.

The paper begins with a description of the geographical location of the region. This follows a description of the Apatanis and their various forms of friendship. Following this, I discuss the contemporary society, which is in transition and operates via a blend of both conventional value systems of the Apatanis as well as the modern values accrued through neoliberalism.

## **Locating the Region**

Outlining the spatial dimensions of present Arunachal Pradesh is imperative. Arunachal Pradesh, which receives the first ray of the dawn, is a land inhabited by multiple ethnic groups. The state is an abode of 26 major tribes and 110 sub-tribes. Linguistically, these tribes are affiliated to the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages. As regards to their racial affiliation, they have been described variously as belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid, Proto-Mongoloid, Paleo-Mongoloid and so on. The State has a total area of nearly 83,743 sq. Km. A predominantly mountainous terrain; it constitutes the southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas. It straddles international borders from Bhutan in the east along the south of the Tibetan plateau to the tri-junction wherein it shares territory with China, taking a syntaxial bend along the Irrawaddy-Salween divide. Running southwards along the Patkai range it borders present Tuensang district of Nagaland. The Brahmaputra valley skirts it south. Many traversable passes dissect Arunachal across its eastern and western frontiers, consequently at the crossroads of population movements from both the north and its east. This is evident from the shared cultural and religious affiliations of the ethnic communities living on its margins.<sup>3</sup>

It had remained peripheral to the state systems in the early historical period, though the first epigraphic reference is alluded to in the epigraphic records of 11th century Assam. The Choratbari grant of Ratnapala, mentions this mountainous terrain north of Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha as the land of the descendants of Jamdagni. The context was the marriage of

his son Purandarpala to princess Durlabha from this lineage (Baruah, 2007:125). Various material remains in forts, temple complexes across the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh are dateable to the 10th and 13th centuries and is credited to the polities of the Chutias, the Kacharis and the Bara-Bhuyans. Through these myths and legends in currency, this region has been deftly incorporated into the 'narrative of the Indic civilization'. It was in the 15th century that the encounter of the Ahom state with the various tribes in this frontier brought them within the narrative of state policy.

The colonial state did not directly administer the territory, yet, it was a narrative of intermittent interventions. As instruments of governmentality, they continued with those adopted by its predecessor state with in dealing with the ethnic communities through *posa*, *duars*, trade and *kotokies*.<sup>4</sup> The nature of these institutions, which earlier reflected elements of a balance between dominant state power and symbiotic relationship were altered to suit the exigencies of the colonial state. Along with other hill tracts, the 'northern frontier' of Assam was separated from the ordinarily administered areas in the demarcation of the "Inner Line" through Regulation I of 1873.<sup>5</sup> In 1911, it was designated as the North Eastern Frontier Tracts and subsequently, renamed as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1954.<sup>6</sup> On 20th January, 1972, it was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh with the status of a Union territory and was granted Statehood on 20th February 1987.

Each of the major tribes retains their distinctiveness in terms of their dress, customs, and their socio-linguistic systems, their religion and political institutions. This is despite many of them claiming ancestry from the same cultural hero or ancestor. Among the 26 tribes of the state, the Apatanis of Ziro valley are one of the tribe, well known to the world outside for their indigenously evolved sedentary cultivation

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<sup>3</sup> The Monpas, Sherdupens, Membas, Khambas inhabiting the northern extremities are followers of Tibetan Buddhism. The Khamptis and Singphos who migrated in the last quarter of the 18th century follow Theravada Buddhism. The Noctes (Eastern Nagas) accepted Vaishnavism, a dominant faith in Assam.

<sup>4</sup> *Posa* is a payment in kind to the tribes by the Ahom state from resources in the neighbouring plains. The *duars* were foothill passes or entry point marked by rivers designated to distinguish the territory under the state and that beyond it inhabited by the tribes. It was collected from individual households at specific periods of a year. The *kotokies* were mediators between the Ahom state and the tribes for communication.

<sup>5</sup> In the late nineteenth century, notions of a 'stable internal frontiers', 'for political security' was brought into play through a regulation for 'loosely administering' the frontiers of Assam. Designated as 'Inner Line' it was proposed to be applied in spaces bordering the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, while segregating the Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Cachar and Chittagong Hills. This demarcation was not a 'boundary line' rather designated the end of 'civil jurisdiction' beyond which the British subjects were excluded from entering, without a license or pass. The natural contours of the landscape and in its absence the remnant of a road, path or river was to be followed for demarcating the space.

<sup>6</sup> The North-East Frontier Agency, better known as NEFA was created for the first time on 23rd February, 1954. It was administered by the President of India through the Governor of Assam as his agent. The Governor was assisted by an Adviser who was the administrative head. NEFA initially was consisted of five administrative divisions, viz., Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap. Tuensang now a part of Nagaland was separated from NEFA in 1957.

## The Apatanis

The Apatanis, whose society I seek to study are said to belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial stock and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman family. They trace their descent from one legendary ancestor called Abotani. The Apatanis inhabit an area known as Ziro Valley of roughly 32 sq. km. The valley is sequestered by the hills and ranges in all directions and a small river, locally known as Kiile flows through the valley from the north to south. The river along with its tributaries supplies sufficient water for the wet-rice cultivation practiced by the community. Their oral traditions allude to their migration to this magnificent valley from the northern direction, from an earlier habitation from beyond the Kuru and Kime rivers (Habung 2009: 3).

According to Census of India 2001,<sup>7</sup> the total population of the Apatani Valley is 24,703 (approx.) of which 12,572 is urban, and 12,131 is rural, and 12,478 is male, and 12,225 is female. Their literacy rate is 55.72. The population has been spread over fifty-one villages of which seven villages are traditional, while the rest are modern villages.<sup>8</sup> Despite settling in different villages, they strongly maintain their social relationships and reinforce social cohesiveness through various ritual associations with the older habitat.

Colonialism came late to the Apatani valley in Arunachal Pradesh. C V F Haimendorf an Anthropologist-administrator in 1944 set up a temporary government outpost. (Blackburn, 2003:335). Thus, the Apatanis came in contact with a minimal government presence. His ethnographic studies brought the history and culture of the Apatanis into academia. However, Stuart Blackburn contends that the colonial encounter pre-dates Haimendorf's visit to the region to as early as 1897 (Blackburn, 2003: 335). There were no records of the limited colonial contacts with the Apatanis, limiting written sources for understanding their history. Therefore, construction of the history of the community is gleaned through the functioning of its societal institutions. For this reconstruction, a scholar has to depend on the oral traditions which help in providing an insight into the working of the social phenomenon.

The community is known for their sedentary agriculture among all dry farming communities in this portion of the Eastern Himalayas. The Apatanis are an enterprising and industrious community of Arunachal Pradesh. The practise of sedentary cultivation in a small sequestered valley heavily dependent on human resource had to evolve ways to maximise the use of labour. Their agricultural practice is sustained without the use of draught power but with the use of a hoe and digging stick. In addition, they have a remarkable system of irrigation which was indigenously evolved. Their agricultural system was planned enough to

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<sup>7</sup> Though the population of the Apatanis in 2011 Census is 27,792, yet it has not been possible to segregate specific data regarding rural-urban divide and number of males and females as the unit has been Lower Subansiri District.

<sup>8</sup> According to Habung in 2007-2008, the number of villages expanded to 51.

check soil erosion and deforestation with provision for efficient water management. As they practiced wet-rice cultivation, individuals held inalienable rights over their land and the agricultural plots were not rotated. With the right to inheritance based on patriliney<sup>9</sup> women generally did not have right to claim over the land. Besides this, land could not be transferred to a person who did not belong to the same tribe and village (Ghosh and Subba, 2003: 245).

The nuclear family was the basic unit of the society. However, the relationships extended to those of a clan and finally extending into village loyalties. Besides the omnipresent family group, we frequently find in tribal societies a type of unit that resembles the family in being based on kinship but otherwise differs fundamentally from it. It is the clan which is a unilateral kinship group is generally traced either through the father or mother, depending on the lineage pattern adopted within a particular society. The clan relationship, on the one hand, excludes kinsmen of the relations ties distant relatives as members of the same unit. The community, therefore, is united through this bond of kinship, which regulates social relationship regarding prohibiting same clan marriages and at ritual levels. This same kinship despite its rules of segregation also creates bonding at material level of religion, polity and economy in building community cohesiveness.

For the sustenance of their social fabric there operated many community-based institutions like the Builañ (Village Council), Gorra (organiser of community rituals). To meet the diverse needs of agriculture, the Apatanis have an institutionalised gang-labour system called the Patañ. From their childhood, every Apatani boy and girl identifies with a Patañ. Reciprocity in agricultural activities is an overarching phenomenon in communities' dependant on subsistence dry farming. The primary form of reciprocity occurs in the labour exchange by an individual who performs the service and expects the service to be returned. This is to meet the requirements of labour, which is scarce despite the use of slaves for agricultural purposes. The entire agricultural activities in the Apatani valley operates through a kinship bonding in which, both men and women whether young or old join hands together in the field.

It needs to be outlined that all societies practicing dry farming sustain their livelihood activities through reciprocal exchanges of labour at the level of the village/clan. However, they do not have a fixed institution to ensure such reciprocity, which is a unique feature of the Apatani society. It is pertinent to mention that not only did they live in a sequestered valley, but also the Nyishis, a dominant tribe, surrounded them. As a result, their access to the trade networks was extremely minimal. Therefore, to sustain the population within a closed valley, a sustainable agricultural pattern was evolved.

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<sup>9</sup> The terms patrilineal and patrilocal bear subtle differences, though at times they are used as synonyms (Ember and Ember, 1971). It is generally assumed that the tribal societies of North East India are matrilineal (genealogical relationship flowing from the mother's side) (see, Mizinga, 2000), as in the case of the Khasis. However, in the Apatani society, as opposed to matriliney, the society practices the descent through the father's line.

## Patañ and Friendship

The Patañ is a group comprising of a fixed number of individuals along a gendered division of labour. There are myths associated with the beginnings of the labour gang, which is said to follow the practice of sedentarisation of agriculture.<sup>10</sup> Initially, it alludes that the individuals responsible for organising the agricultural practice carried out the activities individually. It was the requirement of additional labour that led to the evolution of the patañ (Mammu, 2010: 10). The reciprocity embedded in its structures was symbolic of both exchanges between human and supernatural beings and exchanges of labour among networks of individuals necessary for production. The ritual association here seeks to provide social sanction of this institution at the temporal level. This combined labour structure also extended to activities for collecting house- building material.

The patañ formed on the basis of the age groups are termed as Hime Patañ and Akha Patañ respectively. The Hime Patañ consists of young children who are initiated into the nuances of agricultural operations from the age of seven. This group of child labour is not necessarily even in terms of gender. They are made to work on the fringes of the paddy fields and the kitchen gardens and in the early hours before dawn. One or two elders usually accompany the children. This association cuts across age and gender. Robert Lowie alludes to this characteristic of 'primitive tribe' stating that the social units are not just based on kinship but work through a variety of 'associations'. He further states that:

...We find that in most tribes every individual is simultaneously a member of a variety of social units. He is born into a sex, a moiety,<sup>11</sup> a totem sib and a class, with all of which his affiliation is permanent; he is also born into a certain status from which he advances through a special ceremony into that of maturity, and by less perceptible stages into that of a full-fledged elder. At any one period of his life, his duties and privileges may depend as much on his associational as on his kinship connections (Lowie, 1920: 270).

Individuals between 15 and 50 years constitute the Akha Patañ. A fixed number of five men and five women here constitute the Patañ. It is the same group of people who voluntarily form the Patañwork in rotation on the paddy fields at the request of the owners of the fields. Depending on the time of the day during which the agricultural operations were carried out there were accorded different nomenclatures' like the Konchi-Patañ and Aloh Patañ.

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<sup>10</sup> According to a legend, the first couple named Don Piisang and Liibo Taney after settling in their present habitat became aware that they had no knowledge of cultivation. A woman named Gelyu Yairing taught them to cultivate wet rice, while Timpi Talu transmitted knowledge for cultivation on dry fields. The first couple and their associates formed the first labour-gang called the Don Khallo.

<sup>11</sup> Groups identify themselves with the symbols of specific animal spirits is known as a spirit.

Based on the specificity of the work like the creation of repairing dykes, creating nurseries and transplantation of seedlings the patañ's were also assigned different names. The patañ is, therefore, a community-based organisation which anchors all material activities and therefore, forms the core of their livelihood. This system of reciprocity seems to reflect what Marcel Mauss defines as a system of exchange visible through enactments in rituals of lifecycle and trade. The leitmotif of this exchange is in terms of the exchange being associated with a spirit and therefore, meshes the spiritual with the material domain (Mauss, 1966:7).

It is through the patañ that a bond of friendship develops within its members. The composition of the patañ cuts across family and clan affiliations'. This beyond the clan bonding that is permanent in nature. Its ties extend beyond the time period of their productive exercise in the fields into the arena of leisure too. The friends sleep over in each other's houses by rotation, which is known as Doi Ajiñ. This practice was prevalent among both the men and women. The friendship within the patañ also develops into bonds of matrimony, which C V F Haimendorf alludes to thus: "...in some patañ there are girls and boys of different clans and there it happens quite often that working companions became (sic) lovers and marry when they grow up" (Mammu, 2010: 39). During such weddings the coworkers' of the patañ on the side of the bride and groom help each side out during the ceremony. When a female member of patañ gets married, her friends demand that since the friends 'keep each other warm' during the night during their sleepovers, therefore for taking her away, the groom is asked to compensate for it (Mammu, 2010). Traditionally the brides' patañ mates were provided with the best piece of bacon, which has been replaced currently by a gift of blankets.

In the eventually of the fire accident generally the community pools in for rebuilding their houses and provides them with other material support. The members of the Patañ are particularly obligated towards providing both material and emotional support. During the period of death rituals, the members of the community go back to their respective houses at the end of the day, while it is obligatory on the members of the same patañ to stay in vigil overnight as the funerary rituals proceed. In the event of conflict within the clan represented by each member, the members try to negotiate on behalf of their respective clan. This ensures an additional layer of bonding to ensure cohesiveness within the larger village community, which houses multiple clans (Mammu, 2010: 42).

The aspect of merry making is crucial to this friendship. Such a practice is a recreation of the activities of the first couple who initiated agriculture as well as the Don Khallo, and therefore considered as a spiritually sanctioned activity. The associates of Don Piisang, Abyo Hibyo Taney and Ayo Hising Piisang had indulged in merry making during the post-harvest season for which they prepared local wine called 'O' which they drank through the night. Through the night, they enact their traditions by narrating tales, songs and lore's of their respective clans. This practice through an informal network helps in transmitting life's lessons and other social values and ensuring continuity in a transmission of the indigenous knowledge. It helps to ensure harmonious social relationship, inculcates discipline and the spirit of dignity of labour.

More generally, the material, social and spiritual world works through this overlapping cycles of giving and receiving.

The members of the patañ receive a wage for rendering their labour for agricultural activities. When three members of the patañ are hired, they receive one large basket measure of paddy called Paro Yagii. All the ten members get paddy equivalent to half the value of a Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*). The tradition among the members is that they pool in their wage and increase their assets by purchasing the Mithun, an animal to which great cultural value is attached. A variety of paddy, which is a part of the remuneration is dried and husked to brew local wine. Whenever a member of the patañ decides to sever links with especially among the women, the traditional beads are snatched from her and kept as an asset. This is a way to dissuade a person from severing links with the patañ, unless it is in the eventuality of being married off to a neighbouring village.

Radcliffe Brown argues that beyond pure kinship, for the objective of social equilibrium, a man is connected with a large number of other persons. With some of them, he finds himself in a definite and specific jural relation, which can be defined regarding rights and duties (Brown, 1952: 101). The same set of obligatory relationships can be extended over a considerable range to all the members of a lineage or a clan or anage-set. In addition to these networks, he uses the term 'alliance' or 'consociation' for relationships beyond the family ties, which create networks both horizontally and vertically (Lowie, 1920).

To quote Robert H. Lowie, "sex moieties, divisions on the basis of matrimonial status, social clubs, secret fraternities, all crisscross the bonds of the family and the sib (clan) creating new units of incalculable significance for the individual's social existence" (Lowie, 1920: 296). Therefore, the association assumes equal or greater significance than the classificatory clan ties. Mauss, in his thesis, discusses the physical aspect of exchange of goods through social rituals, and trade and underline its significance. He states that "they exchange courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances, and feasts rather; and fairs in which the market is but one element and the circulation of wealth but one part of a wide and enduring contract" (Mauss, 1966: 17).

Although these anthropologists did not directly deal with the dimension of friendship, yet brought to the fore the aspects of relationships beyond the family and clan which aimed at maintaining social equilibrium. The obligatory contract of the patañ helps ensure inter-clan bonding in the light of recurring, inter-clan and inter-village conflicts. For the Apatani, such crisscrossing bonds was crucial for their livelihood and ultimately for social order. Alluding to mythical associations in the forming of such bonds and its sustenance is a way of being in relation to human and supernatural others that is learned from childhood, and is aculturally embedded standard for evaluating actions (Vleet, 2003:491).

## Myoko and Ceremonial Friendship

In traditional Apatani society, there are a series of agricultural cycle rituals. Since they are practitioners of sedentary agriculture, the rituals are elaborate, largely undertaken at the level of the community. In organising these rituals, the Gorras (composed of an elder representative from each clan within a village) play a leading role in addition to the priest (Nyibu). The first ritual of the agricultural cycle is Myokuñ, where all the spirits are invoked in order to seek blessings for 'warming of the soil to retain its fertility' (Habung 2009:: 93). In the period following India's independence and the introduction of the administrative apparatus- which was practically non-existent during the colonial period- this ritual has been converted into a festival, celebrated on a fixed date. The original villages of the tribes continue to be significant in terms of these ritual observances. Despite the multiplication of villages, it is during community rituals that the villagers renew affiliations to their original villages. Myokuñ is celebrated by rotation among the villages with Hari, Bula and Tajang forming one group, Hija, Duta, Mudang Tage, Bamin Michi forming the second group, with Hong the largest village forming the third (Kaning, 2008: 40).

The Apatani society is known to ceremonially initiate relationships within and outside the villages. They are the Subu Piinyan initiated during the Subu and Muruñ rituals (currently festivals); Lyichu Piinyan, established by sacrificing an animal with no specific period (Kaning, 2008). Both these ceremonial relationships occur within the village with a view to maximise on avoidance of conflicts within. In the context of friendship, it is the ceremonially sanctioned Biine Ajiñ' formed with individuals outside the village during the Myokuñ festival, which is important. The implication of this relationship is that the Biine Ajiñ should belong from outside the village grouping, which occurs for celebrating Myokuñ. New friendships are initiated during the festival and the friendships of the earlier generations too are sustained. When a friendship is contracted, it is generally under an oath. Each individual also utters a curse that would befall a person in the eventuality of severing the friendship. It works under an element of fear that their lineages would vanish if they failed to honour the oath. This tie once sanctified by the family or individual is permanent.

This ritual friendship has its roots in the life stories of their cultural hero Abotani and his companions. The entire ritual is an enactment of moral codes is situated in the mythical past of, derived out of a series accomplishments, and failings of their cultural hero and his experiences. The myth seeks to provide lessons for the community to maintain mutuality between humans, and humans and spirits and at the same time define what is expected of them as social norms.

The myth goes thus: Abotani, the cultural in course of his roaming in the material world had to encounter a large number of adversaries and also had friends. Among his friends, Siiki was prominent. He accompanied Abotani and constantly had to encounter challenges in terms of physical and mental prowess.

On one occasion, Siiki was asked to traverse a deep gorge, which he feared he would not be able to achieve. Abotani offered that he could achieve the feat by holding on to his loincloth. As they were traversing the gorge, Abotani let him go, and he fell into the gorge and died. He regretted this act of killing his companion. Fearing that his spirit would return to haunt him, Abotani initiated a series of rituals with the view to appease his spirit. To please the spirit of Siiki in a recreation of the attempt to rescue him from the gorge, he was offered the sacrifice of a Mithun. His spirit did not respond to the sacrifice, and he was subsequently offered a pig, which failed to appease his spirit. It was when the twig of a wild tree called tapar was offered, the spirit responded as a sign of forgiving Abotani for his act. The twig was symbolic of the physical attempt in trying to rescue a person who falls into a gorge (Mammu, 2010).

As the Myokuñ festival commences, a ritual is performed as a re-enactment of Abotani's penance. On the third day of the festival, a ritual called Tapar Liinii begins. At the centre of a village is the community platform called the Lapang, over which a ritual hut called the Nago is created. All the adult males collect the tapar from the forest and in a procession move towards the ritual hut. Inside the Nago the priest puts the tapar into the monkey skull through its nose.<sup>12</sup> The priest then begins the chants replicating the tradition of Abotani, invoking Ato Siiki considered the ruling deity of Myokuñ. As the incantations reach a feverish pitch, the tapar in the skull vibrates indicating the arrival of the spirit of Ato Siiki. When the priest formally declares the arrival of the spirit, all the males who are carrying the tapar put it over the nago and offer libations of the ritual drink, 'O' over the twig symbolising the appeasement of the spirit. It is with the performance of this ritual, which serves as means for balancing and adjusting the relationships between human and supernatural beings. As an act of completing the ritual, each individual gets a pig sanctified by the priest, which is later offered as a sacrifice (Kaning, 2008: 171-172).

Thereafter the respective Biine Ajiñ's are invited to the village. A person could have between 6-7 Ajiñ's from outside the village, which would include relationships from earlier generations and creating new bonds. Traditionally, such bonds were created and retained through the males. Currently, all members of the family form their friendships across the village and visit separately to maintain the ties, which once contracted cannot be severed. The Biini Ajiñ's visit their friends and are offered a special fare of the best food and local wine village. After being entertained for the day, as they leave they are offered uncooked meat from the sacrifice, the best piece of bacon (Yoh Asho), good quality home brewed wine (O Alah) and a local substitute of salt (Tapyo). There is also a competition in singing where the mythical stories are performed through a series of questions and answers from amongst the friends. Through this competition, the traditional knowledge gets transmitted, and its continuity is ensured (Kaning, 2008).

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<sup>12</sup> Monkey skulls are traditional kept in households for ritual value and is generally used as a hold for bow and arrow.

This tradition of ritualised friendship across villages helps in minimising inter-village conflicts in early times. In the eventuality of individuals being embroiled in conflict across villages, his Bine Ajing would negotiate on his behalf. In the eventuality of fire accidents, which is rampant in the closely cloistered Apatani villages, they help out their friends. During certain festivals like Subu and Muruñ when individuals find difficulty in getting eggs, fowls and Mithuns within their village the BiineAjiñ helps in procuring such articles. A person who fails to retain this friendship is socially looked down upon, as it is believed to be a violation of the code set down by their ancestors.

## **Society in Transition**

Culture is a dynamic as terms like continuity; adaptation and change are used to capture its complexities. The Apatani society with the onslaught of economic changes and modern value systems is in transition. Modernisation and the encounter with alternate cultures have radically impacted their traditional culture and practices. Being a pre-literate society, the myths and legends in which are encoded the stories of the spirits, human encounters and negotiations with the spirits and the cultural hero representing the triumph of the human spirit survive in oral forms. As the traditional ritual practices are encountering newer forms of institutionalised religion, which are codified, there is a substantial loss in the transmission of knowledge as populations have moved beyond traditionally bounded spaces, which are markers of their ethnic identities.

The livelihood patterns have been altered with the governmental insistence on abandoning the socially embedded shifting agriculture. The alterations in the demographic mobility occurred due to the demands of modern means of livelihood. Those who remained within the Ziro valley are engaged in modern professions like government sector, contractors and business enterprise. Consequently, they were subjected to a temporal measurement of time through the devices of chronometry and the solar calendar, replacing the time defined by cycles of agriculture and supplementary occupations. There was a gradual withdrawal from traditional activities in adapting to newer livelihood patterns. Those in governmental jobs moved out into different parts of Arunachal Pradesh, severely affecting the labour pool so crucial to their agricultural practice.

Children who go to school are no longer able to participate in the Konchi Patañ as Hime Patañ. The older population with diminishing energy levels and middle age women now constitute the core of the indigenous population. It is the women who take the burden of continuing with the tradition with work in the fields no longer in a structured manner. Its composition is uneven in terms of numbers, gender and age. Women are also taking upon themselves to take up the heavy work and irrigation activities earlier taken up by men. Though the aspect of reciprocity remains, yet it entails a heavy pressure on the small population attached to agriculture. The extension of the activities of the patañ from the

economic activity to a social one has ceased to operate. It is during the vacations that young boys and girls go back home and contribute to agricultural operations through affiliation to their respective patañ.

The institution survives in its functional aspects with severe modifications is reflective of the resilience of the institution in adapting to current social realities. What is lost in the process is the camaraderie and friendship sustained through this institution and loosening of bonds within the villages where a certain section of the population still live in. A substantial section of the population has converted to Christianity. They are just severing their associations with traditional institutions by not participating in community activities as they have rituals embedded within, which their new religious affiliation declares as Satanic. Therefore, social cohesion as maintained through this institution where the material and spiritual worlds overlap is under severe threat.

The friendship maintained through the BiineAjiñ however, continues to be reaffirmed at the-Myokuñ festival through the performance of the TaparLiinii ritual. It is the bounden duty of each individual to honour his friend and those acquired from earlier generations. Three days of the festival, which stretches for over a month, are dedicated to visits of friends. In case the immediate family of the friend is not present, distant members of the same family are ushered in and honoured.

