

Education, Technology and Cultural Change: A Review of Social, Cultural and Religious Practices of the Adi Community of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh, the North easternmost state of India, is a home to twenty six major tribes and more than fifty sub-tribes. A majority of the people are of Mongoloid race with unique characteristics in terms of dress, language and customs. The tribal societies follow patriarchal and primogeniture system and practice endogamy while strictly observing the law of clan exogamy. Each tribe has its own structured institutions that sustain law and order, settle disputes and undertakes every activity for the welfare of the respective tribes. In terms of religion too, the tribes of the state have been traditionally following *Donyi Poloism*, the practice of worshipping the Moon and the Sun God.

However, with the advent of technology and advancement in the field of education, there have been significant changes in the practice of the traditional customs and socio-religious beliefs so much so that a majority of such practices are on the verge of extinction. While there are attempts at preserving the age-old customs and practices primarily through *developing* scripts and digitizing the folk tradition, the changes in all these aspects are far too many to be incorporated holistically.

The paper takes into account the cultural and religious practices followed by the Adi community of the state and will analyse some of the major changes witnessed during the recent times through the prism of education and technological intervention. Quantitative data has been collected using a questionnaire for a sample size of 700 Adi households. Descriptive results were used in analysing the data.

Keywords: Donyi Polo, Digitization, Primogeniture

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Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is a home to twenty six major tribes and more than fifty sub-tribes. A majority of the people are of Mongoloid race with unique characteristics in terms of dress, language and customs. The tribal societies follow patriarchal and primogeniture system and practice endogamy while strictly observing the law of clan exogamy. However, with the advent of technology and advancement in the field of education, there have been significant changes in the practice of the traditional customs and socio-religious beliefs so much so that a majority of such practices are on the verge of extinction. The same can be stated of the dialects spoken by the major communities of the state. Lack of scripts and hence, a concomitant lack of printed literature has created a void which, to a large extent, been filled by English and Hindi. Only in the recent times, attempts at digitizing and archiving the oral literature have been attempted, which are primarily transferred from one generation to another orally. These oral literatures serve as a store house of traditional knowledge systems, customs and myths which are followed by the communities across the state and bind them together.

Although the state is yet to come out of its locational remoteness and infrastructural constraints, yet in the recent years, it has developed considerably in the field of education. For many years, the region has remained cut off from the rest of the world. This geo-political inaccessibility has also affected in the institutionalization of the educational system in the state. With no uniform script and language, with the exception of the Buddhists in Kameng and Lower Lohit areas (as they used Tibetan and Tai-Khampti for the Buddhist religious texts), the tribes of the state had used Assamese as the link language.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Arunachal Pradesh had no schools at all. The first school was established in 1918, in Pasighat, and the second in 1922, in Dambuk. The first college offering undergraduate courses was established in Pasighat in 1964. Against such a backdrop, knowledge passed across generations orally, and the senior citizens and village elders were entrusted with the responsibility to guide the younger generations regarding their cultural traits and customary practices. Ballads have continued to date and are deeply rooted in time, place, and culture.¹ These are an important means of transmitting knowledge. Gradually, community institutions were established where need-based skills were taught.² However, these institutions were largely confined to the geographical area of settlement of a particular tribe.

The real impetus to English education in the state came with the Christian missionaries. Initially, when people, particularly students, came down from the hills to the plains of Assam and to Shillong, the then capital of Assam, they witnessed the pace of societal development owing primarily to the adoption of English language as a medium of instruction, as introduced by the missionaries, and the medium of official communication as well. A large number of them started converting to Christianity and they realized English as 'the medium that would guarantee jobs in the administration'³, although largely confined to the members of the Adi community. In May 1970 and January 1971, the students of Pasighat College (later renamed as Jawaharlal Nehru College) launched mass rallies and demonstrations demanding 'replacement of Assamese as the medium of instruction in schools, and intensive teaching of Hindi and English.'⁴ However, this created a deep schism largely on linguistic and community lines as the Wanchos of the greater Tirap district were in

favour of retaining Assamese as the medium of instruction largely because it provided a link with the people in Assam and also it was the 'lingua franca of NEFA'⁵ (renamed as Arunachal Pradesh on January 20, 1972). English education in the state was officially sanctioned in 1971 when the NEFA administration had all its schools affiliated to the Central School system with English as a medium of instruction from the primary levels itself.⁶

