Conservation ethos in the tribal folklore

Vishal Gupta

Department of Conservator of Forests, Science & Technology, Silvassa 396 230, Dadra & Nagar Haveli

vishalgupta_ifs@rediffmail.com; vishalgupta_ifs@yahoo.com

Received 10 February 2005; revised 20 December 2006

The richly forested Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh is home to 25 major tribes, which belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group and practise Buddhism, Vaishnavism or elementary form of animism based on magico-religious beliefs. They practice Jhum (slash-and-burn agriculture), depend on forests for supplementing their daily needs and are now taking to the newer modes of land use and settled agriculture. They have evolved their culture & tradition, myths & folktales in close association with the nature and have an intricate understanding of the complexities of the ecological processes.

Based on the field experiences with the communities, it is described the way these tribal communities perceive nature & their surroundings, their socio-religious beliefs & sanctions regarding forests & land, and the myths & folktales governing their resource use. It goes on to elucidate their sacred beliefs, and how the concept of environmental conservation is embedded in their customs and ethos. An attempt has also been made to understand the changes taking place in these closed societies, primarily due to exogenous contacts, which has damaged the traditional fabric of the society.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, Jhum cultivation, Sacred forests, Conservation ethos, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khamptis, Singhphoos, Membas, Khambas, Singhis, Tagins, Apatanis

IPC Int. Cl.: A61K36/00, A61P25/00

The Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh is the richest bio-geographical province in the eastern Himalayan zone. With a very rich floral and faunal diversity; it is designated as one of the 18 biodiversity hot spots of the world. This rich diversity of life forms in the state is not only due to the varied climatic conditions but also because of its peculiar position at the junction of Indo-Malayan, Palaearctic and Indo-Chinese bio-geographic regions. The thinly populated state is also a land of great socio-cultural diversity. It is home to 25 major tribes that belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group and are further divided into sub-tribes, mainly on dialectical grounds. They are ethnically similar, non totemistic and are believed to have been derived from an original common stock. But owing to geographical isolation, there are certain distinctive characteristics in dress, customs, festivals and language (Fig. 1). The major tribal groups can be divided into three broad groups based on their socio-religious affinities. Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khamptis, Singhphoos, Membas and Khambas follow the lamastic tradition of Buddhism. They largely practise settled cultivation with jhum (slash-and-burn cultivation) in steep slopes. The second group inhabiting the central part of the state are collectively termed as the Teni group. They are the Akas, Singhis, Tagins, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Adis, Mijis and Sulungs, who worship the Donyi-Polo. They worship nature, make animal sacrifices, and with the exception of Apatanis and Adis, practise jhum. The third group comprises Wanchos and Noctes of the southern districts, who practise an elementary form of Vaishnavism.

Beliefs, myths & taboos

The tribes of the Teni group believe in the spiritual qualities of nature and a host of spirits called Wiyus, good or evil, who are capable of causing disease, misery and misfortune; in life as well as after death, are always in their active imagination. They are therefore to be propitiated with sacrifices, offerings and prayers. Donyi-Polo is often conceived as just, benevolent and good and is regarded as one high God symbolising the eternal truth. Different categories of wiyus and orums (ancestral ghosts) dominate the spiritual and religious world of the Singhis of Kameng and Subansiri. The most dreaded of these are Dojing and Yapom, the spirits of the jungle. They take a great toll on the people by making them fall ill. Jengte and Pamte, Nyori and Pamri are the ones that cause
various kinds of fever. Yan wui is supposed to reside in the lofty hills with a large family and is believed to visit people with diseases of various kinds. They are always in the active imagination of the people. Among the Hill Miris, the most dreaded spirit is Yapom, the spirit of the forests. He is taken to assume many forms and sometimes may appear in human form. Failure of crops is attributed to his wrath and he is to be appeased with sacrifice and offerings.

Myths and the folk-tales woven around them play a very important role in shaping their belief. The worship of nature and the belief in the fury of the forces of nature are common in their myths and tales. The belief among the tribal groups related to the creation of the world varies and there are myths related to notion of the world as a macrocosm, transformed from some great personage or even trees. The Gallongs attribute the emergence of the earth to the prawn and the crab; the Noctes relate it to a snake; while the Digaru Mishmis attribute it to the white ants. An Apatani myth mentions that at the beginning there was only water, next a rock and finally the soft earth appeared, created by six deities. They later created trees, plants, animals and even sun, moon and stars. Then there are also deities, who preside over the forces of nature. Another creation myth of the Hill Miris tells that earlier there was water everywhere, above which rose a tree. A worm was born over it that began to eat the wood and the earth was formed from the dust. At last the tree fell on the ground, and the bark on the lower side of the trunk became the skin of the world, that on the upper side became the skin of the sky. The trunk itself turned into a rock and branches became the hills. It is believed that earthquakes are caused by restlessness of a great creature, which may be a deity, a big mithun, a monster or a great serpent. Nishis believe that this great elephant like creature, which they call Chigo ngirgo lives beneath the earth and the earth rests upon his body. Usually it lies still, but sometimes during the summer and winter, it turns and makes the earth shake.