Their role as representatives of their friends in inter-village feuds still continues. In terms of the day-to-day responsibilities of the Biine Ajiñ whose presence is expected for resolving conflicts, family members stationed at Ziro valley represent them. The traditionally valued items like the smoked bacon which the Biine Ajiñ carried back home are being replaced by money payments. The Biine Ajiñ's presently supplement their absence in times of calamities by financially pooling in. It is the fear of the spirits and the curse that dissuades people from severing this ceremonial friendship.

A new form of friendship called Tu Ajiñ has emerged which is not sanctified through ritual. The strict code of the Biine Ajiñ makes it difficult to sustain with the population spread out into other parts of Arunachal Pradesh. The newly converted Christian members of the society dissociate themselves from such ritual aspect of the friendship reciprocate by gifting sugar. They do seek to sever links through a mutual agreement of compensating the friend for the abandoning the institution under altered social conditions. However, the embedded fear acts as a deterrent in severing this tie unless it is mutually agreed upon. So long as the celebration of Myokuñ continues, this institution shall survive in its current form. There are fears within the community that the pace at which conversion to Christianity is taking place, this institution of friendship reified by their traditional faith will totally get effaced.

## **Conclusion**

All traditions that operate within tribal societies are centred on an awareness of the integral and whole relationship of symbolic and material life. It becomes difficult to separate subsistence, kinship structures, language, governance, and landscape from the system of beliefs and ritual practices. Within such an overlap of realms, that we find the culture of friendship is located in the Apatani lifeways. Each of practices through which friendship is structured seeks to create networks of goodwill at a variety of levels ranging from family, clan, and village to tribe. These associations intersect with other socially sanctioned institutions strengthening relationships very essential for the sustenance of their livelihood patterns, for a population concentrated within a small area. There is also a constant endeavour to minimise conflicts. Reciprocal exchange, the comprehensive principle governing conduct of a social relationship is extended into the domain of friendship.

The fact that each tradition was sustain through a myth is symbolic of the relationship between humans and non-humans. The stories try to capture the second phase of their mythology when humans, animals and spirits roamed the earth chronicling their encounters with each other. The myths also allude to conflicts, negotiations between the humans and the spirits and the final segregation of the realms of the humans and the spirits. The myths abound in the emergence of a cultural hero who guides the community through their earthly sojourn to their present abode. The stories of the trials and tribulations and the frailty of the human spirit as revealed in these myths are a window to the occasional disorderliness in the universal order. The myths and rituals that are enjoined upon the tribe are for the purpose of maintaining a semblance of order between humans, and between humans, non-humans and their environment, and between humans and spirits. The activities guiding the communities embody within it expressions of the constant underlying quest for the sustenance of a universal rational order. The essence of these myths and rituals, which support the sustenance of an institution is a means of determining self-awareness and awareness of others, and are thus, expressive of what each culture perceives as morality.

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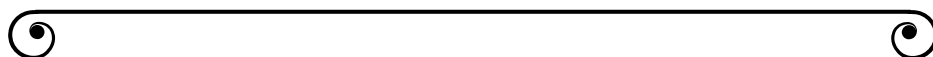
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# Understanding Patterns: Festivals of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Understanding Patterns: Festivals of Arunachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** Festivals in the society or community work as a prism, reflecting various aspects of people's life, from their faith, fear to their priorities. Thus, studying festivals become essential for gaining an in-depth understanding of any culture or society. This paper analyses the different festivals of both indigenous and non-indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh and also tries to understand the influence of non-indigenous religions in the festivals of Arunachal Pradesh.

**Key words:** Indigenous, Donyi-Poloism, Buddhism, Festivals.

### Introduction

Festivals are the mirror of people's culture and society, which emerge from the creative response of the masses to their problems, needs and aspirations.<sup>1</sup> Festivals not only express the true nature of any society or community, but also their beliefs, customs, dreams and imagination. Every festival has its own

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unique story behind its origin. These unique stories become folklore or folktales, which serve as a foundation for the festivals. In human societies festivals are not only a time of celebration, but also a time for praying and offering to nature or God for their blessings, in order to gain a rich harvest, good health or general prosperity and welfare, protection from natural calamities, from wild animal attacks, disease and epidemics, or to immortalise personalities, deeds and events.<sup>2</sup> Very festival owns a different set of rules, rituals, customs, dresses, songs and dances. In simple societies, festivals mostly revolve around nature. Praying and worshiping nature demonstrates the importance of nature in the survival of humankind. In nature worship different aspect of nature is either personified or in its true form is worshipped. Each festival is synchronized according to the different seasons, based on the indigenous calendars throughout the year. And each season is marked by its peculiar characteristics: for example, the season of sowing or the season of harvesting and so on. This also draws our attention towards the importance of agriculture and cultivation within the tribal communities.

In Arunachal Pradesh, festivals are varied from one community to another, based on their religious beliefs. Most of the groups have their own beliefs and religious notions, but they have been influenced by Buddhism from across the international boundaries with Tibet, Myanmar and Bhutan, and by Hinduism and Christianity from across the plains of Assam.<sup>3</sup> There are in total 25 distinct tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes, having their own religious beliefs and customs which can be classified into four groups.<sup>4</sup>

(a) First, the Donyi-Poloism, of which the adherents are mostly those tribes who believe themselves to be the descendants of Abotani such as Adi, Nishi, Apatani, Tagin and other tribes.

- (b) Second, Buddhism of both Mahayana and Hinayana sects emanating from Banpolism of Tibeto-Burmese roots and the Theravada school of Burmese stream respectively, such as Monpa, Khampti, Sherdukpens, Memba, Khamba, Zhakhring, Miju, Mishmi.
- (c) Third, Hinduism also influenced some of the tribes, such as Nocte, Idu etc.
- (d) Fourth, Christianity such as Lisu, Morang etc.

### **Objective**

This paper makes an attempt to understand the influence of non-indigenous religions in the festivals of Arunachal Pradesh. We have tried to classify the reasons behind the organisation of these festivals by different communities belonging to both indigenous and non-indigenous faiths. The study shows that the non-indigenous faiths have been strongly influenced by the indigenous faiths. That is why what we see now is that though many tribes in Arunachal Pradesh have converted or adopted a new religion they all are still practicing their traditional faith along with the newly acquired faith.

### **Festivals**

A festival means a time or day of feasting or celebration or a series of performances of a certain kind. A festival in the accepted usage of the term, may be defined as an aggregate of rituals observed mostly in an astronomically or ordinarily fixed date and time and celebrated with rejoicing by an ethnic group, or a social group or a community as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In Arunachal Pradesh, festivals are varied from one community to another, based on their religious beliefs. In this paper, we will follow the classification of communities in Arunachal Pradesh, given by Mibang and Chaudhuri (2004),<sup>6</sup> in order to study different festivals under the different religious groups like Doni-Poloism, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism.

### **(a) Donyi-Poloism**

Donyi-Poloism, the belief on the sun and the moon god, is a faith practiced by five large indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh and their sub-tribes out of the 25 indigenous communities. Out of the total population of the state almost 50% of the population are followers of this faith. These five tribes Adis, Apatanis, Tagins, Nishis and Hill Miris call themselves the 'Tani' group.<sup>7</sup> This group believes themselves to be the descendant of Abo Tani who is their mythical forefather. The Tani group of the people explains all natural phenomena as well as the link between this world and the Supreme through their belief. They are viewed as divine representations that watch over this world. The sun is feminine, which is also known as Anne Donyi or mother sun. The moon is masculine and all the work is decided on the basis of moon movement (Lunar calendar).<sup>8</sup> These tribal communities believe in many deities and several types of heavenly spirits. They also believed in the existence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits and also worship different natural forces like the earth, sky, moon, sun, water and mountains, and offer sacrifice to propitiate them.<sup>9</sup> The worship of ancestors and nature plays an important role in the day to day life of these tribal communities, and in order to please them they offer feast, ceremony and sacrifices. According to the 2001 Indian Census out of the 705,158 tribal population of Arunachal Pradesh, 333,102 (47.24%)<sup>10</sup> falls under the category of "other religion followers" or the follower of animistic faith.

### **Important Festivals**

Festivals in the Tani group are varied from one tribe to another, but most of the festivals are celebrated for good agriculture, prosperity and well-being of domestic animals. The most popular festivals among the Tani group are Solung, Etor, Aran, Unying/Aran, Mopin, Reh, Si-Donyi, Siron Molo

Sochum, Moram, Nyokum, etc. Festivals celebrated by the Tani group can be divided into two major groups of festivals:

**1. Festivals for good crops and well-being of domestic animals:**

The first group comprises those festivals which are related to agriculture and domestication of animals, to secure a good harvest and well-being of domestic animals. This group includes the festivals like Solung, Dree, Unying/Aran, Mloko/Myoko, Nyokum etc. celebrated by different indigenous communities of the Tani Group.

- Solung is one of the important festivals amongst the Adi tribe and its sub-tribes like Padam, Minyong, Pasi, Pangi, Ashing, Tangam, and Milang. It is celebrated on 1 September, after the last weeding and before the winter harvesting.<sup>11</sup> This festival is celebrated to appease the Dadi Bote (deities of animals) and Kine-Nane (deity of fertility and food grains) for good harvest and for the welfare of domestic animals.<sup>12</sup> During this festival 'Ponung' and other folk dances are performed and animals like Mithuns, pigs etc. are sacrificed.<sup>13</sup>
- The Dree Festival is an Apatani agriculture festival. It involves the sacrifice of fowls, eggs and animals to the gods – Tamu, Metii and Donyi-Polo. This is celebrated every year on 5 July after completing paddy plantation.<sup>14</sup> During this festival, the girls perform the Busidu or Amualu dance by day on a hillock at the outskirts of the village.<sup>15</sup>
- Unying/Aran is another Adi festival, popular in Minyong, Pasi and Pangi community. Minyong celebrated Unying/Aran in the month of April at the onset of *Jhum* cultivation. Pangi celebrate Aran during March, to express their gratefulness to the God Donyi-Polo for good harvest. And Pasi celebrate Aran in February before *Jhum* cultivation

begins. During the evening of these festivals, the male folk sing the Bari or the chorus song.<sup>16</sup>

There are several other festivals celebrated by the Tani group, for bumper harvest and well-being of domestic animals. Such as the festivals of Etor of Adis, Pepotamiyo Modana of Bokars, Yulu of Gallong tribe and the Rap and Alilibu festival of Pailibos tribe, imran of Milangs, Nyokum of Nishis and Pumeng of Komkar tribe, Aran festival of Pangis and so on.<sup>17</sup> The rituals and rites are the common aspects that joins one festival to another. The most important rites and rituals performed by the Tani group are Agam Kepel (rite for the welfare of domestic animals), Binyat (rite for the bumper crop), Mopun (rite for purification of land before cultivation) and so on.<sup>18</sup>

**2. Festival for Prosperity and wealth:** The second group includes those festivals which are observed for prosperity, good health and happiness of individual family or the whole community. This includes the festivals like Mopin, Moram, Nyokum, Siron Molo Sochum, Si-Donyi, Boori Boot, Reh etc. In which few are as follows:

- Moram is the Apatani festival, celebrated in the month of January- February.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of this festival is to ensure welfare and prosperity. It is an individual family festival, but the entire Apatanis as well as others can also participate in the feast offered by the individual household. In this occasion, Mithun is sacrificed and a special share of meat is distributed to the members of the *Buliang* (traditional village council) and the rest of the village.

The Hurukhandu dance is performed by young men. In this festival, the people summon the deities named Arki, Aro, Mindu, Kordu, Tugru, Higr, Dulu and Potu in

order to gain their blessings for prosperity and wealth of the family members.<sup>20</sup>

- Boori Boot is the most important festival of the Hill Miri tribe, celebrated in the month of February. The festival invokes the spirit of Boori Boot to bless them with prosperity and a healthy life. Under the guidance of the Nibu (priest), people construct the images of the spirits out of bamboo, cane and leaves for worshipping. It is a three-day festival during which all the rituals and sacrifices are performed by the Nibu (priest). The priest performs prayers for the welfare and prosperity of the community.
- Reh is the festival of Idu Mishmi tribe, and celebrated between January and April in the Lower Dibang Valley and between June and August in the Upper Dibang Valley. The festival is observed for seeking welfare and prosperity for the family and for a good crop. It is a festival with substantial expenses involved, which require a number of sacrificial buffaloes for offering to the great mother 'Nanyi Inyitaya' and the presents such as money in cash and pigs for relatives.<sup>21</sup>

There are several other festivals which are celebrated by the Tani group, for prosperity, wealth and good health of mankind. Such as the festival of Mopin of Adis, Uyo Modana of Bokars, Rap, Kato Padung, Amden and Givedadung of Pailibos, Motor of Pangis, and so on.<sup>22</sup> The rites and rituals are performed during all these festivals are Taktor (rite for the good health of mankind), Tapu (a rite to eradicate germs from body), etc.

#### **(b) Buddhism (followers of the Hinayana and the Mahayana sect of Buddhism)**

According to the 2001 Indian census, out of the 705,158 tribal population in Arunachal Pradesh total 82,634 (11.72%) are

Buddhist.<sup>23</sup> The Buddhist tribes in Arunachal Pradesh are Khampti, Khamba, Khamiyang, Memba, Monpa, Nas, Chakman Singpho, Sherdukpen, Zhakring and Khowa.<sup>24</sup> But all these tribes do not belong to the same sect of Buddhism, for example the Khampti and Singpho belong to the Hinayana sect of Buddhism, while Khamba, Nas, Monpa and Sherdukpen follow the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. Most of the tribes following the Mahayana sect of Buddhism are confined to the Lohit and Changlang districts, and unreformed Tibetan (Lamaistic form) sect to Siang while reformed one to Kameng. Some of these tribes are still carrying their animistic faith or traditional tribal religion but also following Buddhism as their main religion such as Khamiyang, Singpho, etc.

### **Important Festivals**

Most of the Buddhist festivals are more or less the same with small variation in the rituals followed by different Buddhist communities. Their most important festivals are Losar, Sangken, Maiko Chumfai or Falgooni Purnima, Putwah, Choskar, Torgya etc.

These festivals mark the different events in Buddhist history, from Lord Buddha's birth to his attainment of Nirvana. The festivals celebrated by Buddhist communities can be divided into three groups:

**1. Festivals celebrated to mark different events of Lord Buddha's life:** The first group includes those festivals which celebrate different events in the life of Lord Buddha. Such as Drupka Tsajee, Maiko Chumfai, Saga Dawa, and so on.

- **Drupka Tsajee/ Drupka Tseshi:** This festival marks the day on which Lord Buddha gave his first sermon on the 'Four Noble Truths' to his first five disciples at Deer Park in Sarnath, also known as the day when Lord Buddha turned 'the wheel of Dharma'. The festival is held on the

4th day of the 6th month of the Buddhist lunar calendar around July or August every year. However, the date can vary from region to region.

The festival is celebrated among the Monpas with great enthusiasm. During this festival people visit religious shrines or monasteries to offers prayers.

**2. Festivals celebrated for good agriculture and prosperity:** This group includes those festivals which are celebrated for bumper harvest, prosperity and good health of the people of the community and safeguarding communities from evil spirits. Some of these are Choskar, Torgya, Sungkhnu, Cungripa Losar, Mendruk Brua, Wang and Khisksawa, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

- Choskar: It is a religious ritual among Monpas, celebrated during the arid summer month of April- May, after the *Jhum* field is prepared. The ritualistic event begins with the reading of the religious scripture by the priest or the Buddhist Lamas in the Buddhist temple, also known as Gompa. A procession, led under the guidance of the senior Lama, is taken out by the villagers. The procession with the holy books goes around all the cultivated fields of the village.<sup>26</sup> The significance of this ritual is that it is to ensure better cultivation and protection from pests and wild animals and also to bring prosperity and happiness to the villagers.

During this festival, the *Kiengpa Cham* dance is performed by two young men wearing a monkey mask called *Kiengpas* (Kieng =monkey), along with the carriers of the scriptures.<sup>27</sup>

- Torgya is a monastic festival, celebrated by the Monpas of Tawang monastery. This festival is celebrated every year from the 28th day of the eleventh Monpa month (Dawa Chukchipah) of the lunar calendar, which generally falls

in between the month of December-January.<sup>28</sup> Torgya is a three-day festivals, which is celebrated to protect the community from evil and harmful spirits by driving them away and usher prosperity and happiness for people and crops. The number of dances performed during the celebration, like Pha Cham, Jam Cham, Arakacho Cham, Shia Cham, Dut Cham, and Thutotdam etc. are accompanied by beating of drums and cymbals, blowing of huge telescopic horns and clarinets.<sup>29</sup>

**3. Festivals celebrated to commemorate the advent of New Year:** This group includes those festivals, celebrated to commemorate the advent of New Year. Such as Losar, Sangken, and Sipongyong Poi, and so on.

- Losar is one of the most important festivals among Monpa, Memba and Sherdukpen Buddhist tribes, celebrated in the month of January, February or March. This festival is celebrated to commemorate the advent of New-Year. It lasts for eight to 15 days. During these days, prayer is offered for prosperity and good health. Losar marks the beginning of Tibetan New Year.
- Another important Buddhist festival is Sangken mostly celebrated by the Khamiyang, Khampti, and Singpho tribes. Sangken generally falls in the month of 'Naun Ha', the fifth month of the year of the Khampti Lunar calendar coinciding with the month of April. It is celebrated on the last days of the old year and the end of the festival marked with the beginning of the Lunar New Year.

In sum, every Buddhist community follows the lunar calendar for fixing and commencement of festivals. The fourth month according to the local lunar calendar is considered very auspicious for every Buddhist follower, because the fourth

month marks the birth of Lord Buddha, his attainment of enlightenment, and his passing into the state of Nirvana.

### **(c) Hinduism**

In Arunachal Pradesh the advent of Hinduism came from the effort of the followers of Shri Sankaradeva of Assam. According to the 2001 Indian census out of the 7,05,158 tribal population in Arunachal Pradesh a total of 92,577 (13.13%) are Hindu.<sup>30</sup>

The Hindu majority tribes are Mishmi, Mishing/Miri, Deori, Aka, Longchang Tangsa, Nocte, Wancho etc.<sup>31</sup>

### **Important festivals**

Some of their important festivals are Harak, Bhimidi, Rajkema, Bohoga and Basak Bihu, Narong and so on.

- Bohagiyo Bisu/ Bohoga Bihu is one of the most important harvest festivals of Deoris. It is observed for a period of seven days. In the first day of the festival Deoris offer a puja in a "Than". The sacrifice of birds, goats, ducks and fowls are performed during this festival.
- Narong festival is celebrated by Longchang Tangsa. It is an agricultural festival observed for a day. In this festival Longchang Tangsas welcome Goddess Laxmi to their houses.

### **(d) Christianity**

According to the 2001 Indian census, out of the 705,158 tribal population in Arunachal Pradesh a total of 1,86,617 are Christian (26.46%). The percentage of Christian followers in Arunachal Pradesh slightly increases from the previous census report of India (1991).<sup>32</sup>

The Christian majority tribes are Wancho, Dafla, Mossang Tangsa, Bori, Yobin, Lisus etc.<sup>33</sup>

### **Important Festivals**

These tribes celebrate Christian festivals, which are observed throughout the country, but their names and the ways of celebration may be different such as, Mokhosil (New Year), Saliapai (Good Friday), Jasipai (Thanksgiving Day), and Eschipai (Christmas) etc.<sup>34</sup> are some examples of Christian festivals celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh. These groups sometimes decline to participate in the traditional dance, music and festivals. But Christianity also brought many new festivals into Arunachal Pradesh like Thanksgiving, Good Friday and Christmas. These new festivals have added extra colour to the cultural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Conclusion**

Every festival in Arunachal Pradesh signifies the important role of Nature, environment and surrounding ecological factors in the survival of humankind. Thus, every festival is observed to worship Nature and its different attributes in order to protect humankind from all natural calamities. On the other hand, agriculture based festivals in Arunachal Pradesh signify the importance of Agriculture as a major source of livelihood.

The most important festivals are Solung, Mopin, Losar, Boori Boot, Dree, Nechi Dau, Chalo-loku, Longte Yullo, Khan, Ojiali, Reh, Sanken, Si-Donyi, Nyokum-Yullo and Tamladu, etc. Each festival has its own distinct form of rituals, customs, dance and music. Animal sacrifices are common in most of the festivals, particularly in the non-Bodic tribes. Dance and Music form an important aspect of celebrations either as an expression of joy or a ritualistic submission to the supremacy of God.

As agriculture is the main occupation of many tribes, major festivals are marked with the beginning of cultivation

or the end of cultivation (from the beginning or sowing to the end or harvesting). As there are myriad of communities, the festivals are celebrated throughout the year in one community or the other. These festivals are not just a time of celebration or enjoyment but also a time for bringing all people together who otherwise remain scattered in far-flung villages. Most of the tribes converted to Christianity or following Hinduism still carry the traces of their traditional tribal beliefs. The list of festivals of the non-indigenous religious groups includes the festivals in their calendar like Buddha Purnima or Christmas which are celebrated with an indigenous flavour. For instance, the Hindus celebrate the Narong festival. In this festival Longchang Tangsa community welcomes Goddess Laxmi to their houses. The Christians festivals have indigenous names, like Mokhosil is New Year, Saliapai is Good Friday, Jasipai is Thanksgiving Day, and Eschipai is Christmas.

The people of Arunachal Pradesh are part of the process of global commonness but at the same time are also retaining their indigenous ways of life. It is difficult to use concepts like acculturation or diffusion commonly used in anthropological literature for explaining this situation because the boundaries between their own, and what they have borrowed or received are still visible. When a group or society is in contact with a more powerful society, the weaker group is often obliged to acquire cultural elements from the dominant group and this process is acculturation. There is no visible dominant group or powerful society with which the indigenous groups of Arunachal Pradesh is in contact. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity are world religions which are present in Arunachal Pradesh, but unlike Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur their impact on the way of life of the people has been minimal.<sup>35</sup>

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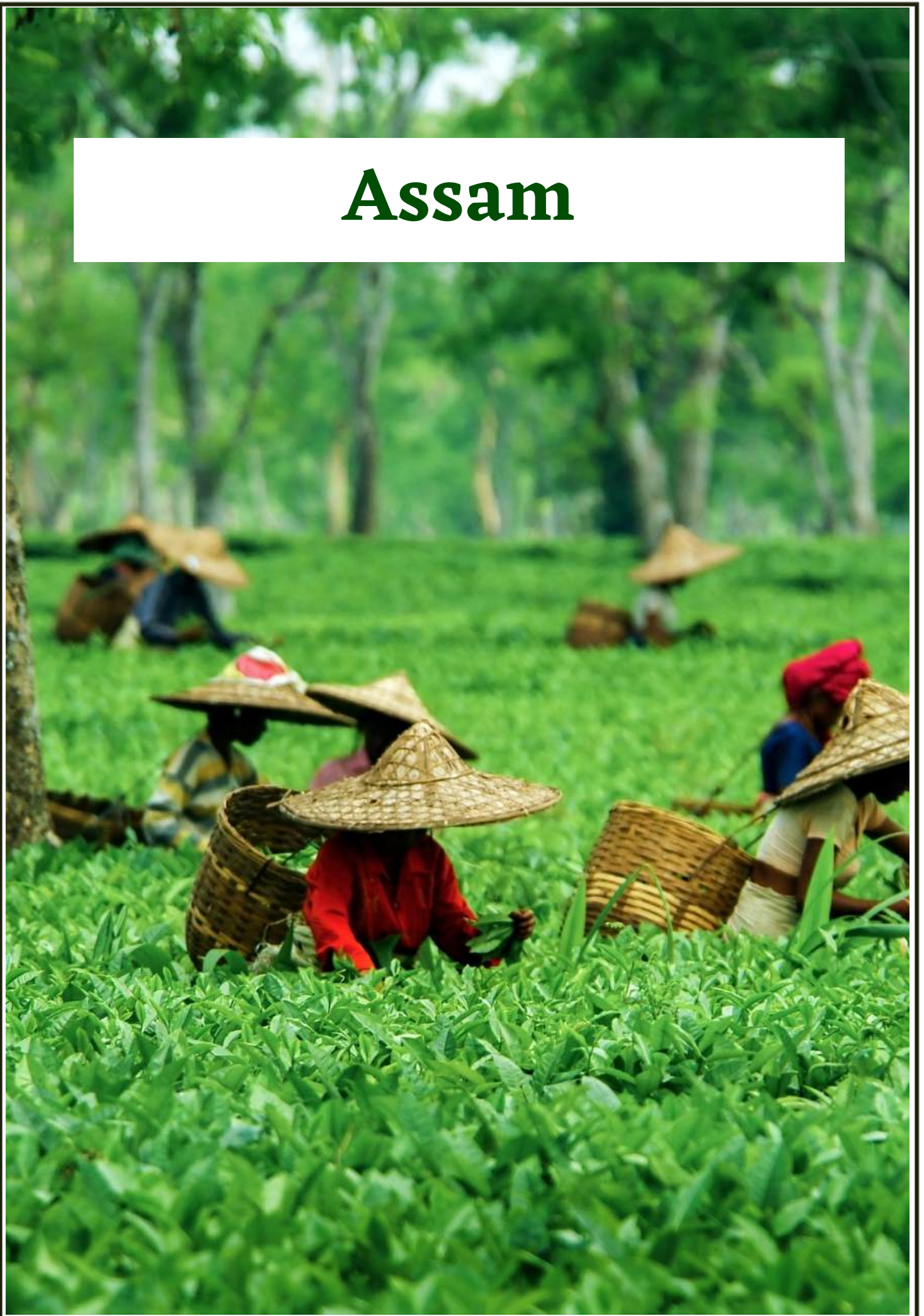
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# Assam



# A study on Satra tradition of Assam

Bornali Borah

## Introduction

Satras are the outcome of Neo-Vaishnavism propagated by Sankardev. These Satras have been exerting great influences on the social, religious and cultural aspects of Assam since the 16th century. The Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam is not separate one from that of Bhakti movement in other parts of India. The Vaishnavite Bhakti movement got momentum across India in the 15th century. North India witnessed the rise of this spiritual movement in the 14-15th centuries. While Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Kabir were the exponents of Vaishnavite in north India, Chaitanyadev in west Bengal and Sankardev in Assam advocated the same ideas and ideals. The ancient texts such as 'Kalika Puran', 'Jogini Tantra,' claimed the prevalence of Saktism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism in Assam much before the birth of Sankardev. But, the external activities of all these three branches altered the original meaning of religion. There were malpractices in the name of religion. Sankardev realised that without the unity among people, the progress of the society will be hindered. Therefore, he adopted the easy means of the ancient religion and tried to ensure unity in the society. Sankardev visited different pilgrimage sites across India for 12 years. Based on his experiences from pilgrimage, Sankardev promoted the Neo-Vaishnavism or 'Aksaran Bhagawati Dharma' in Assam. Madhabdev, Damodardev and Haridev also followed Sankardev's footsteps. The branch of religion of Sankardev was based on the ideologies of 'Bhagavata Purana' and the 'Bhagavad Gita'. He composed songs, poems and plays to attract the public towards the religion. On the other hand, he established the 'Satras' as sites of religious discussions. Later, the Satras played pivotal role not only in promoting the religion, but also helped in the development of Assamese culture.