English education notwithstanding, the general and basic infrastructure of the state has not developed much yet with several areas still remaining inaccessible. However, in the last decade, realizing the potential of hydropower and other mineral resources, several companies have started their functioning here with basic minimum facilities. The situation can be gauged from the fact that train services connecting the capital of the state has started only this year. The state run schools are in a deplorable condition, mobile telephony and services of national banks have only recently been started in many places of the state and most of these regions lack advanced medical facilities. The result of all these are migration of a majority of people from the interior areas to the capital city and setting up of most of the institutes and organizations in the vicinity of it only. The second strand of migration pertains to the students, a vast majority of whom move out of these regions for better education in other metropolitan cities of the region. While students leaving their native states in search of better education is a general phenomenon in the northeast, the problem in Arunachal Pradesh is compounded by the fact that there remains a palpable disconnect between the knowledge of the rituals and customs of their own culture and religious belief. This is primarily because of the lack of a script, written literature and a non-institutionalization of the local cultural practices. As the students leave the confines of their community and villages, which are stronghold of their culture and tradition, they gradually lose touch with all these and adopt and get exposed to different nuances of their culture which has been re-created primarily for entertainment value and public consumption.

Adi culture and tradition: an Overview

Adis are a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh with their population covering three major districts of the state, viz., East Siang, Upper Siang and West Siang. Like every other tribe of the state, Adis too are known for their unique customs and beliefs, beautiful dances and elaborate dress pattern. The major religious belief is *Donyi Poloism* although in the recent years, people have converted to Christianity.

One of the most prominent rituals followed by the Adis is the chicken sacrifice (*Ayenkanam*) during which the liver is taken out after killing the chicken following which the priest gives the prediction. This apart, rituals of prediction also include *Tagyrsonam* and *Ambuikanam* in which the dried leaves and rice grains are used for making predictions. The predictions are usually done by a resident shaman, also a *Miri*, who could be a female as well. The predictions are usually made regarding the nature of illness, which is usually classified into two types, viz., those caused by natural factors and those by the supernatural ones. Looking at the dried leaf or the dead liver, nature of illness is determined and propitiation to God are made to ward off the evil spirits.

In case of dress, separate dresses for men and women are woven by the women of the community. Helmets are made from cane, bear and deer skin, worn by men depending on the region. While older women wear yellow necklaces and spiral earrings, unmarried girls wear a *beyop* – an ornament consisting of 5-6 brass plates fixed under their petticoats. The traditional measure of family's wealth is measured on the basis of the possession of domestic animals, primarily *mithuns*, beads, land and other ornaments. Further, traditionally *gale* and *galuks*, worn by the male and female respectively, have a hierarchical origin. The hierarchy is determined the colour and the motif of these dresses.

The Adis have the most vibrant form of village democracy and judicial set ups with equal participation of men and women. The *Kebangs* use to meet in village community houses called *musup* or *dere* where major decisions are taken. In the recent times, the *kebangs* have been officially systemised with the elders being appointed by the district administration for a fixed tenure and are empowered to decide on disputes and conflicts arising in their respective villages. *Ponung* is one of the major dances of the community where the dancers, both male and female, dance rhythmically to the tune of religious chants by the shamans.

While these rituals and practices are confined to the villages and particularly amongst the older people, the younger generation is generally found to be ignorant of the traditional relevance of these rituals and customs and instead appropriated the same primarily for fun and holidaying.

Methodology

To analyse the level of understanding of some of the major beliefs and customs of the Adi community by the younger generation and the impact of education and technology vis-à-vis culture, a questionnaire with 15 questions has been designed. The questionnaire has been prepared using Google docs and distributed among 700 respondents belonging to the Adi community. The method of distribution included e-mail, posting the URL on the Adi community pages on Facebook, and visiting selective schools, colleges and households with the print version. The respondents have been categorized into four age groups, viz., 15-20 years, 21-25 years, 26-30 years and 31 to 35 years. Five point Likert scale has been used to record the responses. Descriptive results are used for the analysis of the data.

Major Findings

Of the 700 respondents, 67% (469 respondents) come under 15-20 years, 24% (168 respondents) under 21-25 years, 6% (42 respondents) under 26-30 years and 3% (21 respondents) come under the 31-35 age group with 71% (497 respondents) being male and 29% (203 respondents) female. All the respondents are educated with 27% (189 respondents) having either graduate or a post graduate or a professional degree and 73% (511 respondents) have either completed their High School (Class X) or Senior Secondary (Class XII) levels. 82% (574 respondents) follow Christianity and 18% (126 respondents) follow the indigenous faith, i.e., *Donyi Poloism*.