Then there are stories of tricksters who transform themselves into birds and animals and are even known to marry birds, frogs, trees, bears and dry leaves. Similarly, their tales describe how the early man used to live high up on the trees in their bird-nest like homes. They gradually learnt to make pillars of the house from the legs of an elephant, the poles from the body of a snake, the roof from the skeleton of a buffalo and the thatch from a fish’s scales. These stories also give an insight into their traditional beliefs regarding origin and evolution of animals and plants. Their myths and tales have given rise to certain taboos that are scrupulously observed. Apatanis celebrate dree festival in June. During the celebration it is a taboo to plough or dig the earth. They further refrain from nipping green vegetables or cutting trees during this period. During the mlokom -yulo festival of the Nishes, held in the months of Lekang and Leehar (March-April), Gods and deities are invoked by offerings and sacrifices and prayers are held for the welfare of the village. At the end of the festival, the villagers observe a taboo for five days during which they do not go out of the village for jhum, hunting or collection of forest produce. Outsiders are also not allowed to enter the village. The observance of taboo is known as mlokom-arina and violation of the same entails fine.

Sacred animals and plants

Snakes, porcupines (safi), jackals (saki), hornbills (piyo) and gharial (bara) are considered to be sacred among the Nishes. The myths regarding the origin of the Nishes tell an interesting fact regarding two sons/incarnations of their ancestor Abo Teni as Nima and Nia. The Nishes believe that the tigers (dalu namra) and lions (hasang damye) have originated from Nima and the people from Nia. Thus, they consider these ferocious animals as their dada-bhai (brother in relation) and to kill them is tabooed. If someone kills or traps these animals, mercy is sought from the spirits and the ceremony performed is called rohpey. During this period a set of taboos and prohibitions are observed. Certain trees as sengri & sengne (Ficus sp) are thought of to be the abode of evil spirits and wiys and to fell them even for firewood is tabooed by the Nishes. However, a strange custom among these people relates to these very trees. When a person goes missing or someone passes away, the next of kin fells these trees, as an act of showing his displeasure to the wiyu for having caused him the misery.

A similar account is given of the traditional customary laws among the Adis of the Siang. In some villages there are some uncultivated forestland in the high hills with hirots (Ficus sp) and these trees are believed to be the abodes of bad deities by villagers. They believe that this type of jungle is under the control of the deities. If somebody cuts the hirot tree or goes for hunting without offering
anything to the deities, he will definitely face some unseen trouble and will not get any game. They consider this type of forestland as spiritual land or the deities land. *Adis* also abstain from hunting animals like mole, pangolin, slow loris, hollock gibbon, etc. as they believe that killing these would lead to unwarranted events as famine, floods or personal misery. Passes, lakes and wild fig trees are considered to be the favourite abode of the gods and spirits by the *Mishmis*. They give proper respect to these deities while passing through, lest the spirits are offended by loud noise or any other disturbance.

**Forest protection**

There is a belief among the *Nishis* of East Kameng that *wiyus* as *Kirue*, *Miorue*, *Yapom*, *Dojing*, *Kichack*, *Miochak*, *Kiofang*, *Miofang*, etc. reside in areas where hunting, felling and cutting of trees is prohibited. Failing to do so may invoke the wrath of these spirits and the man may face unseen trouble. These areas typically comprise of lakes in the mountain folds called *sineiak*, surrounded by thick forests called *myokum*. Because of the fear of invoking these spirits and apprehending unseen troubles, no one dares to venture near these areas. Among the *Monpas* of Tawang, there are certain sacred areas locally called *kela*, which are related to the birth of an individual (Fig. 2). There goes a belief that these areas are the abode of their jungle deity *Singye lamo*, who is the deity of the village/group of villages, who venerate a particular *kela*. In honour of the deity, prayers are held and offerings are made. Each such *kela* has a *bompa* (temple) and the surrounding areas are considered to be the *phobrang* (palace) of the deity (Fig. 3). The people entering the area observe certain taboos as prohibition of ginger, garlic, meat and liquor. In addition, felling or cutting of trees or branches is totally prohibited. Felling of tree by the outsiders due to ignorance is generally excused and the members of the *kela*, as a custom, plant two trees in place of the felled tree.