The word 'Satra' was used in the Indian literature since times immemorial. There was mention of the word in the Rigveda, the oldest literature of India. The word was stated in the 13th rik of the 33rd sukta under the 7th mandala. It has been perceived that the word 'Satra' was first used in this ancient text. The scholars provide different definitions of Satras. The 'Hem Kosha' dictionary defines Satra as—a religious institution in Assam, a monastery, a session (Barua, 934). According to 'Adhunik Asomiya Abhidhan', 'Sanskrit-Inraji Abhidhan' and 'Sanskrit-Asomiya Abhidhan', a Satra is a Yajna or Yagya. The meaning of the word has been described in many ways in different books and dictionaries. Satra is a religious place where the worshippers pray and worship the god. The Satra can be defined as a place of worship where the noble things are discussed with devotion. Discussion on the Bhagavata is a major part of the Satras.

## **Methodology and source**

Descriptive and analytical methods are used in this research paper. The primary data for this study are collected from field study and various books, Journals, Articles etc. are used as the secondary source of data.

## **Discussion on the topic**

Sankardev promoted the ideologies of the Bhagavata in Assam towards the end of the 15th century. Before that, Vishnu and other deities enjoyed prominence in the Hindu religion. As the Bhagavata gained the importance in the 14th century, the worship of Krishna started to get the dominance (Sarma, 7-9) instead of Vishnu. Sankardev derived his ideas from the 'Shrimad Bhagwat' 'Gita' and 'Padma Puran.' Based on these scriptures, he advocated the Neo Vaishnavism in Assam. Sankardev and his disciples established Satras and Namghars to spread the religious messages across Assam. Following the establishment of Bordowa Than by Sankardeva, many such Thans or Satras were established with the same objective of ensuring equality in the society. Sankardeva established the Satras with an aim to discuss and practice religion, culture and literature in a serene ambience and make it a way of life. His disciples and contemporaries also set up Satras with the same principles. Sankardev's disciples such as Madhabdev and Damodardev not only established Satras for religious activities, but it also turned into a place of public discussion.

Sankardev set up the Satras after his return from the pilgrimage. During that time, Satra were not full-fledged. Damodardev established a full-fledged Satra on a piece of land provided by Ramrai. Sankardev was impressed with this Satra and asked Madhabdev to take inspiration from it. The Satras gained the momentum in development from the time of Madhabdev and Damodardev.

Though after the demise of Sankardev, the Vaishnavite community in Assam was divided into four groups, there are no major differences among them. There are differences in some of the rituals and external activities only. Differences are noticed among these four groups in terms of Nam-Dev, Guru-Bhakat, festivals and customs. It was only after the death of Sankardev, that the rifts were perceived in the Vaishnavite community of Assam. The beginning of the dissidence was attributed to the unwillingness of Sankardev's disciple to take part in the Mahapurush-Tithi organised by Madhabdev (Dev Goswami, 1). Thus, Brahma Sanhati became a separate branch of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Aauniati, Garmur, Dakshinpaat and Kuruwabahi are four Satras under this Sanhati or branch. Questions were raised about the descendants of Madhabdev after his death. It was because of the differences among Purushuttam, Saturbhuj Thakur, two grand children of Sankardeva, Mathura Das Burha Aata and Gopal Aata, Purush Sanhati, Nika Sanhati and Kaal Sanhai came into existence. Norowa, Kowamora, Dighali and Samaguri Satras are under the

Purush Sanhati. Nika Sanhati includes—Barpeta, Madhupur and Kamalabari Satras. Kaljar, Dihing, Mayamora, Bahbari Satras belong to Kaal Sanhati. The other Satras under Kaal Sanhati are Aahatguri, Haladhiaati, Kathpar, Ikarajan, Khoiramochora, Na-Ghoria etc.

Thus, the concept of Satras which was initiated by Sankardev veered towards the development. The Satras, established in the 17th century was run in a feudal system as they were financially supported by the Ahom kings. Many Satras were established during the reigns of Jayadhwaj Singha and Gadadhar Singha. But, it has been found that punishment was given to the violators of Satra culture during the rule of Gadadhar Singha.

### **Nature of Satras**

The Satras in Assam are divided into three groups according to their nature—Udashin Satra, Ardha Udashin Satra and Grihasthi Satra. Women cannot stay in the Udashin Satras. The followers of Udashin Satras are indifferent to the worldly pleasure and engage themselves only in the worship of god. In the Ardha Udashin Satra, there are separate accommodations for the married people and others. In such Satras, Satradhikars and Deka Satradhikars remain indifferent towards the conjugal life. Grihasthi Satras are those places of worship where the followers fulfil the responsibilities—both domestic and spiritual. Auniati Satra is an Udashin satra. While, Dakshinpat and Barpeta Satras are Ardhan Udashin, most of the Satras belong to the category of Grihasthi Satra.

On the other hand, Satras are divided into three categories such as Mul, Aajnapar and Salabanti. The Satras which were established by the Gurus themselves are called Mul Satras. Aajnapar Satras are those which were set up by the disciples of the Gurus in accordance with their Aajna (direction). Salabanti Satras are the branches of the Mul Satras. Most of the Satras of Assam belong to this category as they were established with any revered material or resource of the Mul Satras.

### **The structure of Satras**

Irrespective of their branches or Sanhatis, the structure of all the Satras is the same. The major elements of a Satra are— Namghar and Monikut, Guru Griha, Vaishnav Griha, Charihati Bhoral, Atithisala, Natyasala, Korapat and Bhogghar.

Namghar and Manikut are two integral parts of a Satra. The Manikut and Namghar are established in the middle of a Satra with east-west direction. Manikut is also known as Bhajghar. Epics such as the Kirtan, Dasham, Namghosha, Ratnawali are kept above the incarnation of Vishnu or the Guru Asana. There is a dome like structure towards the west of the Namghar or Kirtanghar. Towards that the main door or the Singha Duar is located. There are spacious verandahs in all the four sides of the Satras. The Satradhikar has the supreme power to run the Satra.



Satras

The Satradhikar is free from the responsibilities of married life and there is a separate house for him which is called Gurugriha. The four sides of the Namghar or Kirtanghar are surrounded by the houses of the followers. These houses are called Vaishnav Charihatis.

While many Satras have separate guest houses for the guests, in some Satras, the guests have to stay at the Charihatis. There are arrangements of Natyasala and Akharagriha (Practice room) for the performances of Bhaona in and outside the Satra. The main room at the entrance of the Satra is known as Korapat. The house where the offerings for the god are prepared is called Bhogghar. A full-fledged Satra also accommodates Doulgriha, Sowghar, Padsila etc.

## **Tradition of Satras**

Tradition means customs or rituals which are observed since the ancient times. Therefore, with the changing times, the tradition also perceives changes. The community prayers are named as Prasanga in the Satra tradition. There are certain norms for the community prayers which are known as Chaidhya Prasanga or 14 Prasangas (Dev Goswami, 17).

Though Madhabdev introduced these Prasangas, it was Purushattam Thakur who developed it later. But there are differences in terms of 14 Prasangas according to the Satra to Satra. Some Satras observe only 14 Prasangas—in the morning, noon, afternoon and evening. The observance of 14 Prasangas was later relaxed in many Satras. When the political power started to impact the financial side of the Satras, the followers or the worshippers couldn't give proper attention to the spirituality. The Satra tradition was hampered in many Satras established by the early spiritual leaders of Vaishnavism.

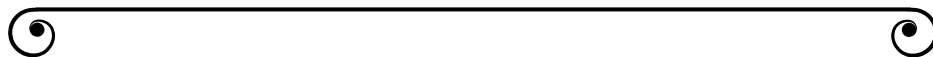
Now, the full-fledged Satras are noticed only in Barpeta, Majuli and Patbausi. Because, the number of Aajnapar and branch Satras is higher in comparison to the Mul Satras. Manikut, Namghar and Doulgriha are the major parts of the branch Satra. Changes have been noticed in the performance of the Bhaona as well as songs and dances. While with the changing times, Baresohoria Bhaona and Hejari Bhaona got prominence, modern instruments are also being used. Another important event of the Satras is the election of the Satradhikar. At present, democratic election for the Satradhikar takes place only in the Barpeta Satra. In many Satras, Nirmali Lowa Utsav is organised in a grand manner. The play which is performed in this event should be written by the Satradhikar. It is an evident that the Satradhikar has expertise in the religion as well as art and culture. But gradually, many Satras are leaving such rituals.

## **Conclusion**

As the impacts of globalisation are making inroads to every nook and corner of the globe, it has become challenging to keep the tradition of Satras alive with an indifferent attitude towards the world. At present times, most of the parents are reluctant to send their children to live a life of a worshipper at the Satras. Most of the children return to the homes after a certain point of time. But Udashin Satras have been playing a pivotal role in promoting the Satra culture and tradition in Assam and abroad. The efforts to keep alive their culture is significant in terms of history and culture of Assam

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# The Non-Cooperation Movement and the Hindu-Muslim fraternity in Assam

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The Indian National Movement got a new pace and dimension with Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation movement (1920-22) enjoying mass mobilization under the leadership of M. K. Gandhi. Under the banner of these two movement people from all over India irrespective of region and religion, caste and community began to oppose the British rule adopting a common programme of action and thus paved the way for transforming the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movement into a mass movement with a view to raising the voice of the Indians against the British authorities. Gandhi first revealed his proposed action plan in the *All-India Khilafat Conference* (17th April, 1920) with the plan for the boycotting of Governmental educational institutions, offices, Legislative Councils and other elective bodies, renouncing of official titles, honours and refusing to pay revenue and taxes. At the same time he emphasized the promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity to confront the government with a united stand.

The struggle for freedom in Assam came to form an integral part of the Indian National Movement following Khilafat and Gandhi's programme of Non-Cooperation movement. It had tremendous impact in Assam which witnessed Hindu - Muslim fraternization on that day and the leaflet on Duties of 19th March issued by the All India Khilafat leaders was endorsed in meetings in several places in Assam.<sup>1</sup> Irrespective of their caste and community the people from all parts came forward to participate in it. Along with the Hindus the Muslims belonging to both the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys of Assam played an active role in organizing Khilafat meetings with common programme of action.

The objective of the paper is to analyze the Hindu-Muslim fraternization during the Non-cooperation movement and to focus the part played by the people of Assam in this great event and to narrow down the gap between the two communities. The methodology used for this paper is a historical methodology of the primary and secondary data available on the non-co-operation movement. The oral traditions and interview of elders are also examined and verified in the light of information given in other sources. The approach of the paper is multi-disciplinary and an extensive study on the basis of existing literature.

The political support for the non-cooperation concept came almost spontaneously from the Surma Valley Political Association and the Surma Valley Muslim Association which rendered full support to the non-cooperation agenda. The Khilafat day was observed in several places of Surma Valley like Sylhet, Karimganj, Nilambajar, Habibanj and Maulavi Bajar.<sup>2</sup> The Muslims of Karimganj even threatened to resort to Jihad if the whole question would not satisfy them.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, they held several meetings in November, 1920 at Jakiganj Bajar, Birasri, Karimganj, Godar Bajar, Lauta, Chiragi Iddgah, Karua Patisala and Habiganj.<sup>4</sup> Gandhi's emphasis on the promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity had an immediate impact on the masses of Surma Valley. With a view to promote fraternity between two communities Muslim leader Abdul Gafoor called upon their co-religionists to refrain from the killing of cows with the interest of not hurting Hindu sentiments.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the Muslims the Hindus belonging to both the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam played an active role in organizing Khilafat meetings with common programme of action. Leaders like Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Chandranath Sarma and Syed Saadulla organized public meetings where they fought for the cause of Khilafat. In Goalpara, on 19th March, 1920 a public meeting was organized with Abdul Mazid Zeaosshams as the Chairman and the Muslims took resolutions expressing their discontentment at the British attitude towards Turkey.<sup>6</sup> In Jorhat, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts also people came forward to participate by organizing various meetings. Derajuddin Ahmed, Keramat Ali and K. K Baruah addressed in a public meeting at Jorhat.<sup>7</sup> The leaders also explained Jallianwala Bagh tragedy in public meetings organized in different places of the province.<sup>8</sup> The leaders of both the communities not only exposed British atrocities but also tried to maintain communal harmony.

The student community also rendered their whole hearted support to the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movement. M. Ali Laskar in his paper says that, 'the Assam Chatra Sanmilian was formed in 1916 and simultaneously a Muslim Student Organisation called the Muslim Student's Conference was also formed in Assam'.<sup>9</sup> These two organization made common programme action against the British Government and the relationship between the Assam Chatra Sanmilian and the Muslim Student's Conference remained cordial.<sup>10</sup> At the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress (25th and 26th December, 1920) the Non-Cooperation programme was ratified with added emphasis. It had its echo in Assam and the students set the pace by boycotting first the Guwahati Cotton College. They organized 400 student of Cotton College and make them ensured to boycott the institution. Prominent leaders like Chandranath Sharma, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, Trigunacharan Barua, Mahibuddin Ahmed encouraged the programme of boycott of educational institutions. The students of Surma Valley started the Non-Cooperation movement by convening a conference in 19th -21st September, 1920 and also had adopted a resolution of total boycott of schools instead of gradual boycott.<sup>11</sup>

On 22nd September, 1920 Bipin Chandra Pal from Surma Valley delivered a speech in a meeting and put emphasis on national education.<sup>12</sup> From Murari Chand College (Sylhet ; Surma Valley) three students delegates attended the All India Students Conference at Nagpur and by 20th January, 1921 a large number of students from the same college boycotted classes.<sup>13</sup> On 22nd January, 1921 a Government aided Madrassa at Sylhet demanding for the nationalization of their school called for a strike.<sup>14</sup> The boycott programme

gradually spread in places like Karimganj and Cachar.<sup>15</sup> A Government report admitted that by 22nd January, 1921 'almost the whole of the college students are apparently on strike now and the work of the teaching staff is at a standstill at present'.<sup>16</sup> On 15th February, 1921, a large number of students from Dhubri Town organized a meeting in the courtyard of Dhubri Mosque.<sup>17</sup> In Lakhimpur district too, the movement reached its high peak under the leadership of Rudra Kanta Barua and Yusuf Ali.<sup>18</sup>

On 29th January, 1921 a public meeting was held at the Iddgah field at Nagaon under the President ship of Purna Chandra Sharma who ensures the presence of Islam Khan in that meeting and says that Islam Khan devoted himself to the freedom struggle and fought throughout for the independence of undivided India.<sup>19</sup> In that meeting a school boy Md. Serif presented a speech supporting Khilafat movement and Non-Cooperation movement. Mahbub Ali; the talented youth of Dalgaon (Kaliabor) who studied at the Aligarh Muslim University decided not to serve the British and joined the freedom movement.<sup>20</sup> In an interview with the descendants of Mahbub Ali, it has been found that Mahbub Ali wholeheartedly plunged himself in the freedom struggle.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, a few Muslim students like Md. Serif, Monaf Ali, Fahimudin Ahmed etc. left their school and joined the National Congress. The Muslim students of other districts of Assam such as Darrang, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur also followed this example.

With the formation of Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) in 5th June, 1921 the movement assumed a new dimension. At the beginning stage the APCC decided to establish District Congress Committees (DCC) which led to the formation of Guwahati and Barpeta DCC at first. In the Kamrup district, Guwahati was made the centre and it was again subdivided into 23-24 centers for organizational purposes. They placed each centre under one or more leading Non-Co-operators. At the invitation of APCC, Gandhi came to Assam on 18th August, 1921. Gandhij was assisted by Muhammad Ali and his wife, Azad Shobani, Jamanlal Bajaj, Jamuna Das, Prabhu Das, Abdul Hyat, Hiroo and Krishna Das.<sup>22</sup>

People from different parts of Assam came forward to welcome Gandhi. In a public meeting held in front of the residence of Tarun Ram Phukan of Bharalumukh of Guwahati where approximately 25, 000 people assembled to hear Gandhi. Tarunram Phukan translated Gandhi's speech into Assamese which created great enthusiasm among the people. In the evening ceremonial burning of foreign cloths was gone through and it lasted till the next morning.

On 24th September, addressing a meeting at Dhubri T. R. Phukan spoke on the message of Khilafatism and Non-Cooperation thereby encouraged the Hindu-Muslim unity.

The APCC in a meeting on 27th November, 1921 decided to form National Volunteer Corps and supporting this decision thousands of common people enrolled themselves as Congress volunteers.<sup>23</sup> Even they converted National Schools to 'Swaraj camps to carry out their

organizational work. It is stated in official document that, 'from Swaraj camps volunteers were sent out to every village in the districts to enroll workers and collect funds for Mr. Gandhi's army and treasury and they carried the vow to overthrow the alien Government'.<sup>24</sup> In Nagaon district, Md. Serif, Mahbub Ali, Monaf Ali, Fahimuddin Ahmed enrolled themselves as volunteers.

In response to Gandhi's call, a number of young lawyers, teachers and other Government Employees adopted the pledge of Non-Cooperation and joined in the movement. As Omeo Kumar Das records at the time of Gandhi's visit to Assam in August, 1921; 15 lawyers boycotted courts and thereafter out of a total of 75 Assamese Lawyers, 50 Lawyers boycotted the law Courts and organized the practice of settlement of disputes through arbitration out of Court.<sup>25</sup> In the Surma Valley, a number of lawyers including Muhammad Abdullah, Abdul Hamid, Md. Yusuf, Abdul Matin Choudhury suspended their legal practices in the wake of Gandhi's visit. Gandhi appreciated the activities of the legal practitioners.<sup>27</sup> Like the legal practitioners a number of school teachers and other Government employees too tendered their resignation.<sup>26</sup> In Guwahati, Mahibuddin Ahmed and in Lakhimpur Muhibul Hussain gave up their teacher ships and joined the movement.<sup>28</sup> In the Surma Valley, Abdul Musabbir gave up his teaching job.<sup>29</sup> Sub- Deputy Collector namely Mohammad Christi from Sibsagar resigned from his job.<sup>30</sup>

On 23rd August, 1921 at a great rally Mahammad Nuruddin Ahmed of Nagaon district returned the 'Khan Bahadur' Title conferred by the British.<sup>31</sup>

On 14th and 15th November, 1921 the Jamiyat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind convened its third conference at Karimganj with Abdul Munawar as the Chairman where large number of Ulemas took the pledge to work under the guidance of Jamiyat-ul-Ulema- i-Hind.<sup>32</sup> The boycott campaign also touched the tailors of Sylhet and Karimganj and they took a resolution in a Mosque at Sylhet not to sew garments with foreign cloth any more.<sup>33</sup> It is also mention worthy that the Muslim tailors of Puranigudam of Nagaon district in response to the call of Tarun Ram Phukan to the tailors of Guwahati took a resolution not to stitch any cloth other than Khaddar.<sup>34</sup>

Inspired by Gandhi's call 'to make Assam free from opium' the Muslim people of Nagaon banned opium. Islam Khan, Mahbub Ali, Fahimudin Ahmed etc. led the anti-opium campaign and encouraged the Muslim people of greater Nagaon to join the National Congress and fight for freedom of India. Mosaraf Hussain, Irfan Ali, and other seized cigarettes from some of the shop and burnt all on the road near the Nagaon Municipal Market.<sup>35</sup> They also tried to educate the villagers about the evil effects of opium consumption.<sup>36</sup> Omeo Kumar Das recorded that, 'as a result of the Non-Cooperation movement, the sale of opium dropped from 1800 maunds to 900 maunds.'<sup>37</sup>

Emphasizing on the propagation of Khadi, the Congress workers tried to popularize hand-spinning and weaving among the masses with a new spirit realizing its necessity for socio-

economic reconstruction of the society. As soon as the concept of Khadi was popularized among the Assamese people, they took it up with a new spirit and pleaded with congress volunteers for the supply of cotton fibers in great quantity. The Assam Khadi Board was constituted at the provincial level and on the same line, District Boards were formed to streamline the organizational network.<sup>38</sup>

While this movement was going on in full swing the Government adopted some repressive policies to suppress the movement. It ordered the arrest of the Congress workers in different parts of the province. As a result, a number of Non-Cooperators from almost all districts of Assam were arrested and imprisoned. Along with their Hindu counterparts, Muslim volunteers also suffered a lot. Among the prominent leaders of the Surma Valley particularly from Cachar who got imprisonment for their active participation the names of Imran Ali (Barkhala), Tobarak Ali (Silchar), Abdul Musabir and Saukat Ambia(Karimganj), Mubarak Ali Barlaskar, Hyder Mia Barbhuiya, Rajam Ali, Jafar Ali Barbhuiya, Md. Alim Uddin, Md. Nur Ali, Basarat Ali Majumdar, Maulavi Umar Ali may be mentioned here.<sup>39</sup>

Like the Surma Valley, in the Brahmaputra Valley too people received the same fate. At Guwahati, British authorities arrested prominent leader Md. Tayyebulla in December, 1921 who always worked for Hindu-Muslim unity.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Akimuddin Ahmed, Segam Ali, Seikh Bathok, Seikh Bahadur, Seikh Muhammad, Sayed Mahammad Hanef, Jahad Ali. In Darrang district, Md. Sadik Ali, Siddik Ali, Tahabar Ali, Foteka Ali, Basir Seikh, Bhakura Seikh, Matia Seikh, Maher Ali, Ramjan Ali, Ranjit Seikh, Rajat Ali, were arrested.<sup>41</sup> On 13th December, 1922 Mahibul Hussain, the secretary of the Lakhimpur Congress Committee was arrested and he received vigorous terms of imprisonment.<sup>42</sup> In Sibsagar district, Badiruddin Ahmed, Kanjan Ali, Maharam Maulavi, Mahammad Hussain were arrested.<sup>43</sup> In Jorhat, Ayub Ali, Seikh S.K. Dauladdin, Kasem Ali, Falalur Rahman got imprisonment.

Like other parts of India in Assam too, the Government declared the Congress Volunteer Corps, Khilaphat Volunteer Corps, the Santi-Senas and the Sevak Sampradaya as 'unlawful association' and also prohibited the holding of meetings under the Prevention of Seditious Meeting Act<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Government introduced the Criminal Amendment Act, the Press Act and the Police Act etc.<sup>45</sup> Jails were overcrowded with political prisoners and when in the jails space became insufficient the authorities had to erect prison-camps to accommodate them.<sup>46</sup>

After the violent incident of Chauri-Chara (a village in the Gorakhpur district of U. P where the angry mob attacked the Police Station and as a result of which 22 policeman were burnt alive) Gandhi decided to suspend the Non-Cooperation movement on 5th February, 1922. The Congress Working Committee (CWC) supporting the decision of Gandhi, approved it on 12th February, 1922.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, with the establishment of Democratic Government in Turkey under the leadership of Mustafa Kamal Pasha who abolished the Khaliphate (the institution of Khalifa ) and separated religion from politics, the Khilafat agitation also lost its relevance.

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Although as a result of the sudden withdrawal of these two movements there remained a calm in the political arena for some time but it is also true that after these two movements the people became more determined to carry the struggle for the noble cause of freedom. Fortunately, unlike some other provinces of India no communal riot occurred in Assam before and after the suspension of the Non-cooperation movement. Rather the bond of ties continued to grow stronger with the Congress leaders showing personal examples of amity and friendship. Now in the present day scenario in India characterized with separatist movements it has become essential to reread, reinterpret and restate the role of the Hindus as well as Muslims of Assam in this phase of the freedom struggle with a view to restoring a new spirit and enthusiasm in their mind and reconstructing emotional integration among people of different parts of the country, making them feel oneness and proud Indian with their own story of contribution to the freedom of their country.