With the lack of a script and literature in the mother tongue (the available literature is only in English), the void is filled by Hindi, especially by the students who prefer to use Hindi over their mother tongue while speaking with their parents or siblings as well as with the people of

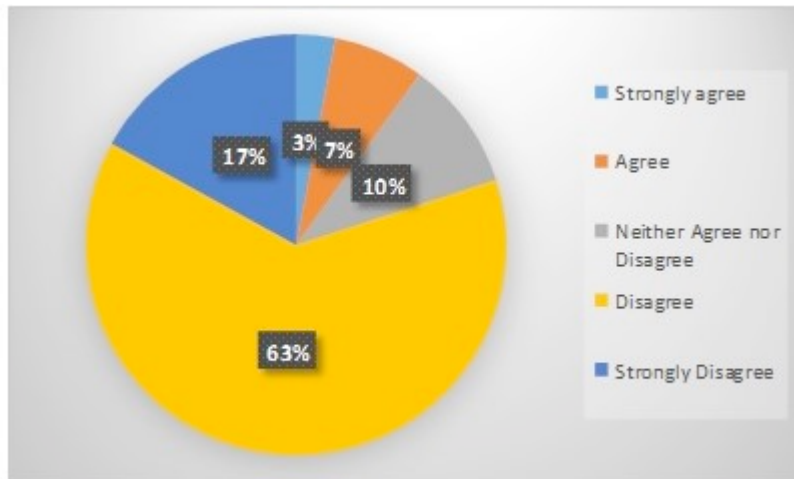


Fig. 1. Use of mother tongue at home

their own community. As shown in Figure 1, 80% of the total respondents denied using mother tongue with their family members or with the members of their own community. While 10% of the respondents preferred to remain neutral, 10% of the respondents use mother tongue while speaking with family and members of their own community.

One of the primary reasons for this lack of use of mother tongue is the migration from villages to the urban centres where they mingle with a heterogeneous group of peers and Hindi serves as the most common medium of communication. Gradually, the medium of informal communication at school has become the mode of communication at home and society as well and Hindi is fast serving as the lingua franca of the younger generation.

Distancing themselves from the villages has been responsible for a majority of the younger generation to become aware of the traditional knowledge systems, folk culture and myths associated with the Adi community. Instead they have become used to the vastly appropriated forms of cultural practices which are followed in the cities. The result is a gradual disappearance of many such rituals or the religious and cultural

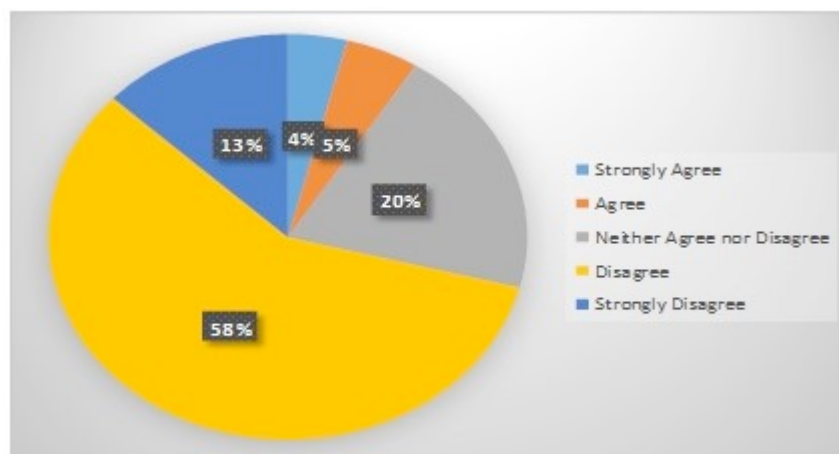


Fig. 2: Knowledge of cultural & religious practices and myths

feravour associated with such festivals. Thus, only 9% of the total respondents have agreed to be well versed with the religious practices, folk tradition and myths associated with the Adi culture. 20% of the respondents remained neutral, but 71% of the respondents agreed of not being well versed with the same. Out of the 497 respondents who are not well versed with their tradition and culture, 90% (447 respondents) belonged to 15-25 age group, and 92% of those who are well versed with their indigenous culture and traditional practices come under the age group of 31-35 years (Figure 2).

