
Cultural Heritage — of — Arunachal Pradesh



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N. NAGARAJU
BYOMAKESH TRIPATHY

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Editors

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Introduction

N. Nagaraju

The contest over anything related to culture or its analysis, which often is followed by violent conflicts, has made room in the post-positivist intellectual climate to a certain realization that whatever position one takes or analysis one offers there is always another view or analysis setting limits to it and bringing in another perspective. This elasticity in opinion can be traced to certain intellectual developments after the sixties and the events, at a global scale, which showed the futility of conflictual claims of cultural categories. Rethinking the notions like march of progress and broadening claims of representation, construction of subjecthood and enlargement of cultural texts and artefacts have made culture to be seen not in essentialist terms but on principles of contingency. There has been decentering. 'Soft borders', 'knowledge world' and 'simulated reality', terms which at once speak and symbolize current reality, which have made any conflict untenable by stretching its limits to an inevitable point of breakdown. One can say this despite all that hype about the coalition against terror. In fact, this hype itself shows the tenuous nature of any conflict based on culture, and even civilization (a term which is often invoked in this context).

But then this should not hold us back from looking at certain other activities in the sphere of culture. To say, at any point of time, that all is rosy or beyond the ominous reach of conflict is no analysis at all. Nor do certain events, discursive they maybe, support such a soothing picture. These events may not be noticed

at the global or national levels where entrenched forces see to that they do not form part of the visual imagery in circulation. Modernity, as though, has seen to that kind of a consensus. These events reiteratingly occur at the 'local' level. The local suddenly has become the site of significance. Not only that it interrogates and even resists the national and the global, but also provides, by the very nature of its significance, the vantage point to articulate a critique of the larger forces at work. There is a continuity, sustenance and strength in the local which, even after being affected, seems to have survived modernity and the forces it engendered. For those who have no ambition but to go on living on their own soil, it reciprocates with an equally simple strength. Studies of the local and the culture it embodies thus assume immediate relevance. There is a range of feeling, from anxiety to hope, to be found there. They are now the sites under focus.

This book should make sense, though humbly, from such a local point of view. There are number of attempts to write the ongoing activity in the cultural sphere as far as Arunachal is concerned. Apart from the usual claims of representation, there still is a scope for attempts like this. In the last decade or so, especially after NEFA has been elevated to a full-fledged state, the pace of change has caught up with the rest of India. 'Isolated', 'hinterland' or such a vocabulary which inevitably was used to qualify any description of this area, is now redundant. Change is visible just as modernity is visible. But then how much of this change is desirable and compatible with the age-old practices and values for the people of this distinct territory remains a point of huge debate. There have been traditional values with the communities of people which helped them maintain a sustainable and renewable relationship with the natural resources and diversity unique to the territory. There have been patterns in the lifestyles of the people which were in place since the proverbial time immemorial and which are now touched and visibly affected by modernity's march. This affected area remains a needed focus of cultural analysis. There are worlds, from mythical to the spiritual, which suddenly seem to be receding, as the saying goes, to the words. The diversity which makes each community very distinct,

has been affected. Religious practices, remarkably different from west to the east, too are coping with change. Indigeneity, loaded with all these aspects of people along with their affinity to the territory, seems to be subjected to new articulations which often assume characteristically modern rigidity.

There, however, are efforts in counterpoise to this change, this invading march of modernity. Each community comes up with the idea of strengthening a practice particular to it from its own traditional resource. It may be a food item or a costume or the delightful festivals comprising all these and many more practices. They keep the visibility of the community up. But then they are markers which, very ambiguously, keep alive the cultural consciousness as much as they remind the disappearing and forgotten worlds of the communities. They remain, nonetheless, efforts which point to a growing complexity of consciousness and tensions which underlie the change. Some forceful critiques, articulated against the march of progress and the cultural hierarchies it brings however strengthen these efforts.

Another area of concern, amidst such complex changes, is the observable peculiarities of oral conditions which characterize many of the communities. Often these peculiarities are seen only in terms of having or not having a script. What however needs attention is how much of those contents or categories of orality, which account for major part of the cultural base, are transferred or brought into the current living conditions of the people. Do the audio-visual technologies, modern and instruments of change that they are, help in the absence of a script? Can this orality be brought into secondary orality which could very well be heralding? Much as these questions keep dogging the observer and the analyst, some symbols or artifacts, as well as other 'permanent' cultural texts and sites, which constitute the heritage, assume added importance. While they have been looked at and analysed from different angles, they establish not just history (in a very modern sense) but also a timeless life, continuity in a wave after wave of change. They symbolize certain practices at certain point in time and testify to the transformation in lifestyles. In short, they add the much sought-after 'depth' to the community. Here is what a

critic, analyzing the value attached to as simple a tool as a hand-axe says:

A study of past has to move beyond notions of sequential time to enquire evidence in the context of multi-dimensional interrelatedness, of the mutual influence of simultaneous events of a particular object or a process. For example, a hand-axe is many things—a tool, an object of social exchange, a ritual weapon, an aesthetic object and so on, many things at the same time depending on the context within which it is found. It is governed by interaction of: 1) physical properties, 2) intention of design which is related to functional requirement, and 3) the transmission of tradition which has to be viewed within the set of technical and morphological patterns that are functionally adequate and socially acceptable. Again, functional variability may be seen in terms of: 1) vegetable foods, 2) importance of hunting-fishing activities, 3) environmental variations and seasonal migration of animals on which paleolithic groups depended, 4) the intended function of artifacts and the probable use of perishable material, and 5) establishing relative chronology on the basis of these industries.