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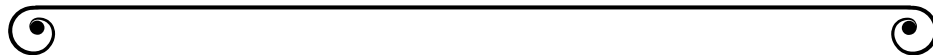
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## Gandhi and Gandhians in Northeast



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# Manipur



# Manipur Vaishnavism: A Sociological Interpretation

Kunj Bihari Singh

Manipur, a small Indian territory nestled between Assam and Burma, is the ancient home of the Meiteis, who though ethnically Mongoloid have now become staunch Vaishnavites and thus contributed their share in the history of Hindu culture. Though the birth of Hindu tradition in Manipur can be traced to the Mahabharata wherein references are made about the Chitravahana dynasty whose patron deity was Siva, Vaishnavism came many centuries later, Vaishnavism took its root during the time of Kyamba, a 15th century Meitei king, who received a Salachakra<sup>1</sup> of Vishnu as a gift from the Pong king Keengkomba of Burma. In the Meitei manuscripts, though the worship of Vishnu by a few Brahmins is mentioned, we do not find any mention of the king or his subjects being converted to the new faith. The appearance of Brahmins in Manpiur in 15th century may be due to the rise of Muslim power in Bengal and the subsequent repression and religious persecution of the Hindus there.

In the next century sporadic migration of Brahmins from the adjoining districts of Bengal and Assam into the valley of Manipur took place. But since the beginning of 17th century more and more Brahmins began to migrate into the valley of Manipur, living with the Meiteis and sharing with them a corporate life by adopting Meitei way of living, language, and customs, and even worshipping non-Hindu Meitei deities. In other words, Vaishnavism in Manipur may be said to have arisen from the cross-fertilization of the two religious forces— Hinduism and that of the Meiteis.

There is no evidence so far of conversion of the Meiteis to Vaishnavism during the 17th century. It was from the beginning of the 18th century onwards, that the spread of Vaishnavism in Manipur materialized. In 1704 A.D- one Brahmin called Nimbarka came to Manipur and spread the new faith. The then king Charairongba and the members of the royal family were the first Meiteis to be initiated into the Vaishnava form of Hinduism by the said Brahmin who became the preceptor of the royal family. The new Vaishnavite faith was known as Mimandi, which is, of course a term commonly used for the Nimbarkas. The spread of Vaishnavism during the time of Charaironga was slow and tardy; the cults of Krishna and Radha could not get much height and the Nimandi Vaishnavism did not last long. This is probably because it is the least important of the six Vaishnava sects.<sup>3</sup> Nimandi Vaishnavism received a death-blow in the hands of one Bengali Brahmin named Santidas from the adjoining district of Sylhet, now in Pakistan, who came to Manipur in the second quarter of 18th century. He associated himself closely with the Meitei king and became a preceptor of the latter. He was a follower of Ramananda<sup>4</sup> and introduced the worship of Rama and Hanuman. It is rather surprising that Sita who is worshipped as divine consort universally in India was not given much adoration in the introduction of Rama cult in Manipur.

Along with the revival of Krishna cult, which will be seen later on, worship of Rama received a temporary set-back, but that of Hanuman continued and is most actively done even to this day. As we find in rural Maharashtra or rather Deccan,<sup>5</sup> in Manipur also, Hanuman is being worshipped as a specific deity.

Coming to the activities of Santidas, we find him deviating from the radical reforms introduced by his sect. It is a well known fact that Ramananda, the founder himself, made no distinction between Brahmins and other caste members provided they were the devotees of Vishnu.<sup>6</sup> Another reform, which must be traced to Ramananda, was the use of vernacular for the propagation of the new creed. But Santidas, on the one hand, stressed more emphasis on the organisation of caste by establishing the recognition of the Meiteis as Kshatriya and the Brahmin immigrants and their descendants forming the Brahmin caste within the Meitei society. On the other hand, he raised strong objection against the propagation of religious fervour through the medium of Meitei language. In the then existing Meitei puranas, he saw a stumbling block if he had to fulfil his mission. Through his instigation, Garib Nawaz ordered to burn all the existing rare manuscripts, and in their place was introduced the Bengali literature. Rama cult which reached its pinnacle during the time of Garib Nawaz and was propagated for a few years by his sons, met a powerful rival which uprooted it during the third quarter of the 18th century A.D. This rival was the Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism of Bengal.

Broadly observed, there are two fundamental elements forming the core of Chaitanyaism. "The first and foremost of these is the general doctrine of Bhakti, or emotional service of love and devotion as a means of spiritual realisation; but equally important is the Krishna cult, intimately connected with it, as forming the ground of this devotional attitude."<sup>7</sup> Other important characteristics of Chaitanyaism are the emergence of Radha as Krishna's eternal consort in the Vrindavanlila, and poet Jayadev's Gita-Govinda which "with its mystical power, was claimed by Chaitanyaism as one of the sources of its religious inspiration."<sup>8</sup> The most powerful instrument with which Chaitanya organised his Vaishnavite sect was the stimulation, if not the introduction, of an emotional and unrationalistic mode of musical worship known as sankirtana in the daily devotional meeting.

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1. A round black stone traditionally used as an emblem of Vishnu.
  2. He was a follower, not the founder, of the oldest division of Vaishnavism known as Nimbarka
  3. M. Monier-Williams, *Hinduism*, (Calcutta, 1951), p. 97.
  4. Often called Ramanandi, but the Meiteis call it Ramandi
  5. G. S. Ghurye, *Gods And Men*, (Bombay, 1962), p. 231.
  6. R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, (Poona, 1928), p. 94.
  7. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1942), p. 2
  8. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

After the death of Chaitanya in 1534 A.D. his followers were left for a time incapable of the emotional exercises that marked the sect.<sup>9</sup> But though literature failed and music died away, the sect lived on.

Chaitanyaism in Manipur owes much to the 17th century revivalists who became dynamic centres of influence. Most prominent among these revivalists were Srinivasa Acharya, Narottam Datta and Syamananda Das. We shall here confine ourselves to the second of the trio, Narottam Datta, whom the Meiteis called Narottam Thakur, and who was closely connected with the spread of Chaitanyaism in Manipur. When Narottam became an ascetic of great fame and sanctity enfolded several persons into his faith he founded a Chaitanya temple at Kheturi in Rajashahi district which later on became one of the active centres of the faith.<sup>10</sup> Kheturi was the fountain source from which the incessant current of Chaitanyaism began to flow into the valley of Manipur<sup>11</sup> from the beginning of the second quarter of the 18th century, i.e. during the time of Bhagyachandra. The spread of this faith was primarily in the hands of five ascetics, viz. Ganga-narayan, Krishnacharan, Kunjabihari, Nidhiram and Ramgopal.<sup>12</sup> Ngangbam Selungba was the first Meitei Chaitanyaite initiated by Ramgopal. Selungba became known as Krishnadas and associated himself with two other Brahmins, viz. Adhikari Kamdeva Brajabasi and Sri Rup Parmananda Thakur, who was the preceptor of the king Bhagyachandra, in the active movement of<sup>13</sup> Gaura Dharma in Manipur. In the history of the Meiteis, Bhagyachandra was the most devout Vaishnava king to whom the future generations owed much for the perpetuation and propagation of Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism in Manipur.

It is a well-known story in Manipur that one night Shri Govinda (Lord Krishna) appeared in the dream of Bhagyachandra and bade him make His image out of the wood of a jack tree on the Kaina Hill. Immediately on the next day the king sent his men to find out the tree. There was exactly the jack tree. From this wood one sculptor named Sapam Lakshman chiselled out four idols which were enshrined as Shri Govinda, Shri Vijay Govinda, Advaita, and Gopinath.

With the birth of this renovated faith, there arose another equally potent force that became the most powerful instrument in planting the faith deep down into the heart of the Meitei populace. It was the Ras Lila—the dance-drama that depicts the life of Krishna and Radha, particularly the dalliance of the former with the latter and several other gopis or cowherdresses in Vrindavan.

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 59n.

10. M. T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement*, Calcutta, 1925), p. 73.

11. D. C. Sen, *Vaishnava Literature in Medieval Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1917), p. 163.

12. R. K. Sanahal, *Manipur Mhos* (Imphal, 1947), p. 84.

13. Gaura or Gauranga is an epithet of Chaitanya and hence Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism is also known as Gaura Dharma, "religion of Gaura".

The pious king Bhagyachandra betrothed his daughter Sija Lairiobi (also known as Bimbavati Manipur) to Shri Govinda as a bride. Soon<sup>14</sup> thereafter, an image of Chaitanya was consecrated in Nabadwip, the birth-place of Chaitanya, and there the idol was named Shri Anuprabhu. The virtuous princess Sija Lairiobi went to Nabadwip to the service of this deity, and since then upto this day members of the royal family are paying visits every year to this holy place of pilgrimage.

In Bengal, after the 17th century there had been a decline of Vaishnava sect for about two centuries. During that time the Sakta revival gained the upper hand while Vaishnavism sank gradually into a lethargic state, with neither leaders nor spirit worthy of its tradition.<sup>15</sup> Once again more licence gets popular favour. Saktism with its greater esoteric licence began to suppress Radha-Krishnaism, the cultic practice of which only offered much restricted opportunity for such licence. But in Manipur, Chaitanya Vaishnavism knew no decadence since its inception. Vaishnava literature, particularly Srimadbhagavad, Chaitanya Charitarnrita, and Haribhaktivilasa provided a high level of the emotional Bhakti-doctrine in the setting of a vital and practical system of religious beliefs, and the life and personality of Chaitanya became a powerful exemplification of these beliefs and doctrines. Gitagovinda of Jayadev, a 12th century Bengali poet, enlivened the festive aspect of the faith by immortalising the divine love of Krishna and Radha amidst the background of Vrindavan. With regard to the interpretation of Radha as to whether she is a wife or a mistress of Krishna, the Meiteis maintain the parakiyabadi doctrine, i.e. Radha is the wife of another and mistress of Krishna. In Bengal too this doctrine gained the ascendancy over the other doctrine, viz. svakiya doctrine which maintained that Radha was the wife of Krishna, and this was doubtlessly due to the immovable influence of the old myth about the Gopis coupled with the Sahajiya cult which sought salvation through the worship and love of a woman other than one's own wife.<sup>16</sup> In Manipur, as much as in Bengal, Krishna is not fully ethi-cised in the emotional faith. "The precarious Radha-Krishna legend, on which its whole system of devotion is based, is taken not as a symbol but as a reality, not as religious myth but as religious history."<sup>17</sup> The full blossoming of the religious faith of the Vaishnava Meiteis can be seen in their Ras Lila dance where the main theme is centred around the love of Radha and Krishna as depicted by the great poet Jayadev in his classic work Gitagovinda. Though eroticism runs through the core of the performance it has been deeply subdued by the potent exaltation of the essence of devotion or Bhakti-rasa which emanates from the heart of every devout Vaishnava spectator. On the other hand, eroticism has never been the devotional principle of the Meiteis, and in the Ras Lila dance the erotic atmosphere has been modified. Hence, in the absence of eroticism as a devotional principle, "it is not always true," observes S. K. De, "that religious rapture, however erotically inclined, leads to moral default."<sup>18</sup>

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14. Though this instance may be reckoned as a mark of supreme dedication to Shri Govinda, mock marriage of maidens with the Meitei gods at the Lai Haraoba festival is a vestige of an ancient rite of fertility cult. Customary instances of marriage of deities with human beings are found in India, (W. Crooke, Religion and Folklore of Northern India, p. 247) and other parts of the world. (J. G. Frazer, Golden Bough, pp. 142-46).

15. M. T. Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 77-8; J. N. Farkuhart, Modern Religious Movements in India, (London, 1929), p. 294.

Within a little over two hundred years of its existence, Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism in Manipur received the indelible impression of local touch. They have not paid much attention to the food habit of vegetarianism which is strictly enjoined in Vaishnavism. Fish is the only non-vegetarian item of food in the daily life of both the Brahmin and Kshatriya Meiteis. It is only in religious ceremonies that the preparations of food are strictly restricted to vegetables. With regard to the worship of Krishna and other Hindu deities, it has been monopoly of the Brahmins. Even if a Kshatriya, including the king himself, erects a temple for the worship of Shri Govinda, a Brahmin is to be appointed to attend to the daily worship of the deity. In every Meitei home, whether a Kshatriya or a Brahmin, every elder member possesses a small wooden box containing a small picture or image of Shri Govinda or Gauranga, a rosary of tulsī beads called 'mala', pieces of chandan, comb, mirror, and other sundry articles like 'chandanchei', 'chhapa', etc. which are used in marking the 'tilak' on the forehead, neck, arms and chest. After taking bath, every day, before the day's meal, 'tilak' is drawn, and prayer is offered to the deity by offering tulsī leaves and flowers.

Unlike the average Indian villages, in the valley of Manipur every Brahmin house is a centre of religious assemblage. Every Brahmin family has a temple and a mandap where neighbours come to offer prayer and perform religious festivals. It is impossible to find any Meitei village where a Brahmin family is absent. When we walk down the streets of Manipur in the evening, it is a familiar experience to hear the melody and feel the rapture of devotional songs from far and near sung in old Bengali by small groups of men and women in accompaniment of drums and cymbals, and the intermittent thuds of gongs which can be heard even from afar. This is the evening prayer, or 'sandhya-arti' as the Meiteis call it.

The popularity of Chaitanya Vaishnavism and its acceptance by the entire Meitei community wholeheartedly as their religion while other preceding faiths like Ramandi and Nimandi could not capture the heart of the people deserves our attention. We find no better answer than pointing to sankirtana itself which is a form of worship of Krishna and Radha through hymns of praise and dramatisation of scenes from their lives and sporting in the garden of Vrindavan. This actually suited the taste of the Meiteis whose religion "expresses itself in a synthesis of music, singing, dancing and drama."<sup>19</sup> The sankirtana, infused by the artistic genius of the Meiteis, creates an atmosphere where dance and music become the dominant elements of their religion and life, providing an emotional outlet of the people. One will be surprised that even in Bengal, the birth place of Chaitanyaism, when the initial force of this creative activity has now virtually disappeared, in Manipur, the cultic aspect remains consistently fresh, active, and vital. "There kirtans [sankirtana], although sung in Old Bengali, a foreign language to the Manipuris, are still the heart-beat and pulse of the country's emotional and religious life."<sup>20</sup>

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16. M. T. Kennedy, op. cit., p. 107.

17. S. K. De, op. cit, p. 417.

18. Ibid, p. 419.

19. F. Bowers, *Dance in India*, (New York, 1953), p. 123.

20. Ibid., p. 124.

The fact that Vaishnavism got a fertile field in Manipur and had a deep-rooted foundation in the Meitei society during a short period of about three hundred years remains a matter of great interest not only for the reason that it leads to the aggrandisement of new followers but for the enrichment of the faith itself. It will be wrong to contend that Meitei Vaishnavism is nothing but a pseudo copy of what is being practised in Bengal. On the contrary, admitting the fact that Bengal is the progenitor of Meitei Vaishnavism, the Meiteis have cushioned the faith to their own taste guided by conservatism and orthodoxy. This we can find from a variety of their religious function and other ceremonies. This, in other words, means that in the process of assimilating the renovated faith many indigenous elements are found to have been associated with it without much disharmony partly because, prior to the advent of Chaitanya Vaishnavism the people were already familiarised with the neighbouring Hindu people and their pantheon.

It will be needless to say that Meitei Vaishnavism has its unique feature in the general history of Hindu culture in so far as the society has a dual caste organisation of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. It may also be added that Vaishnavism has led, first, to the complete absorption of the immigrant Brahmins into Meitei society, and second, to the adoption of Bengali, and partly Sanskrit, literature which undeniably provides the food for the cultivation of Vaishnava faith. Meitei Vaishnavism which tries to attain the tradition of that of Nabadwip, Mathura, and Vrindavan, has made memorable achievements during the past three centuries or so.



# Shumang Leela – A Platform For Cultural And Development Communication Discourse

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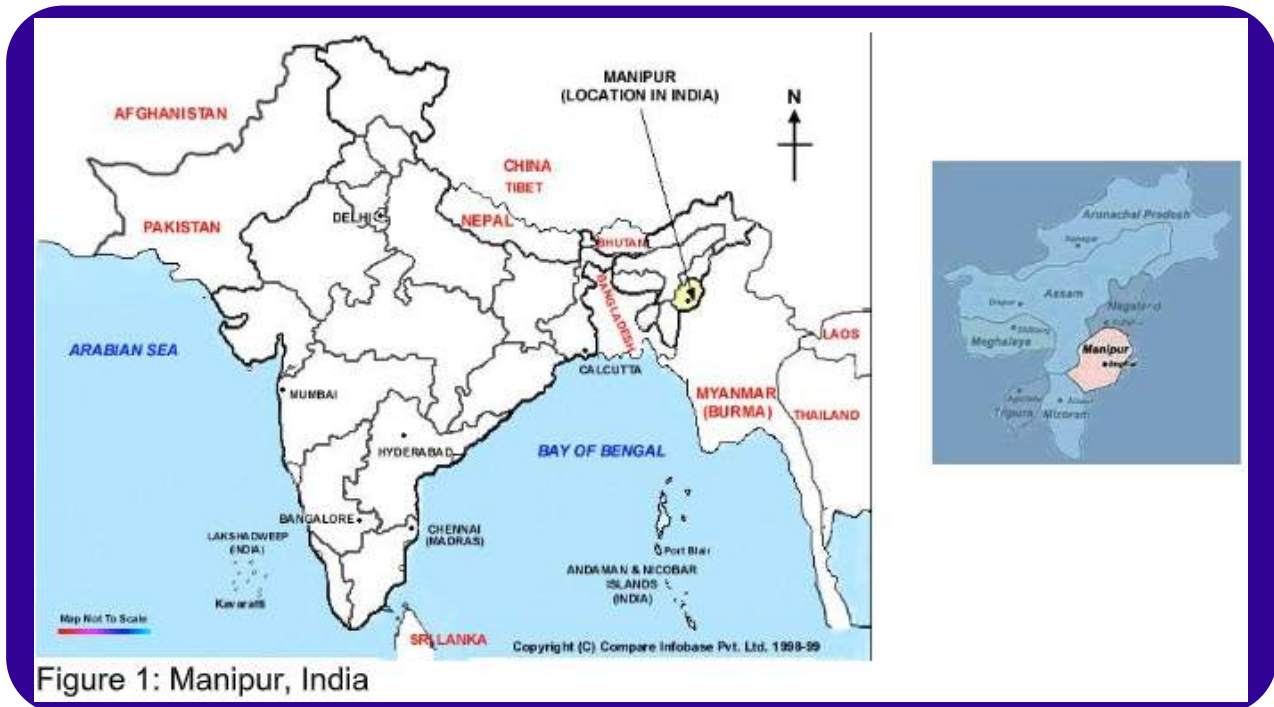
## **Abstract**

Shumang Leela which means 'Courtyard performance' is a Manipuri theatrical art form considered to have developed in the 19 th and 20 th century. The paper discusses how the theatrical art form broke the monopoly of art as being accessible only by the upper caste, the so called elite sections of the society and began acting as a community development media having the role of entertaining, enlightening, instructing, educating and sensitizing the public on various issues relevant to the society within the cultural context and space of the Manipuris. Though secular in nature it has found its ritualistic space as the theatre form is integrated in different life cycles of a person in the Manipuri culture. It is a medium of development communication to spread social awareness to people through its meaningful themes and enactments which portray the socio-politico-economic issues of the people not only in Manipur but also globally. Shumang Leela is popular for its 'Nupi Shabis' who are actually male actors performing female roles. The paper further explores the important issue on Transgender identity of the performers known as 'Nupi Shabis', as the theatre form is their platform and community. Shumang Leela is a stage for cultural communication of the Manipuri society. It is also a model for development communication using traditional media, a communication system embedded in the cultural context. Even where mass media has penetrated, Shumang Leela has proved its validity to sensitize people's thinking to promote change.

## **Introduction**

Shumang Leela which means Courtyard performance is a theatrical art form of the Manipuris. Manipur is a state in the North-eastern part of India with an area of 22,327 square kilometres. The theatrical art form has the role of enlightening, instructing, entertaining, educating and sensitizing the public in various issues relevant to the society within the cultural context and space of the Manipuris. Shumang Leela is considered to have developed from the comic plays termed as Phagee leelas, which gained popularity in the 19th and 20th century during the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj (1856-1886) and Churachand Maharaj (1891 – 1941). Another school of thought believes that Shumang leela originates from the ritual ceremony of Lai-haraoba (pleasing god). Some scholars credit its emergence to the expedition for a

temporal space, an unofficial art form accessible to the common public as opposed to other Manipuri theatrical performances which could not break the cultural dominance of the elites and were constrained and restricted to religious and royal receivers of the medium. Like all art forms the world over, theatrical performances in Manipur was also accessed only by the upper caste, the so called elite sections of the society. This scenario began to change in the early 20th century as a result of formulation of a more secular and egalitarian space. Hence, depending on the media text, theatre can be categorized as Devotional or Temporal.



## Premise of Shumang Leela Plays

Shumang Leela is mainly performed to entertain people. However, it also acts as the major medium of development communication to spread social awareness to people through its meaningful themes and enactments which portray the socio-political-economic issues of the people not only in Manipur but also beyond. Theatre is entering into the avenues, which were once solely occupied, by religion and politics (Schechner, 1983). The focus of Shumang Leela semiotics is the signs found in its texts. For example, a play 'World Trade Centre' was enacted in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 attack to depict human suffering and loss. Plays also revolve around themes like environment issues, insurgency problems, unemployment, corruption, HIV and AIDS etc. The theatre acts as a platform which compares the actual situation of social structure to an ideal construct to sensitize the society at large. Shumang Leela is in line with Wang and Dissanayake's (1984) definition of folk media as a communication system embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes.

People-centered development model look for newer concepts of development such as self-help, grassroots participation, the two-way communication, development support communication etc. Traditional media like Shumang Leela serve as vehicles of information, education, persuasion and entertainment. This art form through its narratives addresses issues in the light of development context related to development of quality of life for all through education, health, nutrition, housing; development of poor, marginal by creating employment opportunities, development of rural population who live in rural areas and have limitations of economic resources. For example, Family Planning Bureau's Shumang Leela "Chayam Pokpa" and Chana Lukhoi's "Anouba Mangal" carried family planning messages; "Kanagi Maralno"; was on Polio Immunization. The Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Manipur used the medium to bring awareness on sanitation through plays like Anouba Mangal and Amambada Meingal. The Science and Technology Department also produced play on environment entitled "Anouba Yenning" Shumang Leela "Senphu Hangba" was produced for generating awareness on national savings insurance; "Makhong Taragi Cheingak" was produced under the State Veterinary and Animal Husbandry Department, Manipur for awareness generation on animal husbandry services. "Naitom Satpi" was a successful Shumang Leela based on leprosy disease.

The traditional art form is generally executed by a touring group of 12-13 performers. These groups are either exclusively female (Nupi Shumang Leela) or exclusively male (Nupa Shumang Leela). Creation of Mise-en-scène in Shumang Leela is very simple with minimal props. Table, chairs, orchestra, poles for dangling microphones and tube lights are the common set ups used. Intricate use of actor's voice, body and mime is the most important element of performance. Using the Multimodal analysis which involves the analysis of communication in all its forms, the interaction and integration or 'modes' of semiotic resources in Shumang Leela for communication can be seen to function at a simplified level yet serving the persuasive communicative functions of the text, by reflecting the society and educating the Manipuris with constructive information.

Shumang Leela begins with the mandali puja which takes place with offering of fruits, betel nuts and leaves and lighting of incense. This ritual makes the performance space sanctified, wherein both the performers and the audience have to remove their shoes if they step on the stage. The performers also offer prayers to Khangoplemjeng Lairembi, the goddess of theatre seeking her blessings. This is followed by the Actors' march (Kouwaj) which is accompanied with playing drums (dholak) and cymbals (kartal). The ritual is performed to give respect to the god. Although Shumang Leela is categorised as a theatre in the Temporal space, a lot of influence of the religious theatrical performances as conducted in the temples can be seen in its symbolic rituals. The theatre form also follows a ritual of conveying reverence to the audience by singing a song called Beitha. One interesting shift that has also been noted is that earlier god (Krishna) and goddess (Radha) were invoked with the singing of Kouwaj to consecrate the performance space. However, this has been replaced by secular songs and themes in the orchestra playing to better engage the audience. Multimodal forms of

communication which is central to any form of human communication, be it theatrical, can be seen in this evolution of Shumang Leela with the conjuring of abstraction and material in semiosis.

### **Nupi Shabis – the transgender performers of Shumang Leela**

Shumang Leela is popular for its Nupi shaabis who are actually male actors performing female roles. Owing to the nature of the theatre form, actors had to travel to different places for performances. Manipuri society being conservative in nature, did not find it conducive for women performers travelling with men to distant locations. Hence, there was a dropout in the number of women performers and men had to step in to play the female roles. Nupi shaabis have to undergo rigorous training in the practice of physicality and vocal skills. The practice generally was that the Director of a troupe would look for suitable boys and seek the parents' permission to train the boy as Nupi shaabi. Upon getting the consent of the parents, the boy would be consecrated on an auspicious day at the teacher's residence. The induction would first start with habituation of household chores done by women so that they are type-casted into the feminine nature. It is only after they have perfected themselves in this role that the real acting in terms of dialogue delivery and feminine movement are taught. Throughout this grooming stage, the future Nupi Shaabi is treated as a daughter. Here again, there is the power play of a patriarchal notion of how an "ideal" woman should be. This "ideal construct" of feminine disposition as perceived by a patriarchal society leads into the transformation and construction of a Nupi shaabi.