This distancing is also responsible for declining faith in village administration systems. The system of *Kebang* which is an integral part of the Adi community, has been pivotal to resolve all major disputes in a fair and objective manner. Since each village has its own *Kebang*, the justice delivery mechanism has been swift and the decision of the *Kebang* is accepted and respected by everyone in the society. In a

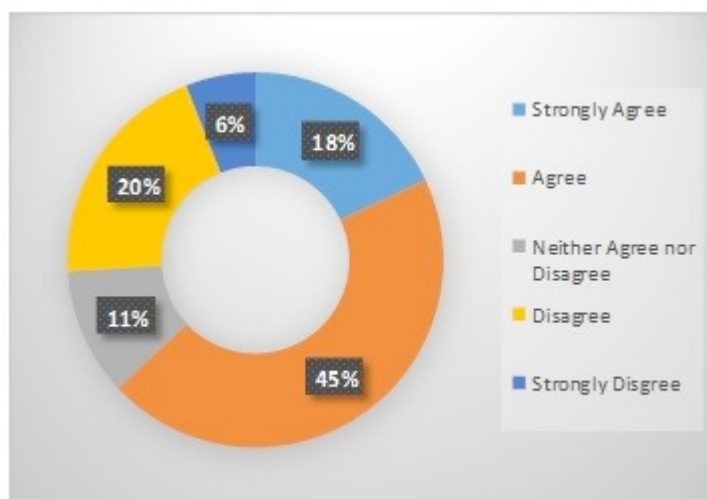


Fig.3: Use of English/Hindi in SNS and Electronic platforms

nation where getting justice is a very time consuming and costly affair, *kebangs* have shown as a strong alternative and stood out as veritable examples of village democracy with an equal representation of men and women as the decision makers. The importance of *kebangs* is further underscored by the fact that the district administrations in Adi majority districts have officially nominated the elders of each *kebang* for a specific period and the verdicts given by them are taken into cognizance if an issue reaches the court of law. However, the faith on the *kebangs* among the younger generation is on the wane as they believe the courts of law serve as better platforms to resolve disputes than the former. 73% of the total respondents have preferred courts of law to resolve disputes over the *kebangs*, with only 17% reposing their faith on it. 10% of the total respondents preferred to remain neutral.

Social Network Platforms and other electronically mediated technologies for communication have emerged as major mediums to share information and remain connected. Some of these portals are instrumental in promoting indigenous cultures and popularizing myths, folklore and knowledge systems unique to a particular culture. The members of such groups are often found to communicate in their mother tongue using native script and in many cases, they use Roman script but the whole

content is in their native tongue. Such pages and portals have proven to be immensely helpful in educating the young generation about their native culture and tradition.

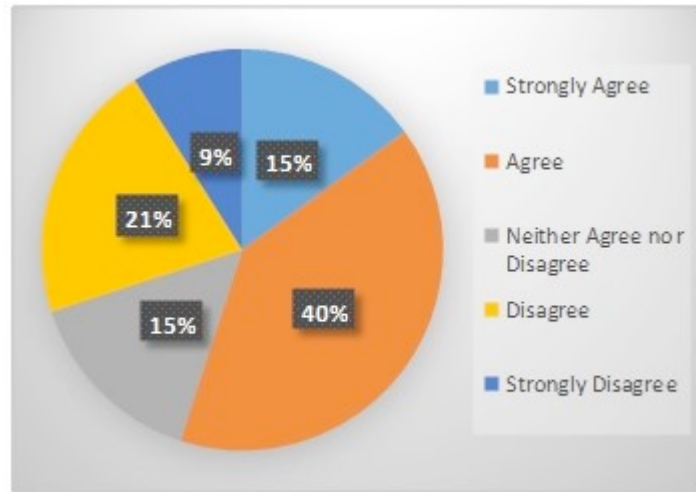


Fig. 4: Contemporizing dance & rituals will preserve culture

However, of the total respondents, it has been found that 63% use English on the social network pages as against 26% who use Roman script but Adi dialect to post updates and comments. 11% of the respondents have remained neutral. Further, 70% of the respondents do not devote their time on reading literature based on their native folk tradition and myths, with only 17% showing an inclination for the same. Of the 70% of the respondents, 58% (284 respondents) belong to 15-25 age group. (Figure 3)

While all the respondents have agreed to the fact that curricula incorporation of their native culture will help in spreading awareness about their rich tradition among the children, the forced distancing from the villages owing to circumstances, has also resulted in accepting the forms of rituals as portrayed in the media, especially by the children. Hence, it has been found that 55% of the respondents believe that contemporizing their dance and religious tradition for entertainment, public consumption and profit making; preparing dresses with fashion quotient as a priority regardless of the hierarchy and custom will help in preserving their indigenous culture. As shown in Figure 4, while 15% remained neutral, 30% of the respondents believe that such contemporising primarily for entertainment and profit will mark further deviation from the roots and tradition which has so far helped in keeping the community together.