This volume, put together in the wake of such change and with an awareness of past, includes essays from neolithic tools to a very modern institution of museum. They attempt to describe and study the texture of cultural space. This space, which informs the local mentioned earlier, is understood in terms of material and non-material aspects, and historically too. The most interesting thing one finds as one goes through the articles is the principle of organization of various tribes and the significant change which occurred over the ages. There are similarities and differences across societies in more or less the same geographic space. What underpins the description and observation is the way the communities, fuzzy and oral, cope in the face of exacting and instrumentalizing modernity. Some of the articles focus on the way the societies have carried to current times very vividly their 'self-knowledge', their traditional wisdom, the intimate knowledge of geography and resources, their spiritual belief systems and world-views and, fascinatingly, their defence technologies and

mechanisms. Similarly some articles focus on the cultural artifacts and archeological remains. While interpreting them, attempts have been made by some contributors to establish linkages between the societies of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam and even other parts of India. Associating Bhismanagar fort to the story of Krishna's marriage with Rukmini and tracing the spread of neo-Vaishnavism, initially to Latha Khumbao (Naga Narottam) and adopting Buddhism to the local conditions are some of the attempts which, we hope, will find strong support and some skepticism. But then the aim of any book of this type should not only be to focus attention on what it embodies but in the way it asks for elaborate responses to what it embodies or says.

The essays are broadly classified into three categories: 1) dealing with historical facts and artifacts, 2) traditional lifestyles of communities, and 3) their responses to change and religious beliefs.

The terrain and physiographical features are briefly described by Ramesh Joshi by way of inaugurating and accounting for the diversity. He suggests that sharp differences in physical features in a short distance is one reason why communities, though adjacent, adopt different lifestyles. Manis Raha highlights some aspects of the social organization of six tribes from Idu Mishmi, Apatani to Tangsa and Wancho. He touches tribal economy, lineage and clan organization, family and marriage. In short a glimpse of Arunachal society including some little-known aspects.

N.T. Rikam takes up oral tradition as a source for historical knowledge. An insider, he analyzes traditional institutions like the village council, religious system and priesthood and related lore for considerations of history. Tana Showren makes an attempt to record the efforts in the Nyishi community to preserve their faith in the face of some sweeping changes and interventions which have affected the community in profound ways. Institutionalization in the form of Nyedar Namlo and a kind of codification of rituals and prayers and other religious practices is attempted with an aim to carry on with the heritage. He also seems to argue that a culture and its institutions must keep pace with the changing times to keep itself alive and growing.

Ashan Riddi highlights the traditional costumes of the Tagin, one of the major tribes of Arunachal and shows how modernity has affected the community. He talks of the vanishing worlds in Tagin culture.

Gindu Borang, a young researcher, has made an attempt to unearth traditional sources like oral tradition, myths, legends, etc. of the Adis to reconstruct the history and culture of the Adis. He elaborates various forms of oral tradition of the Adis like Abang (rhapsodies relating to myth of creation, origin of several institutions), Bari (myth of origin and evolution of various institutions), Abe (introductory speech of Kebang, i.e. village council), Kongki Bote (narration of historical facts and exploits of great ancestors).

Jogendra Nath, an old hand in Adiland, provides information on the concept and philosophy of Adis, one of the largest tribes of Arunachal with special reference to their idea of man's position in the world which is purely based on oral tradition.

B.K. Bora elaborately describes a little-known tribe called the Nah who live in Upper Subansiri area of Arunachal Pradesh. Bora discusses the settlement pattern, social organization, religious practices and other aspects of the culture of the Nah. Vineeta Dowerah discusses the socio-cultural heritage of the Nocte. Taking from her extensive fieldwork, she elaborates the myths, legends and folk tales which form part of the rich oral world of the Nocte. She also throws light on the social structure of the tribe.

Narayan Singh Rao, covering eastern Arunachal, makes a refreshing statement on 'Rang Frah cult'. The concept and philosophy of Rang Frah among the Tangsas is elaborated. In the same vein he discusses how the Nocte religious life was influenced by the Vaishnavite teachings of Sankaradeva. He elaborates the role of Latakhunbao, later known as Naga Narottam and Ramdev Ata in the spread of neo-Vaishnavism.

D.K. Bora brings into this volume his knowledge of the remains of excavated sites of Arunachal Pradesh, undertaken by the Department of Research since independence. He has sought to establish that the material culture of Arunachal always had linkage with Indian culture.

Byomakesh Tripathy has focused on the recent excavations regarding neolithic culture of Arunachal. He has discussed the tool typology and probable date of Arunachal neolithic culture. Tripathy also, in other papers in the book, has given a historical account of the development of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh. More importantly he has provided a historical study on the evolution and popularity of Parasuramkund through the ages as a seat of Brahminical culture.

S. Dutta elaborates the stupa, one of the finest products of early Buddhist art and architecture and a contribution of Indian culture to the civilization of the world. He analyses the three main functions of the stupa and their symbolic significance

Amarendra K. Thakur documents the extant forts and fortifications of Arunachal Pradesh and reveals the functional aspects of these forts during medieval period. He, very significantly, brings to light the defence technologies used by some tribes.

Basudev Malik discusses archaeological remains of Mishmi valley, which include temples, forts, sculptures etc. and tries to show that the Mishmi valley had intimate cultural interaction with the Brahmaputra Valley Culture in the past.

S.K. Dash has written on temples and forts of Arunachal, which are noticed in the foothills. These temples and fort architecture reveal the contact of Arunachali culture with that of Brahmaputra Valley Culture during medieval period.

Prabhas K. Singh traces the development of museums in Arunachal Pradesh after independence and argues that museums can play an important role in the preservation of material culture and heritage of Arunachal.

The effort is by no means comprehensive. It is hoped that it will be followed and furthered by more detailed and focused attempts in future on the cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh.

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Other Books of Related Interest

- **Buddhism in North-East India**
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