Figure 2: Nupi shaabis (source:epao.net)

Herein, a psychological change also takes place which is reflected in the trainee's demeanour. As Swar Thounaojam states, "This image-making of a woman in Shumang Leela comes with its own share of problems. The aim of actor training for nupi shaabis till date has been to maintain a neat male/female binary, not blur or question it. Generations of male directors have codified the feminine gestures, appearance, physicality and costume in such a way that the audience's heterosexual (and of course patriarchal) expectations from a woman character are met by the nupi shaabis". There have been instances when Nupi shaabis have not been accepted by the audiences because of their looks as not being beautiful enough to be a woman. Such non acceptance deeply hurts them and leaves an emotional scar in them as failures.

Many of these Nupi shaabis carry on with their feminine roles off stage, as transgender. Some are so popular for their looks that they get marriage proposals from men. Whereas some Nupi shaabis are very specific about their identity as men and that they are men performing female roles. They would not want to be identified as Transgender. However there is a more complex identity issue which is emerging for the Nupi Shaabis:

"A new generation of self-identified nupi maanbis (trans-women) have joined Shumang Leela to perform as nupi shaabis. Their entry has complicated the gender queerness of Shumang Leela and challenged the internalised homophobia and trans-phobia that still exist within the Shumang Leela community. Bishesh Huiem, 24, is an emerging nupi shaabi. She identifies herself as a nupi maanbi and within theatre where body is key, her transition from nupi maanbi into nupi shaabi for a Shumang Leela raises many interesting questions. Bishesh asserted her identity as a nupi maanbi when she was a pre-teen. She took part in many transgender beauty contests and won quite a few. She got her first role as a nupi shaabi right after her Class 10 exams. Her family was quite against it, but they came around after a lot of persuasion. She performed for three years and left Imphal to study fashion design at Garden City College in Bangalore. She did the college fashion circuit...

... She returned to Imphal in 2009 to open the Bishesh Institute of Fashion and Design and began performing as a nupi shaabi since 2011. The roles she plays in Shumang Leelas has nothing to do with her life experience. Directors give her straight women roles, which would actually have been a fabulous gender bender if Shumang Leela didn't have such a poor track (or non-existent) record of engaging with transgendered experience and performances. Interestingly, in an incredible casting choice, Bishesh has played the role of a trans woman in a 2002 film called Ang Tamo which traces the life of a nupi maanbi. The film is shaped by autobiographical elements collected from many nupi maanbis living in Imphal but due to its lack of craft, it fails to create a trans narrative that examines the limits of gender regulation. Trans performers in contemporary theatre often use their bodies to tell their stories because such autobiographical performances challenge and confront the audience with transgender femininity or masculinity. However nupi maanbi artistes like Bishesh are yet to experiment and critically explore their own and societal understandings of gender using the arts they

practice as a medium for it. When I ask Bishesh about the possibility of using Shumang Leela to explore gender identity, she is cautious. Yes, I think it is important. It will take some time. I have been given an opportunity to work as an artiste. Whatever be the role, I look at it as a service to my society. And slowly I hope that nupi maanbi will also get the space in Shumang Leela to tell our stories. I think what we really need are writers who will be able to tell our stories with care. I am not a writer. I am an actor. I would love to work with a good writer if I want to tell my story” (S. Thounaojam, 2014).

It is in this context that Shumang Leela can raise an important issue on Transgender identity as it has been their platform for many years. Some Transgender join Shumang Leela because they find a community here, they find acceptance. As in their daily walk of life they are treated as second class citizens or sex objects. The very moment, they came out of the stage; they are ridiculed as a second class citizen, and treated as sex objects. No other art form in Manipur gives so much importance to Transgender. Many people watch Shumang Leela because of the Nupi Shaabis.

## **Ritual and social construct of Shumang Leela**

Performance in Shumang Leela involves ingenuity where the artistic representation of the actor must synchronize with the thought process of the viewers. These ‘modes’ of semiotic resources include aspects of speech such as intonation and other vocal characteristics, the semiotic action of other bodily resources such as gesture (face, hand and body) and proxemics. A symbolic communication process takes place between the audience and the performers, as Peirce argued that interpreters have to supply part of the meanings of signs (Peirce, 1880). Different semiotic resources used in Shumang Leela thus bring with them their own practicality and limitations, both in isolation and in permutation, as well as challenges in terms of the natures of the media, the detail and scope of analysis, and the complexities arising from the integration of semiotic resources across the theatrical media. Shumang Leela performances is particularly challenging as the actor is directly in front of a large audience without the usage of any screen or curtain. The performance space is open to the audience without any barrier. For example, in general stage performances darkness can be realistically constructed with the usage of lighting system whereas in case of Shumang Leela the seclusion and shadows are constructed with the actor's gesture and kinesics, accompanied by background music in some cases.

Shumang Leela is a theatre of the people both in terms of its ‘form’, ‘content’ and its community social relationship. The audience are mostly seated on floor as per their seating preferences with the men folk on one side and the women on the other. The audience structure is representative of the societal milieu. Shumang Leela unifies the audience as they are fully engrossed in the play by the actors and they are taken to performance space through its content and form; prevalent social stratifications are forgotten as free intermingling

takes place. Demand of Shumang Leela performance has increased in local events and festivals because it caters to the popular taste with its secular elements. Some feel that the sanctity of certain religious festivals like Laiharaoba is diminished with the inclusion of Shumang Leela which incorporates secular components viz. film music, dances, etc.

The theatre form is integrated in different life cycles (birth, marriage and death) of a person in the Manipuri culture. Shumang Leela is associated with marriage ceremony. The groom's side funds a play from a theatre group of the bride's choice. The play is staged in the bride's courtyard a couple of days prior to the wedding. Shumang Leela is also performed on the eve of Soisti Puja of a new born baby. It is a birth ritual performed on the sixth day after the birth of a child. In some cases the Leela is also performed on during Sorat which is a death ceremony held on the thirteenth day after a person passes away. Shumang Leela in this sense also attains a ritualistic fervour, seeing very less departure from devotional theatre forms. Some political parties also use the theatre art for political campaigns. Thus, the art form is multifaceted in nature. Kidd (1984) mentions: "the plays grew out of the situations, experiences, and analysis of the actors ...They create their own dramas out of their own collective analysis of their immediate situation and the deeper structures in which they are embedded. This is a genuine expression of the people".

## **Conclusions**

Though the market of Shumang Leela is small, it is slowly expanding by finding a platform reaching out to global and national audience. There are challenges from other forms and medium of entertainment like cinema, digital and electronic medium which appeals more to the youth. Shumang Leela enjoys more popularity than stage shows owing to its mobility as it can be performed in any courtyard. However, electronic reproduction of the theatre form through video recording and live telecast of the same has brought about a different counterbalance in the performance and revenue generation arena of Shumang Leela. This can be in the line of arguments raised by postmodernist social theorists that reality has been replaced by hyperreality, which suggests that the sign is now more important than what it stands for. Hyperreality, a term associated with the effects of mass production and reproduction and suggesting that an object, event, experience so reproduced replaces or is preferred to its original: that the copy is "more real than real" (Baudrillard and Brooker, 1992).

MacBride report (1980) states that, "even where modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shows that traditional forms can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people have inherited as part of tradition, and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot

be rivalled by any other means of communication.” For over a decade now, there has been a movement in the Manipuri society to conserve the Manipuri culture. It is in this light Shumang Leela brings a blend of cultural preservation by also being socially relevant with its strong community oriented messages. Semiotics of Shumang Leela constructs meaning of the Manipuri society and culture that it depicts through its powerful texts and narratives. These representations of Manipuri signs are understood to be combinations of signifiers. Crucial codes and conventions which make the signs into a narrative performance generate meanings which have been used for development communication.

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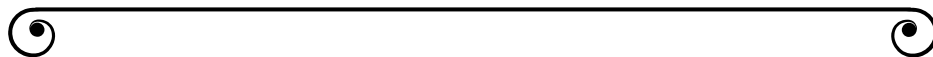
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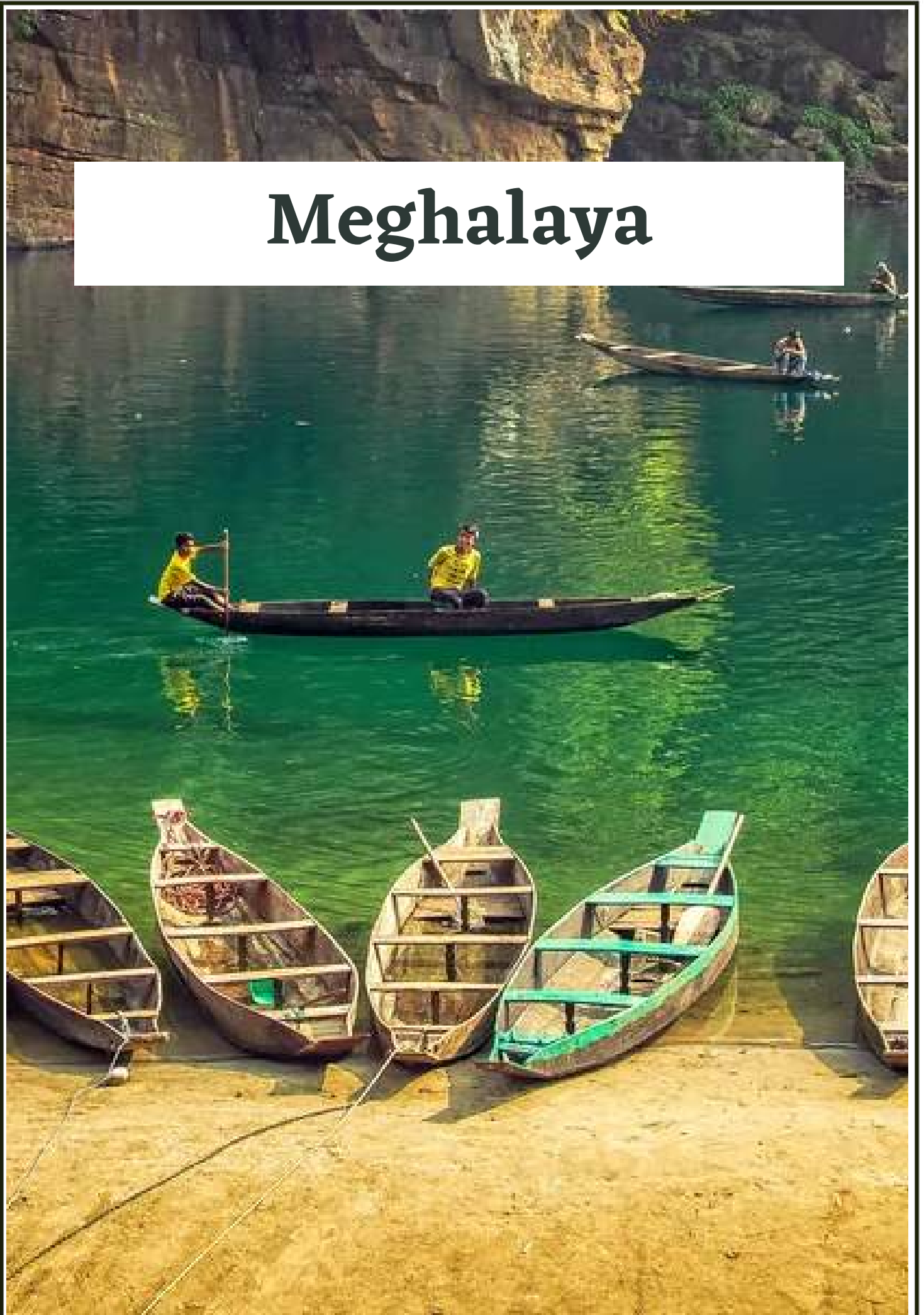
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# Meghalaya



# Diver Myths

By Janice Pariat

I

*Before all else  
there is water—  
from which to fish  
for flowers and failure.  
What hope, to find  
the handful of earth  
that steadies. That  
grows into rocks  
and coastal shelves.  
At what particular  
point to hold our  
breath—there, only  
at the deepest.  
Of this we are certain.  
All beginnings must emanate  
from the depths.*

II

*At the end  
we search for reasons  
subterranean.  
The origin of the apocalypse,  
as it were. The point at which  
the erosion commenced.  
If it exists.  
Perhaps, from the moment  
of inception, all is  
diminishment.*

*We play god.*

*Conjuring worlds before  
we were created. Examining  
the oceans for evidence  
of how we began.*

*It will take years to sort  
and sift through the sand,  
excavating fossils of ourselves.*

*You see, it is only  
through magic that we  
transpired.*

*That, and sheer, blind, wilful belief.*

*This is where we came from,  
and will continue.*

*Until someone — you or I —  
proves we are an  
impossibility.*

*Despite the sanctioning  
of mythology, it isn't believable  
for us to exist.*

*And so we slough them  
back into the ocean — promises,  
tea cups, burnt firewood, walks —  
where they sink*

*silent as the shadow of birds,  
falling between stones,  
waiting to be resurrected in someone*

*else's dream.*



## In conversation with Patricia Mukhim

The Editor of Shillong Times, an Indian social activist, writer and a journalist



# Mizoram



# Mizo identity- The role of the Young Mizo Association (YMA) in Mizoram

N. William Singh

Young Mizo Association or YMA (hereafter called simply the Association) is the largest NGO in Mizoram with a membership of more than 400,000 members.<sup>1</sup> Although calling itself a social organisation that exists to serve the needy, its activities promote the awareness of Mizo identity through notions of shared history, shared religion, shared culture and shared rituals. It organises community services and cultural events on a regular basis, which it utilises effectively to impart a sense of 'Mizo-ness' to its members. A particular feature of the YMA in contrast to associations in other communities or other parts of India is that membership is compulsory for all Mizos.

This chapter aims at analysing the central role of the YMA in promoting awareness and moulding ethnic identity through everyday social activities. This first shows that the activities of the YMA are not limited to the declared aims of the association; this further demonstrates that although the leaders of the association claim that it is a purely non-political organisation, some of its activities have explicit political overtones.

The differences between the written rules of the YMA constitution and the actual practices of the association will be detailed in the first section. The second section explores both the positive aspects and the problematic roles of the Association as regards the other communities in the state of Mizoram. First, the promotion of volunteerism through community service, linked to the traditional Mizo practices of Tlawmgaihna and Hnatlang, and the significant roles of Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA),<sup>2</sup> especially regarding the promotion of traditional dress and festivals, will be discussed. Members of the YMA also seek to develop an awareness of a distinct ethnic identity among Mizos through the promotion or organisation of everyday practices as well as events bearing social and cultural significance. This section also examines the problematic role of CYMA in supporting compulsory Mizo language, besides English and Hindi, in the school curriculum since Mizoram became a full fledged state of the Indian Union in 1987. This policy of promoting the dominant language by silencing other minority languages within Mizoram is criticised by other communities also living in the state. This shows, in particular, that the Association also promotes non-religious traditional markers of identity such as the Mizo language and traditional dress codes.

The third and the last section examines more closely the political and religious engagements of the YMA, looking at some of its recent activities which have political overtones and exploring some recent events which reveal the Association's problematic relationship with other ethnic groups in Mizoram. This point will be substantiated on the basis of fieldwork data and by examining the themes adopted as the Association's annual agenda during the CYMA General Conference<sup>3</sup> and published by the CYMA Press.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines the variety of roles and the manifold activities of the Association in the light of everyday facts and events central to the marking of ethnic boundaries. Categories such as history, territory, language and territory are used in particular to understand Mizo identity. This chapter also continues Pachuau and van Schendel's analysis of identity making in Mizoram as the outcome of Christianity and modernity (Pachuau 2009; Pachuau & van Schendel 2014).

## **Written and non-written rules in the YMA**

### ***The birth of the YMA***

In earlier times, Mizo society had bachelors' dormitories known as Zawlbuk. According to tradition, it was considered to be a centre of socialisation for the male youth. All the adolescent boys would reside in it until they got married. It was a space where they learnt respect towards elders and were instructed about the roles they would have to play in society. From the 1920s, Mizos started practising Christianity, attending schools started by the missionaries and getting modern education, and the relevance of Zawlbuk declined due to evangelisation and mass conversion to the Christian faith (Report 1938: 369; Sangkima 2004: 253–255).

In neighbouring Nagaland, there was an institution similar to Zawlbuk called Morung. It was the boys' dormitory for the Ao Nagas. It gradually declined due to evangelisation of the Naga Hills (Robinson 2004). In the case of the Morung, there was a forced stoppage of youth dormitories by the Christian missionaries with the objective of evangelising the Ao youth (Robinson 2004). However, based on my fieldwork data collected in Mizoram, the main factors for the (gradual) decline of the Zawlbuk are different.

Christian missionaries did not abolish Zawlbuk. When I interviewed Pu C. Rokhuma, a former leader of the CYMA, he commented: 'Alteration in socialisation process from Zawlbuk to modern educational learning was the reason for the gradual decline of Zawlbuk' (interview: 14 June 2011, Aizawl). Many who were born during 1920–1930 commented that the Zawlbuk gradually declined due to the heavy pressure on youth to receive modern education by their parents. They further commented that from 1925 onwards, parents preferred to send their children to school: they wanted them to learn sciences, English, discipline, hygiene and moral values.<sup>5</sup> They realised that modern education with its valorisation of learning and writing were good investments, although it was at the expense of inherited oral knowledge. Those who received modern education during 1900–1901 soon rose to prominent positions in the society (Hluna 1992:35). Newly trained literates acted as voluntary teachers. The end of Zawlbuk and the acceptance of modern school education occurred within a generation (Pachuau & van Schendel 2014: 92–95). This had consequences on the forms of socialisation and identity since it was in Zawlbuks that the youth would socialise and get acquainted with the customs, traditions and cultural practices of their community.

By 1935, colonial administrators attempted to revive Zawlbuk, but there was no significant result. Even earlier, N. E. Parry (superintendent of Lushai Hills during 1924–1928), recognising its crucial role as a socio-cultural institution, made an attempt to revive it through an order in 1926 that compelled all villages of the then Lushai Hills to rebuild their dormitories.<sup>6</sup> Though the order was obeyed, it proved ineffective as times had changed and the Mizo had then outgrown the institution due to the advent of Christianity and the spread of modern education (Zama 2012). At that time, Christian missionaries and Church elders felt it necessary to establish an institution that could replace the Zawlbuk (Lalthangliana 2010). Young Lushai Association (YLA) was established on 15 June 1935 to fulfil that role; it was renamed Young Mizo Association in 1947. The three main objectives of YMA, as mentioned in its constitution and in its publications through CYMA Press are (a) to promote useful occupation of leisure time, (b) to work for the development of Mizoram and (c) to promote a good Christian life. The concept of this association was the combined outcome of Christian influence and the effort of the erstwhile colonial administration to replace the traditional institution of Zawlbuk with a modern institution. Hence the motives for its establishment emerged from the changing social scenario during the first half of the 20th century, and from a political project in the society.

Rev. Dr Zaihmingthanga – who is the first Mizo to receive D. Th. Degree – shared with me his view of the YMA as an agent of unification of the Mizos since every Mizo above 16 years of age becomes a member of YMA provided that he or she is willing to abide by its objectives as well as pay the annual fees of Rs. 50 or a lifetime membership fee of Rs. 500. During our interview, former Member of the Indian Parliament H. Lallungmuana told me: ‘YMA has members from all walks of life, rich and poor; there is no discrimination and most importantly YMA unites all the Mizos regardless of their Christian denomination’ (interview of 28 May 2011, Aizawl).

The constitution of the Association directs members to follow strict rules primarily based on Mizo socio-cultural practices. It encourages members to preserve tradition, culture and core values. For instance, it exhorts members to abide by the following: ‘I shall be honest and diligent in my profession irrespective of its status and perform all my assignment with great dedication. Our most valued heritage from our ancestor’s chivalry beautifies our society. As such, I must cultivate chivalry in me and live with it’ (YMA Constitution 1994).

The main motto of the YMA is to serve and help the poor and the needy (Nibedon 1980); this entails that members would be ready to serve the needy, rather than waiting for the state to help them. Members believe that the blessings of God dwell with the Association. The Association also responds according to the need of the hour, especially in times of natural disasters, by asking members to help the poor, needy and affected families. In this way, it motivates its members to perform tasks that go well beyond their stated objectives. Such requests to provide relief and humanitarian aid in the form of donating clothes or food to people affected by heavy rains and landslides that occur often in the hills of Mizoram are also

conveyed through vernacular dailies and TV channels. In moments of need within the community, the YMA stands out among all the organisations in the state, mainly due to its wide presence and large membership. Albeit humanitarian aid is deemed a significant activity of the Association, it is hard to come by any reportage in the media about the level of outreach of the Association beyond the boundaries of the community. Reports of the YMA helping other communities are rare.

### ***The YMA and politics***

A critical examination reveals the differences between rules written in the YMA constitution and the underlying political ideologies of the Association. The constitution notably states, 'YMA is a non-political voluntary association, with the aims and objectives such as useful occupation of leisure time, all round development of Mizoram and promotion of a good Christian life . . . the government is mine and I belong to the government' (YMA Constitution 1994). It also mentions that leaders should not take up political roles. When a youth becomes member, he or she pledges to stay away from political roles and abstain from political activities.

However, political dynamics influence the members and leaders of the Association. Elders and youth (all YMA members) I have interviewed informed me that both political sensitivity and cultural awareness are important for YMA members; this means that members develop their awareness of their traditions, culture, heritage, identity and questions of political nature while taking part in the activities of the YMA. Examining the vernacular dailies and YMA Newsletter (published by CYMA Press) shows that leaders encourage members to express their views on social issues and problems. These terms – social issues and problems – can then connect to other fields and activities, including some which are political in nature.

Here is an illustration. In 1998, the YMA launched a campaign against drugs and on issues of free and fair elections (Vanglaini.org and YMA Report 2014: 28–35). Members mobilised each household, locality after locality, in support of their cause. The hypothesis is that, in doing so, the motive was to establish social order and reduce unwanted social activities. However, agencies of the state are responsible for the implementation of law and order. Why was the YMA then involved in this? In Mizoram, YMA leaders and members are of the view that there is nothing wrong in trying to end drug abuse, and irreligious and unwanted activities in society. According to them, these are 'humble acts'.

Furthermore, the YMA constitution mentions that members should not have any role in the religious domain. However, some activities of the association go against this stricture. For instance, the CYMA Press publishes Mizo Hla Bu (Mizo Hymn Book), which contains hymns and verses based on the Gospels of the Church. The Association organised a public meeting in the evening of 25 February 1946 at Mizo High School, Aizawl (Lalsangliani 1998). The meeting decided that the YMA members would volunteer to promote the message of Gospel

and Mizo language on the other side of the borderlands in Myanmar. At that time, several dialects were spoken by the various Mizo sub-tribes inhabiting the Chin Hills and the surrounding regions of Mizoram. During the meeting, Pastor Chhawnvunga of Champhai suggested that the best way to promote the language would be to distribute the available books of songs, poetry and short stories in Mizo villages beyond the Triaui River in Burma.<sup>7</sup> This led to the event that is now commonly referred to as the 'Gospel Mail', which is a good example of religious activities that the Association undertook during the period 1945–1960 (CYMA 1986; Zaihmingthanga 2016).

The story of the Gospel Mail is as follows: as per Pastor Chhawnvunga's suggestion, many volunteers offered to collect gifts and books door to door in Aizawl and bring them to the 'Mission Bookroom', from where they would be taken for distribution in the Chin Hills. Volunteers passed the message in each village through the village networks, going from one village to the next one and so on. The YLA leader of Champhai, named Robuanga, got the message that there were four boxes of books for him to collect. Robuanga's deteriorating health did not allow him to walk the five days (200 kms) up to Aizawl. YMA leaders decided that the only way to send the boxes was through volunteers passing through the villages – from one to the next. This was the creation of the Gospel Mail (CYMA 1986).

On 20 June 1946, the boxes were taken to the Mission Veng church in Aizawl for a dedication service. Later, the volunteers lifted and tied the boxes to bamboo poles, one by one, to be passed on from shoulder to shoulder. The boxes were taken from one village to the next. Members of the association took them to the village churches. Villagers poured in gifts, which were used books, the Bible, the Hymn book and so forth. When the consignment reached Champhai, there was a total of 16 boxes. Not only did people donate their clothes and books, but they also donated rice, vegetables and chickens for the celebration of the Gospel Mail and of the volunteers who made it all possible. The boxes were taken for distribution beyond the Triaui on 28 September 1946 (Zaihmingthanga 2016: 24–35).

History reveals the role of the YMA in the making of Mizo identity during 1945–1950. The association and its members did not organise only the first Gospel Mail. The second round of Gospel Mail was carried out in 1947 (Vanlallawma 1999). The call for contributions was circulated far and wide to every member and leader of the association. Almost every village in Mizoram contributed. People sent gift boxes for the community in the Chin Hills. By August 1947, Robuanga received more than hundred boxes. Until 1950, he received boxes every year. While villages beyond the Triaui had four churches earlier, the number of churches rose to 137 after the second Gospel Mail (Zaihmingthanga 2016).<sup>8</sup> Till today, there is no evidence of other Mizo bodies, such as the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP),<sup>9</sup> performing such religious roles in Mizoram.