Analysis of the data and reasons for cultural change

One of the major reasons for adopting Christianity is because of the erosion of faith from *Donyi Poloism*. While in the traditional Adi culture, people initially looked up to religion as the medium of relief and respite from all ills along with making it as a thread for binding all the groups and sub groups together, but migration from the villages to the cities in search of better jobs and education has been perceived as a weakening of the belief system. As a result, discontent against it grew and the space got filled up by Christianity. Further, Christianity has been propagated as a source of enlightenment, facilitated education and thereby getting an access to the world outside. In many a cases, monetary benefits and promises for better social

infrastructure under the aegis of the church too has helped in getting people under its fold. However, the biggest possible reason for people getting converted to Christianity is because of its impetus on education and on the later stages, using the Roman or Devanagari script to publish literature pertaining to the oral narratives. Further, with the students migrating from the villages to the cities for education, there has been a conscious attempt at getting 'mainstreamed' in terms of religious belief and Christianity provided the best possible option for them.

The festivals, rituals and other social practices of the Adis are directly linked with their belief in a particular religious faith. With *Donyi Poloism* on the wane, coupled with migration from rural to urban areas in search of education and job, the traditional rituals, festivals and customs too have undergone a massive change. For instance, *kebang* as a system used to foster harmony and unity in the villages. It commanded trust and respect which stemmed from the belief that the decisions were binding on everyone and the decision delivery mechanism was swift and impartial. The importance of *kebangs* are recognized by the state government and is underscored by the recent steps at systemizing it through appointing elders to the *kebang* council. But, over the passage of time and with most of the people going out of their villages to urban centers, the belief on *kebangs* too have gone down and the people from the community, especially the younger generation relies more on judiciary and state law and order mechanism for resolving the disputes. Similarly, *musup* and *rashengs*, the dormitories for boys and girls respectively, which had their history dating back to the inter-village wars along with providing a common platform for the boys and the girls to develop their skills have disappeared even from the villages.

Technology brings access to information and it also helps in finding ways and means to preserve the dying cultures and folk traditions. However, in many a cases, as far as the Adi culture is concerned, the impact has been far from positive. Possibly the biggest compromise so far has been in the field of festivals and dances followed by costumes. One of the most famous and popular dances of the Adis is the *Ponung* in which ladies dance rhythmically to the slow chants of the narration of a myth by the shamans. There is a sacred value attached to it. However, in the recent times, with an attempt to popularize folk culture and contemporize it, the traditional chants and meanings associated with it has been replaced with modern songs and dances instead. Similarly, the color and motif in the dresses which originally has a hierarchical meaning have given way to fashion and profit making. The festivals too have lost the traditional fervour as was seen in the villages. *Etor*, for instance, was celebrated in villages to propitiate God for prosperity and to have the best breed of the *mithuns* (*Bos frontalis*). It involved an elaborate ritual of all the *mithuns* of a particular village being taken to an open ground with a bamboo enclosure and kept there for almost a week. On the day of the festival, the village headman offers a feast to all the villagers after each household completes the individual rituals associated with the festival. However, in the recent years, instead of the individual or common rituals and headman offering the feast, the people of the community, both in cities and villages donate money to have a *community feast*, where many a times, instead of the *mithuns*, chicken, pork or beef is offered.

Conclusion

From the survey conducted, it has been observed that unless urgent steps are taken, the traditional knowledge system, myths, and oral literature of this major community will be lost forever. One of the possible first steps for preserving the same is through institutional or curriculum incorporation of these traditions and myths, particularly in the school levels so that the children are given the correct information about the cultural practices followed by their community. Secondly, proper steps towards archiving the knowledge system could help promote and preserve the culture. Thirdly, for popularization of the culture, technology can be a major medium and social network and electronic portals a potent tool. However, appropriate frameworks must be developed so as to popularize the languages without script and making it accessible to the people in general. The entertainment industry too must play a sensible role in portraying the correct forms of any culture rather than presenting it for mere public consumption and profit making. Devoid of such steps, there is every possibility that cultures in their truest forms would disappear and what would be left is a much diluted and corrupted forms of the same.

While education and access to technology is vital for the progress of any society, the same should also be used for preservation of indigenous cultures and traditional knowledge systems. The indigenous cultures of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is already facing a crisis of identity due to lack of scripts for the languages spoken here and a resultant lack of a literary archive. There is a real danger of the cultures getting subsumed by dominant pidgin culture. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the young generation is largely isolated and distanced from their native cultures and traditions and instead are found to be more inclined towards the western and in many cases the *mainstream* Indian culture. While some of the efforts initiated by the *Adi Bane Kebang* (the Adi Literary Society) towards bringing out a lexicon, developing a script and making the same key board friendly, along with bridging the differences between the various sub-groups of Adi are laudable, but unless these are institutionalized, the outcomes of such efforts cannot be deemed as positive and the danger of eventual decline of the indigenous cultures remains fraught.

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