Regarding the YMA constitution's directive to the leaders 'not to take up political roles', it has also been diluted since many of the association leaders have become very active politically.

This is, for example, the case of the cabinet minister of the former Mizo National Front (MNF), Mr Tlanghmingthanga, who was a YMA leader in the past; the former Member of Parliament (currently a legislator), Mr Vanlalzawma, was also a YMA leader. The list is long, and many YMA leaders have even contested elections. For instance, present legislators Lalruatkima (MNF) and T. Sangkunga (Congress) were YMA leaders. They had to ultimately give up their YMA leadership because of their political activities.

## **The YMA and Mizoram communities**

### ***The traditional institutions – Tlawmngaihna and Hantlang***

Volunteerism is an activity where time is given freely for the benefit of another person, group or cause (Kleidman 1994). Tlawmngaihna denotes a communitarian spirit for a collective purpose, which implies reverence towards others. It has no equivalent word in English. It means readiness to serve, love of the highest degree, spirit of altruism or unselfishness, courtesy and help to others, that people have been practising since immemorial time. Every YMA member is supposed to follow and practise Tlawmngaihna, by, for instance, helping an ailing person living in a remote area to reach the nearest hospital, or a poor family by donating clothes and food. Individuals who perform Tlawmngaihna are highly revered. During my fieldwork in 2011–2012, leaders and youth claimed that the ideological foundation of the Association is based on the concept of Tlawmngaihna. The members strive to uphold the cultural values by serving the poor and the destitute and hence contribute to create a more secure society.

The voluntary activities of the YMA members are observable in every sphere of society. Local units inform members on occasions of marriage, death and birth to provide voluntary services for the preparation of food, serving the guests and decorating and readying the house and front yard of the host family. Once they have been informed, members come forward to help the family. A person who volunteered and served others receives in return services and help from fellow members on similar occasions in his or her family. My point is that voluntary work, which one undertakes in normal course as a part of society, can be considered to be a manifestation of one's belonging and identity. The Association encourages its members to volunteer, and thereby safeguard tradition and cultural values. Members are also requested to spread awareness of any unwanted social behaviour like drug abuse. In other words, communitarian and traditional activities are repeated in everyday life to define a specific ethnic identity and enforce belonging, and the desirability of members leading a meaningful social life by avoiding addictions is also repeatedly pointed out.

Since 1980, YMA has been trying to revive Tlawmngaihna through various programmes and social events. Leaders justify this project by pointing to the decline of the spirit of Tlawmngaihna due to the onset of modernity and growth of individualism. Pu Rokhuma, a Mizo elder, stated:

There are less Tlawmngai people (one who does the act of Tlawmngaihna) in modern times; this is a matter of shame and it is a dangerous trend popping up in Mizo society today. But, today, there is a difference in the presence of Tlawmngai people in the rural and urban areas. In rural areas, where traditional social forms can be observed, that are not much affected by modern ethos, there is a stronger presence of Tlawmngai people, and Tlawmngaihna is still in practice. In the urban areas of Mizoram, one witnesses the presence of less Tlawmngai people.

(12 June 2012, Aizawl)

Another person I interviewed, Lalthangfala Sailo from Aizawl, commented: 'A Mizo is born with Tlawmngaihna; sad but true, Tlawmngaihna has been fading away and YMA is reviving it' (Interview on 13 May 2011, Aizawl). These statements highlight the commonly shared idea that Mizo society in recent times has welcomed the modern way of life and has valorised external appearance over the earlier traditional way of life which was communitarian in character.

Hnatlang is a voluntary social service in which every Mizo is supposed to participate during community activities. YMA is actively promoting it. It is carried out at least once in a week in every locality. Local leaders inform members about these activities. For instance, members volunteer to clean up their locality without any sponsorship from any state agency. Youth irrespective of gender participate in such social services. Hnatlang differs from Tlawmngaihna on two counts. First, it is a planned event, whereas Tlawmngaihna is an act of help or service rendered at any time and on any occasion. Second, members believe that Tlawmngaihna is a state of mind, a readiness to help and serve others, not just fellow Mizos, whereas Hnatlang is a service rendered to the community, friends and relatives. For instance, during events of death, members volunteer to dig the grave of the dead and help the bereaved family in many ways. They arrange Hnatlang and do not charge any money for their help.

YMA leaders believe that Hnatlang helps members to realise the importance of their tradition and culture. During birth, death and marriage events, as part of Hnatlang services, members and close ones volunteer in various kinds of services like cooking, serving cooked food to the visiting guests, arranging sitting areas and cleaning up. The members help in making arrangements to perform the last rites of the deceased. Such voluntary services help needy families who are unable to pay for hired labour on such occasions.

YMA also organises frequent interactions among the members to promote social solidarity and awareness. A unique feature is the system of exchange of information between people. Local units are the agencies who conduct and operationalise the exchange of information. Be it at night or at very early hours, local units send out information in their locality. In the past, every village had a village messenger known as Zualko (village crier) who carried and passed on information to other villages and other households. Due to the advent of modern

technology, the local units today use the electronic medium to announce information. They make announcements of death, birth, marriage and any other events in society. No one else, not even the church or the government, makes such announcements.

### ***Promoting traditional dress and festivals***

At the annual event of the YMA general conference, leaders encourage members to wear traditional dress, not just at marriage, birth and death ceremonies and other social events but also during normal weekdays. The annual events are broadcast on vernacular cable TV networks and are also aired through All India Radio (AIR) Aizawl and Aizawl Doordarshan (DD Aizawl). The Association has a cultural committee called CYMA Cultural Committee, which aims at promoting traditional dresses and the organisation of festivals. During the annual event, the committee urges members, elderly persons, students and office goers to wear traditional dresses such as the Puan (a cloth wrapped around the waist), and not blazers and Western suits. It views modern dresses such as blazers, jeans and suits as a threat to the Mizo tradition and culture.<sup>10</sup>

During Chapchar Kut (a Mizo cultural festival marking the beginning of New Year), leaders encourage members to celebrate Kut wearing traditional dresses. They openly promote traditional dress in the vernacular cable TV networks such as Zonet, radio programmes, and through the CYMA Press. In earlier times, the bridal couple and the guests wore only traditional dresses; hence today the YMA members express their dissatisfaction with the Western outfits such as suits and gowns worn by brides and bridegrooms in contemporary Mizo marriages (Nunthara 1996).

Promoting Mizo traditional dress has also been taken up by state dignitaries. For instance, Indian dignitaries at New Delhi appreciate a Mizo wearing traditional dress and performing traditional dance Cheraw ('bam-boo dance'). In the media too, leaders welcome dignitaries from New Delhi with a token of shawl (Kawrchei) and a hat made of bamboo. Leaders encourage YMA members to display traditional costumes and to perform cultural items. This was especially evident when people from Mizoram participated in events in New Delhi (Jain 2007).

Leaders praised the efforts made by the Mizo District Council between 1952 and 1972 that led to the declaration of Chapchar Kut as a state holiday. They also celebrate national holidays such as Independence Day and Republic Day. On such occasions, markers of local identity are displayed: participants wear traditional attire such as the Puanchei (black and white Sarong wrapped around the waist by women), and turban topped with long tail feathers of the Vakul bird; perform the traditional dance such as the Cheraw ('bamboo dance'); and sing traditional songs. Additionally, on these occasions, an observer can witness a display of national symbols of India such as the national flag and the national anthem; emissaries from New Delhi attend the events. YMA members also organise the float displaying cultural dances, traditional dresses and headgears during the Republic Day parade in New Delhi.

This shows that YMA has succeeded in creating awareness of ethnic identity and a sense of local and national belonging by focusing on affairs of everyday life, by promoting social and cultural events, dress, language, literature and traditional songs; the Association thus promotes markers of ethnic identification which are alternative to Christian values and practices; this questions Pachuau's view of the Christian Church as the main resource for Mizo ethnic identification (2014: 140 and 157). Members of the association are not all Christian, since not all Mizos are Christian. The point is that Christianity or being a Christian cannot necessarily define a YMA member or a Mizo. In fact, more than 8,000 Mizo in Mizoram are not Christian and belong to indigenous sects like the Vanawia, the Lalzawna pawl and the Enohka sect, as well as to Judaism (for details on such indigenous sects, see Zaihmingthanga 2016: 261–269).

### ***The relationships of YMA to non-Mizos***

The YMA constitution states, 'In today's world of inter-communal existence, communion with other community, without prejudice is necessary. But, I must not make myself despicable to them' (YMA Constitution 1994 Revised). 'I' refers to every member of the Association. 'Them' here refers to the non-Mizo communities, which are the Chakma, Lai, Mara and Gorkha. Leaders use the terms 'YMA members and non-YMA members' during public events and in the publications of CYMA Press. Pachuau explains that the idea of cultural differences was maintained in rules and policies in Mizo society since the colonial period till today in order to keep control over the creation of identity (Pachuau 2014: 3). Different practices created by British missionaries and British administrators are now being politicised by the Mizo to subvert, distance, alienate and to mark 'others' (i.e. Non-Mizo) in Mizoram (Pachuau 2014: 3–6).

Here is a case of the space introduced between 'us and them' in contemporary Mizoram, which also demonstrates the promotion of ethnic nationalism by politicians who were former CYMA leaders. During 1997–1998, YMA leaders vehemently opposed the demand for a separate ethnic homeland of the Bru community (a minority community inhabiting the western parts of Mizoram), non-indigenous to Mizoram (Syed Sajjad Ali 1998). During 1997–1998, the Bru National Union (BNU) claimed an autonomous district in Mizoram; this movement was unsuccessful due to the pressure exerted by the Association on the state.<sup>12</sup> The peculiarity of this case was that the opposition to the BNU demand did not come from the other non-Mizo units such as the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC), the Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) and the Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC).

A speech by Lalruatkima in 2002 (former CYMA leader, at present a MNF legislator) received huge applause and chest-beating during the general conference (see [www.centralyma.org/general-conference/](http://www.centralyma.org/general-conference/)) because he declared that the Bru community is not originally from Mizoram, and hence, it has no legitimacy to form an organisation under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. The same argument was repeated during the 2014 CYMA

general conference. Leaders declared that civil society bodies – YMA, Mizoram Upa Pawl (Mizo Elder Federation) and Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (All Mizoram Women’s Federation) – would pass a resolution on 5 August 2014 against the formation of organisations along ethnic lines.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Association, along with a handful of other Mizo organisations, reserved the right to decide who belongs and who does not belong to the land, who is indigenous and who is not. However, according to India’s constitutional arrangement, these questions are a matter for the law, and not for the YMA.

Regarding the upholding of social order through, for instance, campaigns against drug, intoxicants, for moral reformation and for supporting households to get their ration cards to be able to procure subsidised essential commodities, there are no news reports of such activities by organisations other than the YMA. Here one sees the extent of influence of the association. In almost all matters, the Association’s concern and participation are considered pivotal. The main difference of the Association with other bodies like the MZP (Mizo Zirlai Pawl or Mizo Students Association) is that the motives, agendas, consensus and reach of the Association are wider, deeper and more influential. For instance, the MZP makes headlines in local dailies solely by organising protest marches against illegal migrants. Furthermore, the students’ body did not participate in many of the activities undertaken by the CYMA. Till today, the MZP has not made any press statements against the formation of organisations along ethnic lines. Since 1998, the activities of the MZP were reduced to organising long marches protesting against illegal migrants in Mizoram and holding street protests against government policies on education and scholarships.

Since 1941, the CYMA has been holding its general conference once a year. Members and leaders decide an ‘annual theme’ (kumpuan), which reflects the agenda of the Association and the tasks to be performed and achieved for the particular year. During the event, members also elect the leaders. Since 1941, the annual conference has been held in different towns of Mizoram and not only in Aizawl. The main reason is to make the presence of the Association felt everywhere the Mizos live. The Association even tried to hold the annual event in other Mizo towns in Assam (Haflong), Manipur (Churachandpur) and Tripura (Vanhmun), but this did not work out; the reason for this failure has not been explained by the Association.

During 1955–1973, the conference was held only once, in 1963, due to a shortage of fund,<sup>14</sup> the Mautam (famine) and Rambuai (troubled times during the 1966 to 1986 Mizo insurgency). Scrolling through the section on general conference of the CYMA website revealed two themes which were repeated more than eight times, especially during the period between 1982 and 2015 (see, Central YMA website/general conference). The repeated themes are – (a) Ram Leh Hnam Humhim (Safeguarding Nation and Land) and (b) Preservation of Mizo Culture.<sup>15</sup> Such themes encourage members to draw distinctions between ‘they and we’. It encourages members to draw ethnic boundaries, define belonging, give more importance to their culture and traditions and see more clearly their differences

from other communities. Such themes have ethnic overtones and can be seen as leading to the definition of markers of ethnic nationalism.

The headline of *The Shillong Times* (a daily from Meghalaya) on 4 August 2014 provides another example of the YMA leaders' opinion on other communities. Here is the news excerpt in full, which was entitled 'Mizo body to conduct Chakma<sup>16</sup> headcounts':

Concerned over an 'abnormal increase' of Chakma population in southern Mizoram, the state's largest organisation YMA has decided to conduct a census on Chakma population in the state to check Chakma infiltration. 'The census on Chakma will be conducted soon in the Chakma autonomous district council areas in southern Mizoram and other parts of the state', Lalbiakzuala, president of YMA central committee said, 'It [the census] is necessary to study the rapid growth rate of Chakma population and further check influx from the neighbouring Bangladesh', he added. Chakma issue topped the agenda of the YMA central executive committee meeting in Aizawl on Saturday. The meeting decided to collect Rs 5 each from all the YMA members in Mizoram to conduct the gigantic task. The YMA meeting also decided to put more pressure on its demand for removal of Mizoram minister of state Dr B D Chakma from the Cabinet. The YMA had earlier written to Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla to remove Chakma from his Cabinet for his (Chakma) participation in a poll boycott against allocation of land in Chakma autonomous district council for construction of a Mizo guesthouse by Mizo students' body MZP.

(*The Shillong Times*, 4 August 2014)

Readers should note that such headcounts are not a recent trend in North-east India (see Singh 2012b, 2014). Organisations in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur have also conducted headcounts. They started headcounts in the villages of Mizoram in order to check the influx of 'foreigners' (a term used by Mizo signifying people from Myanmar and Bangladesh) since 1998. Sammadar mentions that minority communities have often been the victims of these individual headcounts, and for this reason, criticises the YMA (Sammadar 2006: 8–9).

The members of the Association are also accused by other communities of Mizoram for not making their services available to other communities. They volunteer only within their families and friends. During my fieldwork in a lower middle school in the outskirts of Aizawl, where 90 per cent of the students were Mizo, the members volunteered to teach in the school without any emoluments. A Bru villager in the western part of Mizoram commented: 'Volunteerism of YMA is mainly within the context of Mizo society. The members did not volunteer to teach at primary level schools in the Bru villages of Mizoram' (Name withheld, Mamit district, Mizoram, 2012).

Regarding the policy of compulsory Mizo language education in schools in Mizoram laid out by the Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE), minority communities are sceptical of this policy. They firmly believe that the motive behind compulsory Mizo education is to ensure that the language is learnt by all the communities in Mizoram. They disagree with YMA's support of this policy and accuse the Association of openly promoting learning of only Mizo language in schools. The prime reason for their dissent is that other communities often face difficulties in learning the Mizo language. They contend that the state authorities should also provide options to learn other minority languages like Mara, Lai and Chakma in school. A dissenter from the Chakma community of Mizoram stated:

Mizos want to get most of the jobs in Mizoram, since they are well versed in Mizo language, and it is obvious that the Mizos will capture most of the jobs. This is the main reason for mandatory Mizo language in the high schools. Minority communities do not have much hope to get Mizoram state government jobs; instead we look for central government jobs.

(A Chakma elder, 2012, Chhwangte town, Mizoram)

The YMA also supports the usage of Mizo language in the media, debating competitions, educational event and social events. One of the office bearers in CYMA commented: 'If you want to live in Rome, you should live like the Romans' (CYMA leader 2011, Aizawl).

Coming back to Hnatlang, it is also one of the markers of differentiation between Mizos and non-Mizos. For instance, during Hnatlang, an observer will find the YMA members playing an active role while other communities rarely participate. Social activities should be opened up to all communities, but in Mizoram, it remains exclusive. The exclusivity of social activities undertaken by the YMA echoes the sentiments of Alain Touraine in his essay *Sociology without Society* (Touraine 1998: 12–18) where he claimed that identity politics involve movements and exclusive tendencies rather than movements organising around a variety of identities that may alternate between exclusivity and inclusivity.

Members of the Association constantly create meanings of belonging while performing a variety of activities under the banner of Hnatlang. Everyday activity of Hnatlang is performed within a territory or a space. Relevance of the activity and the very notion of participation in such activity by the YMA members exclusively are significantly displayed on everyday occasions of life, birth, marriage and death. Following the norms that already exist in Mizo culture, members and leaders of the Association have never questioned the logic behind the existing norm differentiating who can participate and who cannot. Reification based on conscious categories and cultural symbols operates strongly in creating awareness of Mizo identity through events and activities promoted by YMA.

## The political and religious YMA

A former leader who is unhappy with the present-day office bearers contesting elections in Mizoram commented:

YMA office bearers use their position as a stepping-stone for recognition and future political aspirations. It took a step to abolish CADC [Chakma Autonomous District Council] during the CYMA general conference at Champhai in 1999. We all know that the CADC is a constitutionally recognised body with certain autonomy. YMA is not the Mizoram government. It is a non-government organisation, which can pressure the government for the welfare of Mizoram.

(Ex-president CYMA, 11 June 2011, Aizawl)

During the leadership of T. Sangkunga (1998–2000), the Association initiated the problematic idea of re-checking the electoral roll of Mizoram, which is unconstitutional, since the electoral roll is a white paper, and can be accessed and checked only by authorised officials of the Government of India. During 1997–1998, YMA members demanded a new electoral roll. The intention was to delete many non-Mizos from the electoral roll.<sup>17</sup> This shows the degree of intolerance, xenophobic attitude and the intention to keep alive the Mizo/non-Mizo identity debate in Mizoram.

During the electoral roll reform of 1997–1998, the YMA filtered and deleted many non-Mizo names from the electoral roll. It stirred up discontentment, especially among the Mara, the Lai and the Chakma communities. Curiously, no official records could be found to confirm the Association's involvement in the deletion of non-Mizo names from the electoral roll, neither in its archive nor in the Mizoram government records; few reports were made in vernacular dailies (see [www.vanlani.org](http://www.vanlani.org), 17 July 2013). The leaders I met considered that safeguarding and deleting the names of illegal settlers in Mizoram is 'a humble act'. The electoral roll recognises an individual as a bonafide resident if he or she is born prior to 1951 in the state. The members of the YMA considered it as part of a policy initiated to bring down unwanted migrants across the porous borders of the state. It was also a message to the effect that even though the state had failed to bring down the unwanted migrants, the Association would help to successfully send them back. It was a pure exercise of protecting their interests, displaying a xenophobic tendency that a popular ex-CYMA leader highlighted in the following way:

We felt that foreigners should not take part in the decision making of Mizoram. We want Mizo to make decisions for us, not foreigners. Those who were born outside and brought up outside of Mizoram are foreigners and they cannot be Chief Minister or any kind of ministers; that is against our socio-cultural traditional values, and also against the Constitution of India.

YMA is a part of Mizo social life; without the association, Mizo society, Mizo culture and Mizo history would have been different.

(Lianzuala, ex-president CYMA, 12 May 2011, Aizawl)

Electoral roll reform also created many divisions in Mizoram. Many Mizo migrants from Myanmar and neighbouring states of Manipur became illegal inhabitants in Mizoram. After the Mizo Peace Accord of 30 June 1986, many of them migrated to Mizoram from the Chin Hills of Myanmar and Manipur for a better livelihood and because of the on-going conflict in Manipur and Myanmar. During my fieldwork, many YMA members commented that the association 'flexed its muscles resembling a state within a state'. Two elderly Mara individuals from the Saiha district of Mizoram commented:

Mizoram electoral roll reform was wrong in every sense. Mara Thyuthia Py (MTP)<sup>18</sup> had negative views on the 1997–1998 Electoral roll reform. MTP raised voice against YMA's role. Lai, Mara and Chakma residing in Mizoram felt that YMA leaders were laying their hands on the electoral roll. The worst was that Mizoram government agreed to delete many voters from the electoral roll, simply due to their pressure. Our concern at present is that they should not intervene more on sensitive issues such as gender, class inequality, corruption, and better provision for health care.

(Dr Pahnne & Rev Leicchuama, 27 May 2011, Saiha District, Mizoram)

The huge influence of the YMA in the state administration allows the members of the Association to give their opinion in formulation of state policies, for instance, in state education reform, state environment reform, labour reform and trade committee reform. The Association showed its might by expressing the ethnocentric views of its members (see details in Singh 2014: 3–4). Furthermore, their clout in the activities of the state is increasing. Sangkima, a Mizo historian, argues that the success the YMA has in lobbying is due to the weakness of the state; since the state does not address the issues actively, YMA leaders take up those roles. Since 1998, these leaders have started taking up active roles in education, environment, the fight against drug abuse and health care, which are actually matters of the Mizoram state. Sangkima commented:

YMA has been influencing and putting their hand in state government affairs. This is not the fault of the YMA. The state, now seeks the opinion of the YMA in important policies to be initiated by the state. They are compelled to take charge of some of the government's tasks. Why was the YMA involved in Chakma infiltration issue? This is something political. Government has its own agencies such as police, excise and narcotics. These agencies are supposed to perform roles. But they fail. That is why the YMA steps in.

(Sangkima, 24 May 2011, Aizawl)

The Association seeks to promote Mizo culture through bringing in Christianity, sowing seeds of ethnic nationalism through texts published by the CYMA Press, organising headcounts, reforming the electoral roll, organising Hnatlang and Tlawmngaihna.<sup>19</sup> It has maintained close relationships with the state, in line with its constitution, which states, 'government is our government'. Its influence is so immense that the YMA has a partnership with the state in providing essential services and for the implementation of development projects. For example, Aizawl-based newspaper Vanglaini reported on 23 May 2012 that the YMA is a key actor in state government's Intodelhna (self-sufficiency), a project launched during 1990s (Newslink, Aizawl, 23 May 2012). In contrast, the MZP has not played any role in development projects in Mizoram.

## **Concluding remarks**

Since its conception, the YMA has been emphasising the preservation of tradition and culture. As one of the foremost non-governmental agencies promoting cultural values, it plays a visible role in promoting identity through its activities. It promotes Mizo culture, language and identity by organising high-school debating competitions, supporting compulsory Mizo language education in schools and by promoting traditional dress and attire. The Association utilises festivals, games and sports, socio-cultural events and birth, marriage, death ceremonies and traditional dresses as instruments for promoting Mizo identity among the members. Most importantly, the members endeavour to promote Mizo identity through volunteerism. Preservation of traditional institutions such as Zawlbuk and Hnatlang are used effectively to promote Mizo identity. It remains the only organisation in Mizoram promoting these traditional institutions.

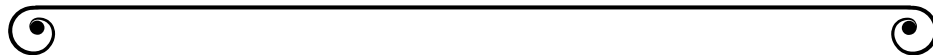
YMA leaders claim that the association is purely non-political, with no political affiliations and not promoting any political party. Field data show that their activities have political overtones, as made evident in their position with regard to the electoral rolls reform, non-Mizo exclusion campaigns, the activities of the CYMA Press, the increasing trend of its leaders becoming legislators and their stance in enforcing compulsory Mizo language. The CYMA Press plays a role in spreading awareness of Mizo identity. It reminds members to actively participate in its activities through its monthly and weekly letters. While promoting tradition, culture and traditional institutions, the Association creates cultural markers dividing Mizos and others. The creation of these markers and boundaries, the ethos of exclusivity and the defining of intrinsic values central to a particular community is what we generally understand as politics of identity.

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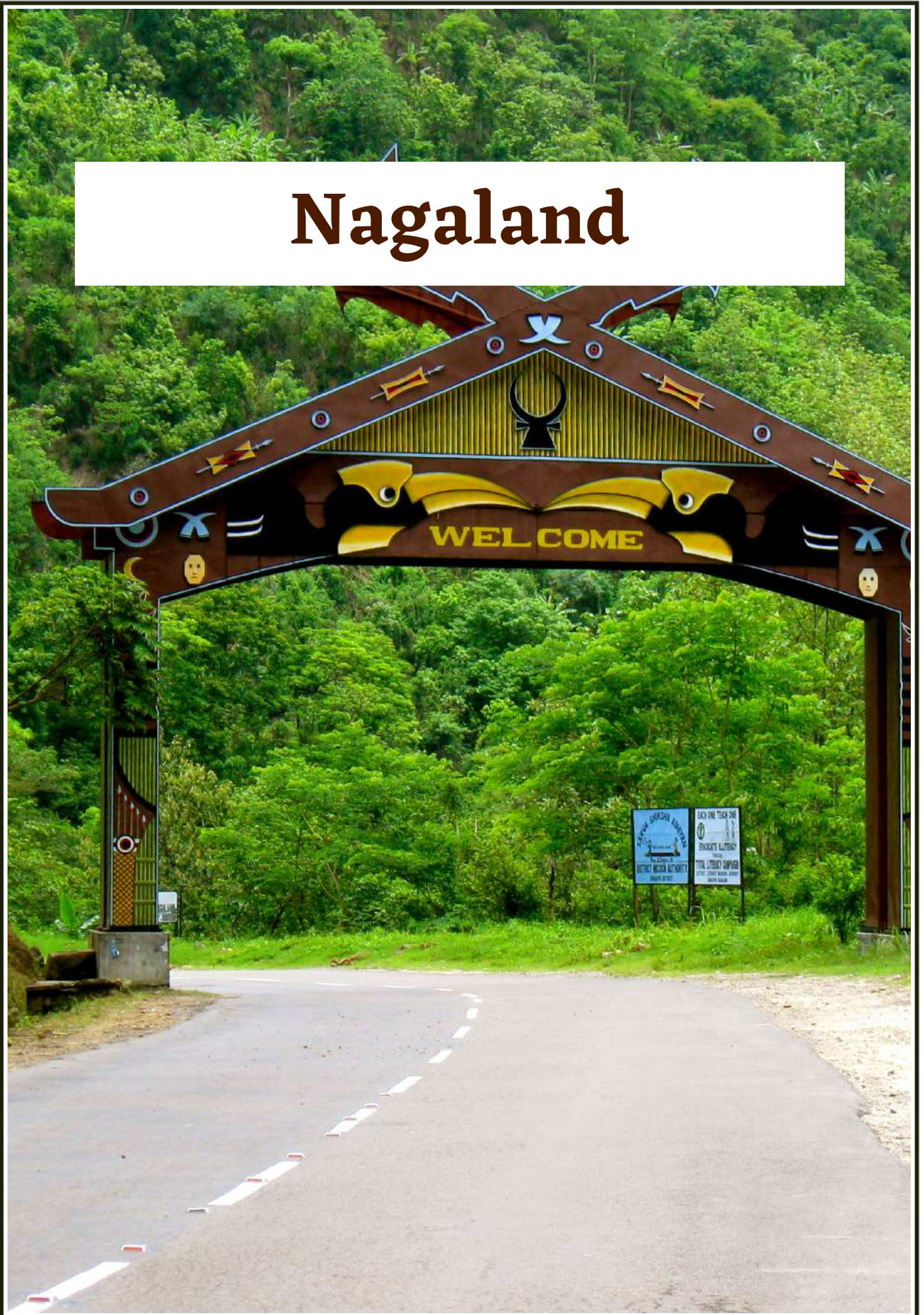
1 According to the 2015 YMA Report, the Association has a total membership of 405,709 members. Every Mizo youth (irrespective of gender) automatically becomes a lifetime member of the YMA.

2 CYMA is the official central office of all the YMA branches of Mizoram; it is located at Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram. It looks after the activities of the YMA branches. In this chapter, the names YMA and CYMA will be used interchangeably.

- 3 The general conference of the YMA is held once a year. It was first held in 1941 at Aizawl.
- 4 The CYMA Press is located in the heart of Aizawl, staffed and managed by the CYMA Publication Committee. It publishes weekly and monthly newsletters as well as journals in Mizo language.
- 5 Chatterji 1975.
- 6 From 1898 to 1954, Mizoram was known as the Lushai Hills District.
- 7 The Triaui River runs along the border between Mizoram and Myanmar.
- 8 According to Rev J. M. Lloyd (2004), two churches were initially founded in the Dai and Matupi areas. Many new churches from all denominations came up later.
- 9 The Mizo Zirlai Pawl (Mizo Students Association) was established on 27 October 1935 at Shillong, Meghalaya. Its present headquarter is at Aizawl.
- 10 Lal Chungnuna. 2003. 'Self Reliance', Speech at Central YMA General Conference, Thenzawl, 2003. [www.centralyma.org](http://www.centralyma.org), [Accessed on September 9, 2016].
- 11 The Mizoram District remained a schedule district of Assam till 1972.
- 12 Press Release by Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF), 20 October 2007. [www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/. . ./BNLF.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/. . ./BNLF.htm) [Accessed on October 17, 2016].
- 13 'Preserving National Identity', speech delivered at YMA general conference, Khawzawl, 2014. See [www.centralyma.org.in/general\\_assembly](http://www.centralyma.org.in/general_assembly) [Accessed on September 8, 2016]. National Identity here denotes Mizo identity.
- 14 Vanglaini, 'A Mizo Daily Newspaper', [www.vanglaini.org](http://www.vanglaini.org) [Accessed on September 8, 2016].
- 15 Lal Chungnuna, 2003, 'Self Reliance', Speech at Central YMA General Conference, Thenzawl, 2003. [www.centralyma.org](http://www.centralyma.org) [Accessed on September 9, 2016].
- 16 The Chakmas are a Buddhists minority ethnic group of Mizoram found in Lawngtalai and Lunglei districts.
- 17 For further details, see D. Singh (2010:115); Dhar (1998: 346); Bhatia (2012: 164). Most of the aforementioned books discuss the issue of foreigners and deletion of non-Mizos (including minority ethnic groups like the Chakmas) from the electoral roll list and argue that it was spearheaded by the YMA, the MZP and the political parties of Mizoram for electoral gains.
- 18 Mara Thyuthia Py (MTP) is the youth organisation for the Mara tribes of southern Mizoram. It was established in 1950.
- 19 Lal Chungnuna, 'Self Reliance', Speech at the Central YMA General Conference, Thenzawl, 2003. See [www.centralyma.org](http://www.centralyma.org) [Accessed on September 4, 2016].



# Nagaland



# The Naga way of Art

Abantika Parashar

District Museum Officer, District Museum, Jorhat, Assam

This is land of handsome people  
Blessings are for the people of this  
land.

People rejoiced, people are  
blessed People will rejoice, be  
rejoice people.

According to the traditional Indian concept there is no clear cut distinction between art and craft. According to the Oxford dictionary, art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as sculpture and painting, producing work to be appreciated primarily for their beauty of emotional power is. On the other hand the same source defines craft as the activity involving skill in making things by hand. The Sanskrit term Shilpa includes both as both are said to be governed by the originality of expression and aesthetic consciousness.

Naga art and craft, which is actually inseparable, is closely associated with socio-religious rituals, customs and practices. Much of the 'Naga Art Tradition' is associated with customary practices like the traditional ritualistic believes and practices such as head hunting and stone worship, cultivation based practices etc. actually artistic pleasure, whether as an everyday activity or as a creative passion, is universally felt by all the Nagas. Although the ideal of beauty differs from tribe to tribe, the general character of enjoyment is of the same order everywhere. Even the poorest family produces work that has elements of aesthetic pleasure and minute craftsmanship.

Amongst the varieties of Naga art and craft, there are there is a distinguished division, each being the monopoly of the either sex. While the man's style are solely expressed in the art of wood carving, painting, basketry and other derivatives, the women dominate the art of weaving, embroidery and pottery making. However to understand as well as to appreciate the traditional Naga art, one has to understand the hardships and difficulties, under which the artisan had to work and struggle in the past.

The book Naga Arts and Crafts of Nagaland published by Naga Institute of Culture, Government of Nagaland, Kohima, describes this point in this way 'security of the village against enemy attack was one of the main concern of every Naga Village. Though inside the same village head hunting was not practiced, it was a common practice between the villages of the same tribe. In the midst of uncertainties of Naga life, it was, therefore, difficult for the artist, to devote much of his time purely in a work of aesthetic pleasure, which didn't give him

any material gain.... In addition to this, the villages by thick jungles and deep rivers could not maintain regular contact and trade and as a result the artisans never thought of producing large quantity of handicrafts for commercial purpose. In most of the tribes, the head of the family even today is the basket maker; his wife is the weaver for the members of the household, thus keeping every household self sufficient...lack of material was also a difficulty.....the practice of burying or hanging to decay on the tomb of possessions of a dead man along with his body is another destructive feature of the traditional art...the tradition is practiced by non-Christian everywhere in Nagaland. But what is commendable is that, in spite of all these hurdles, including constant threat of death, craftsmanship was practiced in Nagaland, which is not provide visual satisfaction, but also a documentation of the rich ethnographic intangible heritage of the different Naga tribes, which are no longer in practice.

### **Textile, the skill of spinning and weaving**

The raw material of Naga textile, which is known for its vibrant color, aesthetic beauty as well as warmth, is cotton. Initially, Cotton on small scale was grown in many areas, but the Lothas, the Rengmas and the Aos were great cotton growers and even used to sell to the neighboring tribes. In recent years, mill made yarn is readily available in the market at lower cost, so production of cotton and the indigenous spinning is fast losing in the face of bazaar competition. In contrast, weaving is becoming more popular than before with new varieties and designs due to availability of material as well as equipments and renaissance of identity.



Figure -1: Two Naga weavers with hand loom and necessary equipment.

Spinning and weaving is the exclusive monopoly of women. Traditionally it could be started as soon as the first fruits of the new harvest had been eaten. The design is mostly done by using different colors of warp at different stages or by the weft weaving method. Traditional Naga textile includes lower garment for male and upper as well as lower garment for female, shawls etc. One of the common features of Naga shawl is that three pieces are woven separately and later on stitched together. In case of children's shawl and women skirts, the pieces are reduced to two.

One of the most interesting Naga textiles is the Naga Shawl. Different tribes of Nagas have different shawls of their own unique patterns and within the same tribe nobody is allowed to wear a shawl according to their choice. They vary from very simple white cloth to elaborate and complex designs and it is very interesting to know the taboos associated with this piece of cloth. The Naga tribes have their own social boundaries and these shawls help in identifying those boundary lines. The common people are not allowed to wear a shawl meant for the head hunters or the rich who have sacrificed Mithun in Feast of Merit, disobeying of which is believed to have unpleasant outcome. For example Ao warrior shawl Tsungkotpsu is only for those who is either head hunter or has performed feast of merit. In case of the Angami cowry shawls, three lines of cowries indicate the wearer is a warrior and four lines stood for a renowned veteran and these are to be sewn by the owner himself.

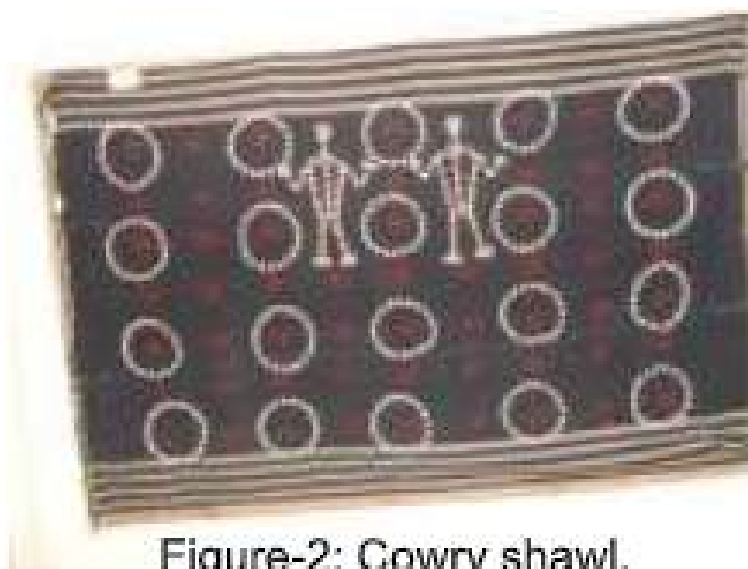


Figure-2: Cowry shawl.

Rongkhim, one of the most attractive Yimchunger shawls can be worn only by a man who has taken heads in war. In ancient times, only a reputed warrior could wear such shawls having 96 designs and other warriors wore that with 64 designs. If this cloth is worn by any other men, who is not a warrior, he was believed to die in leprosy. Kechinger Rongkhim is another warrior shawl, which is entitled to a warrior who has taken the right hand of the slain enemy. Amerthre Khim, with red designs, is another attractive shawl of the same, which can be worn by a man who has killed a tiger. The patterns woven in the shawl is said to be copied from the strips of the tiger's skin. In fact, when the wearer of such shawl dies, a rough outline of a tiger is made with spitted bamboo, which is covered by this shawl and placed in the grave. The reoccurring motives of Naga textiles, especially shawls are some geometric patterns and some everyday objects like Mithun, elephant, tiger, human head, weapons etc. Mithun symbolizes wealth of the owner, elephant and tigers indicate valour of the man, and human heads indicate success in head hunting wars. Again, in a Naga society, cowries are symbols of martial achievements and no ordinary man is allowed to use it in their attire. On the other hand, according to Dr. Verrier Elwin, the zigzag patterns of Naga shawl symbolize the winding path, which a head hunter follows to attack an enemy village along with natural expression of an aggressive forceful temperament.

The importance of a Naga Shawl as a social identity and the intangible elements surrounding it can easily be understood if one comes across the taboos and traditions associated with the manufacture of Teri Phiketsu, a warrior shawl of the Rengma tribe. This is woven specially for successful head hunters, who had brought trophies of human head to the village and in 'The Art and Craft of Nagaland', there is a detailed description of the event '...according to the believes, it is held that, when the warrior comes home with the trophies he is to stay in the Morung for three day....on competition of ceremonies, that is after fifteen days, the wife of the warrior starts to weave this cloth while the smartest man in the village is sent to collect sap and other materials necessary for panting the white medium band in the cloth. As a matter of fact, the whole history of the war is painted on the cloth. The prominent paintings on the white band symbolize the soldier. Three or four inconspicuous heads are painted at intervals to distinguish the leaders or captains from the soldiers. The three lines of black thread about 5cms long on either side of the white band is the symbol of the ear- rings of the victors. The two lines at the bottom on either side of each of the soldiers and leaders indicate the arrows. The figures in the middle of each soldier represent the spoon. A warrior is taboo to eat with his hand, but should use a wooden spoon while eating so that the blood of the enemy is not washed away. The belief, in this practice is to remain the mana of the victim, for, by washing away the blood of the enemy, he is believed to become coward in life thereafter. Also by allowing the blood to remain in his hands, he is supposed to be strong and grow more beards. Just below the representation of the spoon, there is a straight line in each of the painting to denote the bridge which a warrior use to come across into the area of the enemy after the enemy shut the gate and come out over the same bridge with his trophy. The zigzag panting on the lower side of the median white band is the symbolic representation of the sentry posts on which the soldiers kept gourd....such a cloth (original) is very rare to find nowadays. In this regard, J.P. Mills has written '...The pattern of this band is traditional and is regarded representing decapitated men interspersed with the men who have taken their heads. These bands used to be made in both Tseminyu and Tesophenyu, but the old craftsman in the former village is dead and no one has arisen to take his place, the work being regarded in some vague way as derogatory. In Tesophenyu, on the other hand, the tradition is vigorously alive and one Achukha is striking out on a line of his own and introducing a second band. On a cloth which I obtained in 1931, the lower band by his was decorated as follows taking the objects from left to right: a warrior's tail, tiger's eyes, a cow elephant, a bull elephant, tiger's eyes, a tiger, a domestic Mithun, a bear, a Sambhur, tiger's eyes wild Mithun, tiger's eyes, a warrior's 'tail', a very band man whose head has been cut off and underneath, a python swallowing a barking deer. On another cloth I have seen a pictorial record of the rescue of a man from a tiger by the warrior'.

## **Jewelry**

The traditional ornaments of Nagaland are multi colored with simple designs and are very beautiful a necklace made of colored beads is generally worn by Naga people around the neck. 'The beads are made from variety of paraphernalia like stone, bone or shells. They also

wear armlets made of ivory and brass. The most common ornaments used by the Nagas are necklaces, earrings, armlets and bracelets. The Naga ornaments are usually designed from ordinary semi precious stones, ivory; metals, boar's teeth etc are a hallmark of the high degree of creativity and dexterity of art and crafts of Nagaland'. The Naga warrior's pendants used by Konyak tribe are designed in the form of miniature trophy masks in order to symbolize their bravery and courage and colorful glass beads are generally stung on chords and tightened by coins.

## **Wood carving and bamboo works**

Although, the head-hunting is no longer in practice and but it framed on the basis of the cultural and religious life of the Nagas of the bygone days. The art of wood carving is no difference and is mostly associated with head hunting and the Morung practices. Morung pillars are commonly adorned with carvings of human beings, tigers, elephants, hornbills, python and Mithun heads, which are carved in high relief. The working tools are of primitive types consisting Dao, axe, daze and chisel. More often figures are carved out of wood. The great Indian Hornbill is a very recurring motif, which break and feathers are believed to have magical powers and signifies courage and splendor in a Naga society. A head hunter can wear the feather of this bird in accordance to the number of heads he had taken. What is interesting in its depiction in carving is that, very often the perfection of the body is neglected the feathers and the head being the prime attention. That's why one can identify accurate depiction of a hornbill head and feathers, the body of which seems to be highly unproportionate to it. In the same way, in terms of animals like elephants, very often the head portion is realistic, but the legs are more or less conventional. On the other hand, tigers, which symbolizes valor, are well depicted in comparison with strips and a round head. In some Konyak Morungs, there are numbers of erotic motifs including men and women and even animals like dogs engaged in intercourse, dancing couples placing hands on each other's thighs etc.



Figure-3 : Carvings on a door of a house.



Figure-4: A replicated Morung in Kisama heritage village.

Carving of everyday objects are another kind wood carving prevalent in Naga society. Log drums, furniture, utensils and rice pounding tables are names which can be mention in this regard. Log drums are an integral part of Naga society, which is used not only to create rhythmic, but also as a messenger between villages.



Figure-5: A log drum.

Very often the body of the drum is decorated with different carvings for added glorification. In the same way, rice pounding tables are also decorated with different motifs like domestic \ animals, serpents etc, for which material other than wood including ivory is sometimes used. Furniture like chairs are very often carved out with aesthetic visualization and while doing so different materials including ivory, metals and even sometimes coconut shells are used.

Naga carving of sculptures, depicting both the sexes is very interesting. It's very rare when human faces are showed with any kind of emotional expression. Mathematical proportion of the human body is not strictly maintained. It is important that human figures are generally shown without clothes and the sexual organs are very clearly visible along with facial tattoos and different kind of jewelry. Sometimes the carved figures intend to showcase a storyline, where as in other times they are carved as a single identity.

In recent time, the practice of carving of decorative items of wood, metal and ivory has emerged. Here the artisans manufacture different components of Naga society like houses, miniature log drums and rice pounding tables, human and animal figures, everyday objects etc for different purposes.



Figure – 6: Miniature model of rice pounding table.

Bamboo is an integral part of a Naga society. In fact the vicious circle of Naga life is confined to, being start in a bamboo cradle and ending in a bamboo coffin. Actually with a grove of bamboo a Naga is always a rich man. However, tradition of bamboo basketry is assumed to be started in remote past. The making of baskets and mats, is a task reserved exclusively for men and boys. They are no professional basket makers, but every man produces baskets for his own domestic use. For living in a land full of bamboo and canes, they are naturally expert basket makers, which is a domestic tradition that runs from generation to generation. These baskets have their multiple uses with different shape and size from the rough little container made in few minutes into which a chicken is rammed for a journey, to the carefully woven baskets in which rice is carried up from the hills. Very often these baskets are decorated with carved wooden artifacts and sometime even with monkey skulls.



Figure- 7: A basket.

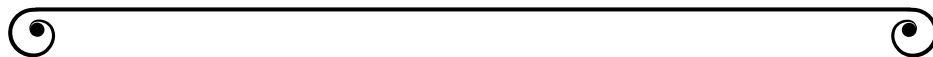
## **Pottery**

Pottery is not a widely practiced craft of Nagaland. It is restricted to women only revolving wheel not used, instead of which they had developed their own unique method of pottery making with hands. Usually the techniques vary from tribe to tribe as well as geographical area they inhabit. <sup>11</sup> The most peculiar feature of Naga pottery is that the designs and motifs have been inspired by the designs of the textile.

It is a fact that the epicenter of Naga art and craft is some forbidden as well as forgotten traditions of ancient time. Traditions like Head hunting are no way acceptable in present scenario, but in the same time it also can't be denied that conversions the old practices and traditions have weakened gradually with the associate craftsmanship. On the other hand, the modern approaches like high quality raw material, modern equipments, marketing, international markets etc have transformed these household practices into a commercial one. Off late the artistic charm of aboriginal art has become popular in terms of fashion and creativity and Naga craftsmanship is one of them. Such initiatives have broaden up the scope

of Naga art and have successfully introduced Nagaland not as a state of turbulence, naked people and aggression, but as a state of color, life and vibrant traditions in the global platform.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning here the remark of Dr. V. Elwin, '...with the growth of the material prosperity, there will be a cultural and spiritual renaissance. Naga dancing is famous and as the people will dance more will revive in their hearts old memories and joy. The Nagas have excellent taste, a perfect sense of color and there are welcoming signs that they will not permit a so called modernism to banish color from their lives and depress them into the drab uniformity of the dress and ornamentation of today'.



# Ahimsa Conversation

Niketu Iralu

## Niketu Iralu



is a peace and nonviolence activist.

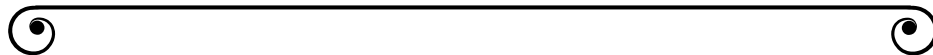
Born in Phek, Nagaland, in 1935, he studied at the Madras Christian College.

In his youth, Niketu became a member of the Moral Rearmament, later called Initiatives of Change. This work for peace and nonviolence took him to different parts of India and across the world. He has also been working among the Naga people to foster peace and reconciliation amongst them.

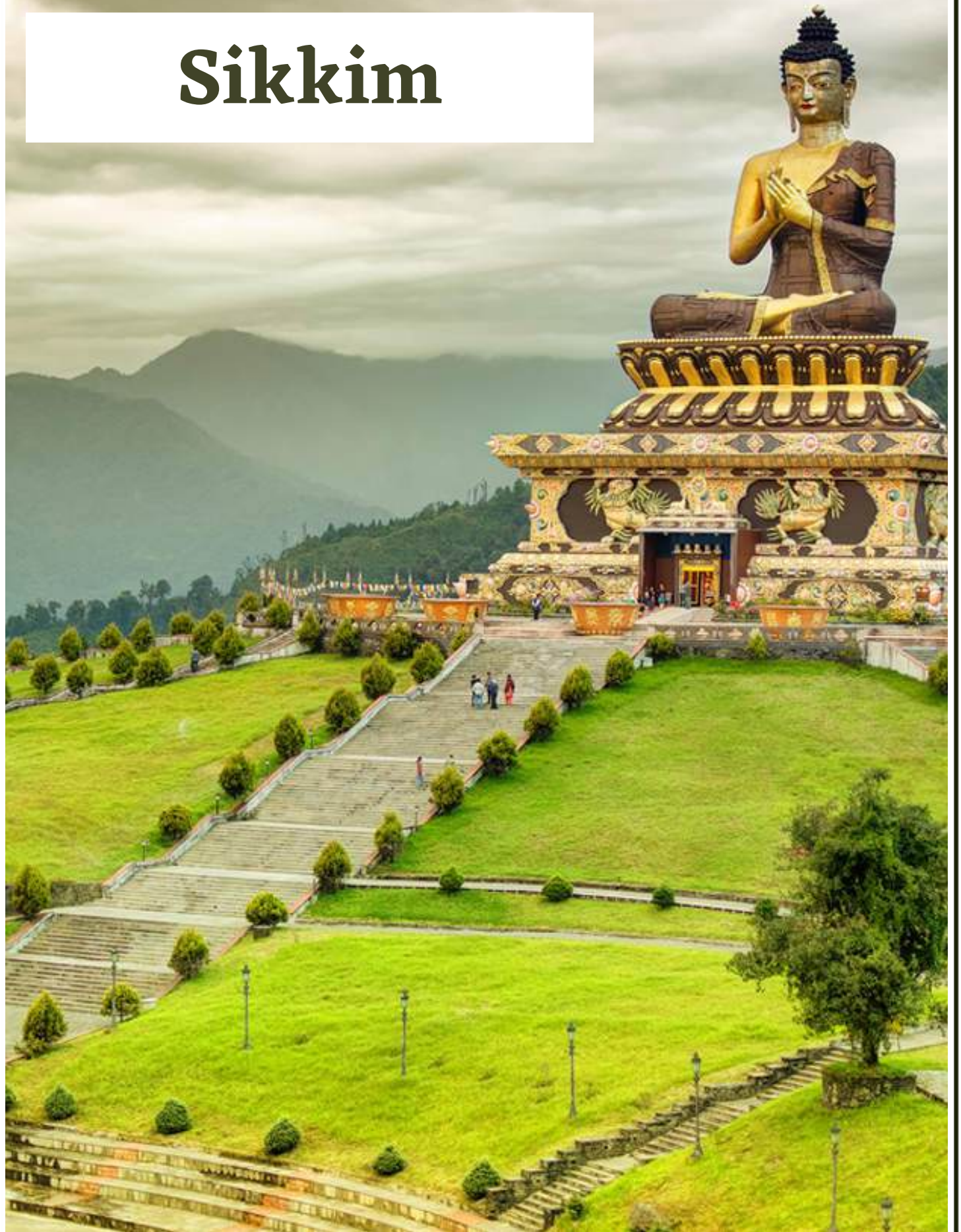
He has been Chairman of the Naga Reconciliation Commission and a Trustee of the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research. He lives in Sechu-Zubza in Nagaland.

Click the link below to watch the video:

<https://youtu.be/Jd12qHw7KYw>



# Sikkim



# Folkloristic History of “Blood Brotherhood Treaty” and its Role in Ensuring Peaceful Coexistence in Sikkim, India

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## **Abstract**

The folkloristic history has often been ignored in India. Even though, the present history of the evolution of every society is indebted to the folkloristic historiography but, in the absence of the dearth of documentation the charm of such rich treasury of the society has been reduced into unrealistic myth(s). The folkloristic history of “Blood Brother Treaty” that was signed at Kabi lanchok, Sikkim in 13th Century is one of the similar sufferers. The treaty that largely contributed in present socio-cultural richness, tranquility and peaceful coexistence of society in Sikkim still remains sidelined in the name of mapping the authenticity of historiography. The paper highlights the importance of the ‘Blood Brotherhood Treaty’ and its role in ensuring peaceful coexistence in the state of Sikkim.

## **Introduction**

Folklores plays a fundamental role in understanding the evolution of a society. There are very few societies which have managed to treasure their folklore(s) and have been able to disseminate the richness of such socio-cultural treasury to the posterity. Folklore depicts the true picture of any society and is one of the vital determinants of the richness of historicity of a society. A society undergoes through various phases of evolution and it is not possible often to find the recorded or documented version of such evolutionary phases. Such dearth may be mitigated through the socially circulated oral form called folklore as the recorder of historic phases of the evolution of society since generations. But most often validity of such records of the historicity is suspiciously questioned. The legitimacy and the reliability of folk records of history are challenged and victimized reducing into unreliable myths. Sikkim is one of the most peaceful and beautiful North Eastern state nestled in the serene hills of majestic eastern Himalayas and is wedged between West Bengal(India), Nepal, China(Tibet), and Bhutan with an area of 7096 square km. It is the least populous state of India with total population of only 610577 (2011 census). Sikkim is considered as a paradise for botanist and zoologists of its rich flora and fauna. Sikkim is home to over 4000 varieties of wild flowers, rare trees, shrubs, including 700 species of rare orchids and rhododendrons. It is also home to some rare species of Himalayan birds, snakes red panda, snow leopard, bear etc.

According to legend, the Buddhist guru Padmasambhava visited Sikkim in the 8th century AD and introduced Buddhism in the state. The early history of the state dates back to 13th century, with the signing of a blood-brotherhood treaty between the Lepcha chief Thekong Tek and a Tibetan prince Khye-Bumsa at Kabi Lungtsok in North Sikkim.

In this regards, the popular folk history of “Blood Brotherhood Treaty” of Kabi-Lanchok in Sikkim is a victim of de-recognition and academic suspicion. Sikkim is labeled as a peaceful federal unit under Indian Union for tranquility, lingo-ethnic plurality and with cordial co-existence. Society in Sikkim is a rich treasury of such folklore(s). On the one hand state is rich in its cultural diversity where ethnic groups like Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia have their history of folk culture and on the other hand there is a highly celebrated folklore on Blood Brother Treaty which these ethnic groups take pride on; which in a way binds them together.

### **Folkloristic History of the Origin of Word “Sikkim”**

The origin of the word ‘Sikkim’ has multiple interpretations as the different communities in Sikkim have different story(ies) regarding its origin – from the wooden house, the valley of rice or even the hidden heaven. Lepchas and Bhutias call it Nye-mae-el-lang(Heaven or Abode of Gods). The Nepalese called it Sukhim (The New House) whereas in Tibetan folklore the state is referred as Beyul (A hidden land of ultimate serenity) and Denzong(Land of Rice). There are many interesting folklores shared by these three major communities of Sikkim-Lepcha, Nepali/Gorkha and Bhutia. From these local folklores or the historical narratives it is found that the Sikkimese identity emerges from a historic co-existence of these three communities.

Among Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali/Gorkha, the Lepchas are also called Rongs and the Nepalis/Gorkhas as Pahares and the Bhutias as Denzongpas/Lhopas. The origin of the Sikkim has different views among the scholars. Some Scholars contend that Sikkim is also called Che-Khyim meaning ‘Stone masonry’. While others are of the opinion that the Western Sikkim was known as ‘Srid-Khyim’, which generally signifies political-power house, with the Rabdentse Palace as its epitome. Lepchas considered to be the aborigines of Sikkim, call Sikkim ‘Nye-Mayalyang’ or the sacred land of hidden paradise or the delightful abode (Gurung cited in Adhikari, 2014 and Thatal, 2015).

Lepchas are called Rongs and the word Rongkup or Rumkup means the children of snowy peak/ the children of God. There is a belief that that Lepcha God, Itbumu, created Lepcha progenitors Fudongthing and Nazongnyu from the pure virgin snows of Mt. Kanchenjunga. The couple was found to violate the rules after they gave birth to several children. Itbumu is believed to have summoned the two and said, ‘you have committed a sin. I cannot allow you two to live in this sacred mountain any longer. As a punishment, both of you now must live in the foothills of Mt. Kanchenjunga as humans and fend for yourselves’ (ibid). In the mean time,

the abandoned babies grew up to be evil spirits and started troubling the inhabitants. After getting rid of seven children, the couple decided to keep their child who is now considered to be the first Lepcha. With their legends pointing Kanchenjunga as the place of origin, it is only understandable to find Lepchas living in the foothills in this mountain for a long time (White, 1909 cited in Thatal, 2015).

The Bhutia of Sikkim is considered to be the Tibetan origin having almost same physical, cultural and religious similarities. It has evidently been accepted that the people from 'Kham' province of eastern Tibet first started to come down and to settle in Sikkim from about 10-11 centuries, due to various socio-political, economic and religious reasons (Bhattacharya, 1994:25). The word Bhutia is considered to an ancient name for Tibet, it is said that Tibetans migrated and came to Sikkim for trade and decided to settle here (Datta, 1999: 44-48).

The popular discourse prevails in state and in scholarly circle that the Gorkhas/the Nepali speakers call Sikkimese hills as 'Sukhym' 'su' means 'new' and 'Khym' means 'rice' (Chopra, 1979 cited in Adhikari, 2014). Gorkha/Nepali community also call Sikkim as Indrakeel. Here Indra means 'thunder God Indra' and the Keel, means his fort. As such, Sikkim for some of the sections of Gorkha/Nepali is "Fort of thunder god Indra". The word Sikkim is also considered to be originated from Limboo vocabulary "Su him" (new house) and the name was given after the marriage of Lepcha Chief with Limboo girl. According to a Limboo legends when the bride entered her husband's house she exclaimed in her own tongue 'Su-Hm', and thus in course of time, the word got corrupted into Sukhim, Sikhim and then to Sikkim (Jha, 1985: 33). Gorkhas/Nepalis are the communities belonging to both Mongloid and Aryan races like Limboo, Mangar, Sherpa, Baun, Chhetry, Kami, Damai, Sarkee, Majhi, Jaisi, Pradhan, Tamang and so on, whether they live in Sikkim or outside. Communities like the Limboo presently belonging to Gorkha/Nepalis were living in Sikkim before there was Sikkim to live in (Subba cited in Thatal, 2015).

## **Blood Brotherhood Treaty and Evolution of Sikkim Society**

Blood Brotherhood Treaty popularly known as Blood Treaty is considered to be the turning point in the ethno-political composition of the state. Folklore form circulation of this historicity defines this treaty better than the historic writings. This treaty has become authentic since Maharaja Thutob Namgyal mentioned it in his history of Sikkim in 1908. The modern history of Sikkim has direct connection with the history of the Blood Brotherhood between Thekong Tek and Khya Bhumsa and a sub-ethnic group of Gorkha/Nepali community. According folkloristic history, prince Guru Tashi of Minyang Dynasty in Tibet had a divine vision that directed him to visit south to seek his fortune in the Denzong. Following this omen, he and his family left for the southern direction. Upon wandering he came across the Sakya Kingdom where a monastery was under construction at that time. However, the further construction was stalled because of the inability of the workers to erect the pillars. Guru Tashi's elder son,

who was later to be renamed as Khye Bumsa erected the pillars. (Gurung 2011 and Chopra, 1979:12).

Knowing the feats of the young man, the Sakya King offered his daughter in marriage to Khye Bumsa. After his father's death, Bhutia Khye Bumsa settled in Chumbi valley. However, Khye Bumsa troubled by the lack of heir to the throne consulted Thekong Tek seeking for solutions to his childlessness issue. Later, the Khye Bumsa got three sons and it was predicted that sons were to be the future rulers of Sikkim. The relationship further developed between the communities and as a result, a treaty called "the Blood Brotherhood Treaty" was signed at a place called Kabi Longtsok. The famous Blood Brotherhood Treaty signed at Kabi Lungtsok (sic) in 1275 A.D. (ibid: 14) had brought a feeling of great friendship among the Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali/Gorkha communities. The historic blood brotherhood treaty among major trios i.e., Lepcha, Bhutia and Gorkha/Nepali had cemented peace coexistence of a society of communities in from a pluralistic nation state unlike to Westphalian model of 1648.

According to the popular folklore prevailed in the Sikkimese society, the Blood Brotherhood Treaty was an oath taking ceremony with the sacrifice of several animals summoning the local deities to witness the occasion. Thekong Tek and Khya Bhumsa and a Nepali/Gorkha sub-ethnic chieftain put their feet in a vessel which was filled of blood poured through sacrifice of animals and sat up on raw flesh and sprayed blood all around. Thekong Tek, the Lepcha representative invited and involved the Khang-Chen-dzod-nga or Kintsoom Zaongboo presently known as Kanchendzonga the eternal guardian deity of Sikkim, leading deity among all local deities witness the historic occasion of the Blood Brotherhood Treaty. It is believed that this Blood Brotherhood Treaty, solemn oath taking ceremony was for the peaceful co-existence of three different entities growing as Blood Brothers as one and inseparable single entity. To perpetuate the treaty and its objective of unity, peace and Harmony amongst the future generation of the land, a symbolic stone was put up as per tradition with Blood splattered over it, which can be witness even today.

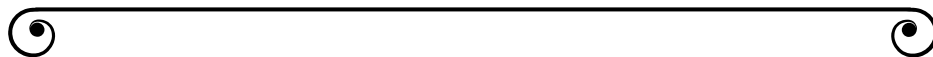
It is significantly believed that the prime witness of ceremony Mt. Kanchendzonga, the supreme guardian deity of Sikkim has been blessing the society in state for the peace and harmony since the day of the Blood Brotherhood oath was taken and throughout the history to till date. Hence, to honour the significance of the event, Mt. Kanchendzonga is still deeply adored also as a witness god during the annual Pang-Lhabtsol ceremony in Sikkim.

## **Conclusion**

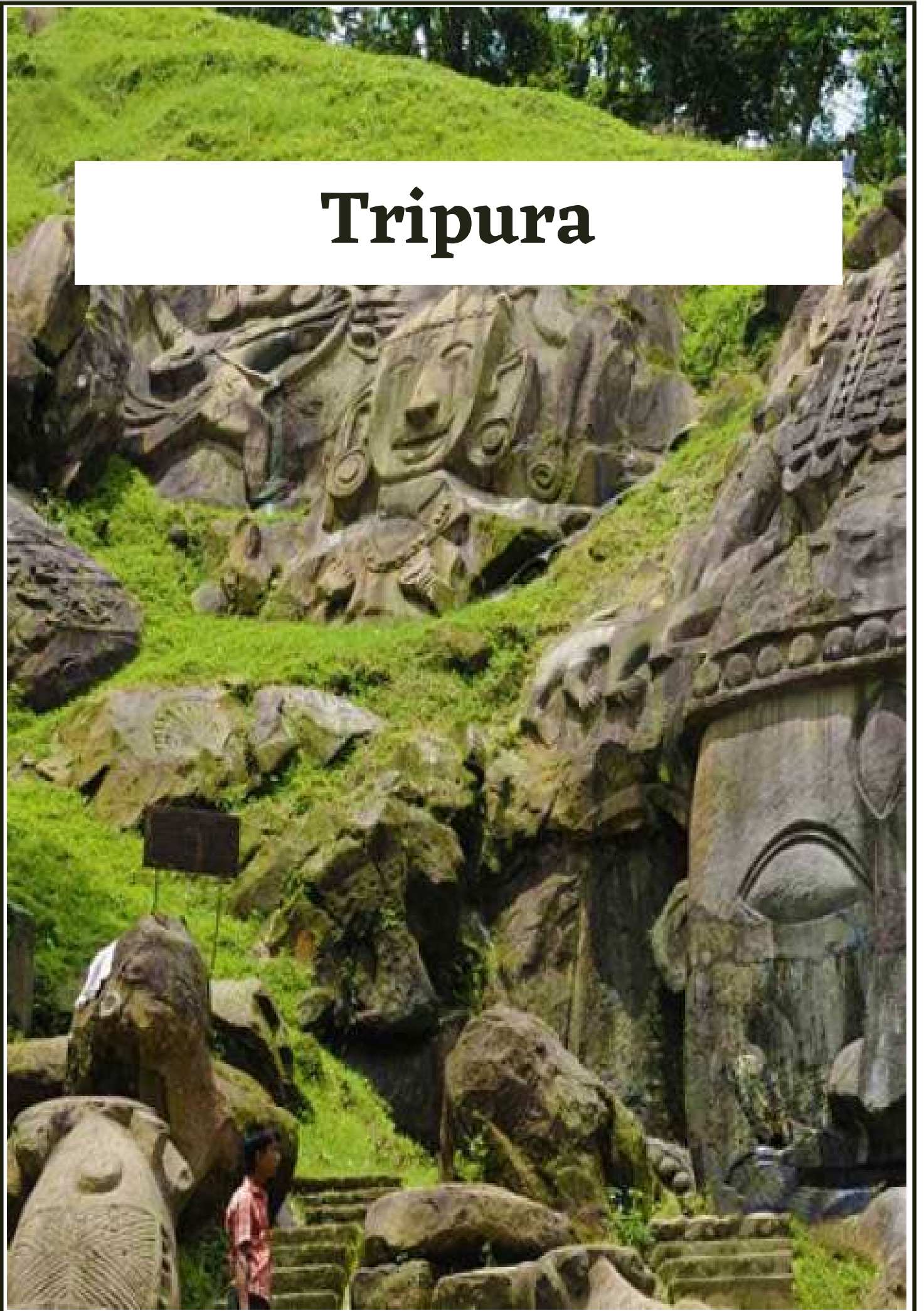
To sum up, The history of Sikkim has witnessed timeless phases in evolution and constituting the present society. In valorizing the recorded history the folkloristic history has always been disregarded. The historic "Blood Brother Treaty", that was signed at Kabi-lanchok in 13th Century which largely contributed in present cultural plurality, tranquility and richness of the

society in Sikkim; has not been properly taken into account by academicians. The folklores are the mirrors of the social evolution process in past and the crucial custodians of the present source of the history. The evolution of the society may not be traced only from the date recorded or documented history. Folklores deserve the preservation and proper notice to mirror the past of a society to its future generation and hence, this folkloristic history of “Blood Brotherhood Treaty” is significant.

Present government of Sikkim deserves a deep admiration in this regards as Government of Sikkim has taken landmark decision to preserve the history of Sikkim recently. State has started to observe ethnic fraternity day in name “Pang-lhob-shol” day to regard the day of “Blood Brother Treaty of 1275”. Also the Pawan Chamling led present state government has taken initiative to construct a statue of fraternity at Gangtok, the capital city of state to earthen the physical resemblance of treaty which is prime source of ethnic fraternity in state since last, near about eight centuries.



# Tripura



# Chandra Kanta Murasingh: Tripura's greatest poet and creative soul

Tapas Dey

It was long ago in the year 1996, a phone cackled breaking the silence of the room. The occupant of the room in a quiet home in Abhaynagar area of Agartala, absorbed in his reverie mulling ideas for a new poem waked up to the call. It was a joyous news as the venerable 'Sahitya Academy' had decided to confer the prestigious 'Bhasa Samman' award, meant for poets and authors of non-scheduled languages, on him. The joy was boundless as Tripura's indigenous poet Chandra Kanta Murasingh was the first in entire northeast to be conferred the prestigious award till then. He quietly settled down and shared the good news with his wife and children and later reached Delhi to receive the award. This was neither the beginning nor the end for Chandra Kanta: lot more laurels awaited him in the days to come but the national recognition spurred him on to new creativity.

Born in the tribal dominated Tuibandal village under Sonamura subdivision Chandra Kanta has been a living witness to the socio-economic transformation of Tripura from his childhood. From the pristinely pure tribal community life as shifting cultivator to the modernity of existence as an urban dweller and poet-Chandra Kanta has seen it all. The simplicity and innocence of tribal life supported by shifting cultivation and allied activities, the light and shade of nature, gargling sound of hilly spring and the clattering of raindrops on his thatched house still remind him of his early days. His father Syampada Murasingh (101), a shifting cultivator, had been a forward looking man and in the new competition spawned by influx of new people he decided to send his son to Ramesh School in Udaipur for studies. Chandra Kanta completed his schooling with credit in 1973 and then joined Indian postal and communication service as an employee and was posted in Imphal.

'I had a spirit to write and express my thoughts in poetry from the early days but in Imphal I got an opportunity to extensively study literature including poetry which stood me in good stead; I keep on reading even now' said Chandra Kanta. Within three years he had studied the masterpieces of Bengali literature and then returned to Agartala to join Tripura Gramin Bank (TGB). His poetic career started blossoming in Agartala as he started penning poems in both his mother tongue 'Kokborok' and Bengali. In due course of time he bagged a number of literary awards given by the state government like 'Rabindra Purashkar' and others. 'The awards acted as impetus for further writing and I have translated works of Rabindra Nath Tagore in 'Kokborok' after I was requested by the authority of Calcutta's Presidency university and Viswa Bharati 'my translation of Tagore's works as well as other works in 'Kokborok' were appreciated by the universities' said Chandra Kanta, an acclaimed writer in Bengali also.

But his greatest contribution is going to be the musical notation he is preparing for 'Kokborok' folk songs which have already attracted attention of connoisseurs. Having retired from service Chandra Kanta now spends his quiet days, shuttling between his home in Abhay Nagar area of Agartala and ancestral home in Tuibandal. 'I now write ceaselessly but my present priority is to complete the musical notation for 'Kokborok' folk songs; I am nearing the finishing point and very soon this will be published' said Chandra Kanta.

*The One Word I Must Say*

*I want to say one word only,  
Even if it provokes ten counter points.*

*Hearing all those counter points,  
I shall want to say that one word.*

*Half of it I said to the blossom.*

*First it grew grave and then exuded joy.*

*Yes, the flowers know how to be happy.*

*But when the blossom turned into a garland,  
And came chasing me, the other half of the word  
Withered.*

*No one likes to hear deprecating words, even if true:  
So, let me start with the succulent tale of the flower.*

*I did. But what went wrong?*

*My listener fumed and shouted:*

*'A gun, get me a gun.'*

*Against whom is this anger? The flower or me?*

*I never knew.*

*'Come'n, take one more swig, have your fill,*

*Here's a full bottle for you' – the man*

*Was gulping and chattering,*

*Pouring out words and more words*

*Because words are so cheap and so much in supply,*

*That no government pays any heed to them.*

*This wretch asked for rice, and the price went up in the ration shops.*

*Will he understand if I tell it to him now?*

*I want to say one word only.*

*Half of it I said to the blossom,*

*But I didn't like its ways.*

*If you want,*

*I can say it to the gun.*

*I can go into its barrel, and then, pour forth*

*Humming a folk-tune.*

*I shall want to say that one word.*

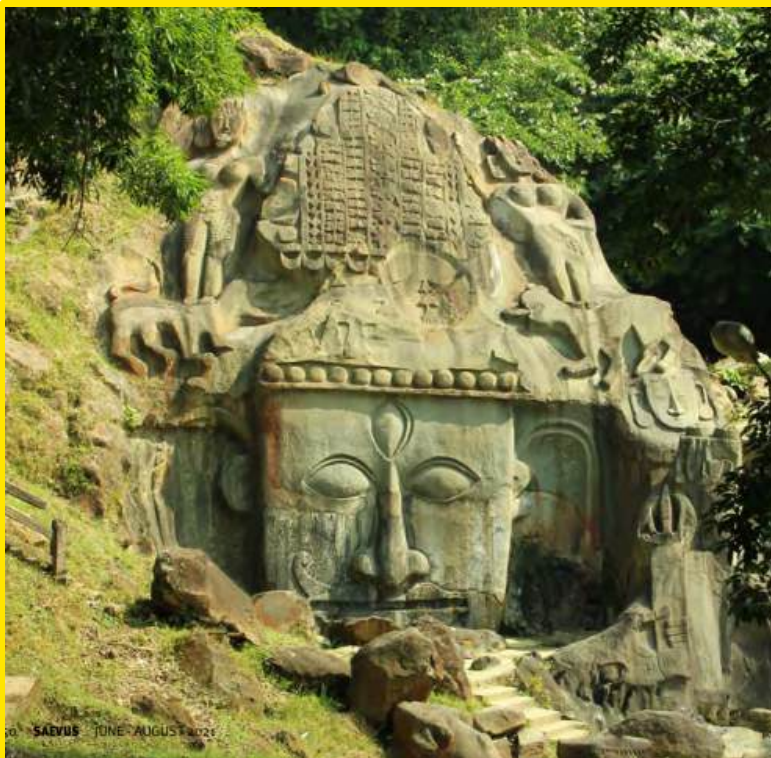
# The Mystical Heritage of UNAKOTI'S HILLS

**Text and Images: Dr. Govind Bhattacharjee**

**The author takes us into the mystical land of Unakoti in Tripura and its enormous bas-relief carvings, which have been the subject of many a myth and legend for centuries.**

Leaving behind a past scarred with insurgent violence, Tripura is now emerging as a tourist hotspot of the north-eastern region. Lying in the cradle of Nature “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”, the peaceful state now beckons all those who seek peace in solitude and tranquillity, even for a few fleeting days, to get recharged. As we go back in time here, history blends with mythology in a way that the two become inseparable. Myths, legends, and folklores merge together and transform almost into a living reality. This intertwining of history and mythology, religion and folklore, legend and imagination often define the basis of cultural practices in societies and survive the relentless march of time. In fact, they often render time into an amorphous entity.

Located in the Raghunandan hills, some 170 km from its capital Agartala, in the remote north eastern state of Tripura bordering Bangladesh, a small hill called Unakoti has been attracting pilgrims since at least the 7th century AD. Unakoti means one less than a crore. According to myth, while on his way to Varanasi, Lord Shiva decided to halt and spend a night at this location, and instructed the Unakoti gods and goddesses who were accompanying him to wake up the next morning at sunrise to resume their journey. But as none woke up the next morning, in his anger, Shiva turned them all into stone statutes before proceeding alone on his way. This myth, as recorded in Rajamala, the official chronicle of Tripura’s Manikya kingdom, says there are as many rock-cut carvings and stone images at Unakot.



Myth spawns more myths and legends and there are others entwined around Unakoti as well. One such legend tells that the images were created by a devotee of Shiva and Parvati, Kallu Kumar, who was keen on accompanying them to their heavenly abode at Mount Kailash and who was ordained the task of completing one crore images within a night to be allowed to do so. He fell short by one before the Sun rose the next day.

One may not believe in any of these legends, but cannot deny the exquisite beauty of the enormous bas-relief carvings on the side of a massive rock at Unakoti forming the side of the hill. They are simply out of the world, which is perhaps why people have woven myths and legends around them. Shiva, known here as Unakotiswara Kal Bhairav, dominates the landscape of the hills with a gigantic carving 30 feet high with an intricate headgear, flanked by Durga and Ganga on the two sides, and complete with his consort bull Nandi. There are carvings of Ganesha, Vishnu, Hanuman, and even Ravana - blending cultures spanning the entire country in the true sense - blending also the classical and tribal styles of carvings. Possibly the carvings span different historical periods for such assimilation of different cultures and epochs. Archaeology has not yet been able to uncover the mystery of the unremembered origins of these carvings.



The ambience of the evergreen hills through which meanders the small but beautiful and charming river Manu makes the carvings even more spectacular. There are many other stone statues as well, casually scattered among the hills and hidden generally from the public eye, except those of the most adventurous. The hills which some compare with Macchu Pichu come to life at the time of Makar Sankranti in January every year and then during the Ashokastami festival in April. Along with this, flowers that blossom in every nook and corner of this lush green state provide a veritable feast to the eyes of tourists and locals alike; they also include some rare and endangered flora, like *Begonia surculigera* found near Unakoti. Thousands land at the site, get mesmerised by the pristine setting and the beauty of the sculptures. They wonder how these were created, who created them, and why. Finding no answer, they ponder over the legends, which once again blend with history and reinforce human imagination.



Tripura, the sleepy hill state hidden in the remote north-eastern corner of our country has an area of only about 10000 sq. km or just about 0.3 percent of the total landmass of India. However, its smallness belies the immense diversity of its ecosystems and the luxuriant variety of its flora and fauna, as it is home not only to these archaeological wonders but also some spectacular natural history. Tripura has as many as 129 species of fishes and 32 species of amphibians and reptiles including three species of freshwater turtles and tortoises, besides two varieties of monitor lizards that are endangered, and at least 13 species of snakes including the common Indian Python. No less exuberant is the diversity of its mammals – it has 90 species of mammals representing more than a third of the total Indian mammalian fauna, among them the spectacled monkey – locally known as “Chashma Banar” is the most dominant and celebrated.



## 19 Tribes of Tripura



Click the link below to watch the video:  
[https://youtu.be/\\_ovXJ60C4kk](https://youtu.be/_ovXJ60C4kk)

## Tripura's Tribal Youth Unhappy With Government Bid To Replace Kokborok With Hindi In Local Media



Click the link below to watch the video:  
<https://youtu.be/BBbD0zkz9H0>

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