The monasteries and *gompas* in these areas also maintain forests and trees. These forests are taken to be the private forests or *parmang* of the *gompa* and the people honour the local religious sanctions prohibiting felling of the trees. Collection of any forest produce for any purposes what so ever is prohibited and is scrupulously followed. *Mijis* of West Kameng venerate *Nhei-mu* or the water deity. It a belief among them that the nullahs and rivulets are the abode of the snake deity and His permission is to be sort in crossing it and for taking up new works. All the trees in the catchment above are held sacred and felling the trees or dirtying the area by defecating or urinating is totally tabooed. Any act of defiance leads to invoking the wrath of the deity, which can only be lessened by prayers and making offerings. *Lu puja* is the annual prayer held in the honour of the deity. There are certain areas in the *Adi* land of Siang called *soyit*, which are akin to the salt licks; generally lying in the folds and some open areas, where felling of the surrounding trees is totally prohibited.

**Belief affecting use behaviour**

The indigenous tribes have evolved over ages close to their surroundings in the lap of nature and have an intricate understanding of the forests and resources. They have depended upon the forests for their survival, livelihood and employment. The forests have met their day-to-day subsistence needs. They derive their food from the nature in from of roots, tubers, leaves, wild herbs, mushrooms, fish & game. They build their houses from timber, bamboo, leaves and thatch. Forests also act as grazing grounds for their cattle and meet up their requirement of medicine from the wild. Some of the tribes have evolved interesting traditions based on their long drawn association with nature. *Mijis* for example usually do not cultivate the same plot of land for more than a year, unless the soil is exceptionally good. The period during which the plot may lie fallow may extend from 6-12 yrs. A similar *Hill Miri* tradition of leaving considerable parts of their lands fallow for a long period has also been mentioned. They cultivate their land for 2 yrs and then allow it to lie fallow for the next 5-7 yrs. There is a mention of an interesting custom among them to which they adhere scrupulously. They have a superstition like *Adis*, which deters them from breaking new grounds as long as available fallow is sufficient: a dread of offending the spirits of the woods by unnecessary felling of the trees.

Among *Tagins*, land ownership pattern is communal in nature. Selling of land is a taboo among them, as they believe that *Gida taru*, the presiding spirit over lands, gets annoyed over transactions involving lands. This holds true even for a new migrant accepted in a village, who is offered free land for cultivation and settlement. Certain areas in the vicinity of the villages are taken to be the abode of the
wiyus and the Nishis refrain from breaking these areas for cultivation. These get protected as sacred forests and are called Myoro-tom (Fig. 4). If the nearby areas are to be brought under jhum, they seek forgiveness of the wiwu of the jungle by offering prayers and sacrifice of fowl or pig. Similarly, the lofty mountains and the high hills are taken to be the abode of mighty spirits who visit the villages and people with diseases. They are therefore to be kept in good humour by proper propitiations. The forestland in the high hills is therefore not broken.

Sangyam or bola (Morus laevigata Wall. Ex Brandis) tree is highly priced in these communities for its long lasting timber qualities. Earlier this tree was fairly commonly available and was mostly used for construction of houses. Of late, however, it has become more of a rare occurrence and has disappeared from its natural habitat. The people of the community have now great reverence for it and a man is considered lucky if there is even one such tree in his land. Even in the traditional jhum lands, it is not felled or cut and is protected as an invaluable asset for generations. Among the Nishis, before felling of trees in the common wastelands (goye-myodi), the deities are propitiated with offerings of fowl, vermilion and incense sticks. On one hand their mercy is sought for felling the tree and on the other they are thanked for rearing the tree for so long. Sulung, a semi-nomadic tribe of the high hills of Kameng and Subansiri, devote their food gathering expeditions to collection of wild sago (Caryota sp) locally called rang-bang. They also used to move their settlements once the supply of the nearby sago trees got exhausted. Due to wanton cutting down of these trees, the supply of sago
has gone down. In many places they have therefore taken up raising and cultivating sago trees nearer to their settlements, transplanting seedlings from the close by forests. The tribals of the southern district of Tirap have an interesting tradition of not felling the trees that have paan (Piper betle Linn.) climbers on them.

Environment and natural forces also influence the Adi outlook of life. Their rituals and festivities also mark different stages of cultivation. The first of the major rituals is aran held after clearing of land for jhum has taken place. The local deities are propitiated and villagers abstain from all work during that period. This is followed by mopun, a sowing rite. Later, at the time of fencing the fields, ettor is celebrated and offerings are made to Agam, the lord of the animals, to ensure safety of the fields. Prayers and sacrifices mark these festivities. These culminate in solung, a ceremony for prosperity of cattle.

Directions of change
Opening up of the society and an increased link with the outside world has led to a change in the traditional life style of the communities, especially among the younger generations. The democratic way of life has suffered a setback with the increasing political consciousness and ambitions due to the process of democratisation and recurrent elections for public offices. This breakdown of the age old traditional systems and a loss of the tribal ethos has been primarily due to unabated modernisation, a socio-economic change from a barter based system to a market oriented economy, introduction of a pro-urban education system, and an increasing contact with the exogenous people and the resultant alienation of the modern educated youth form the culture, customs and traditional lifestyle so characteristic of the tribal way of life. This has weakened the age-old community institutions and eroded the traditional resource base. The lure of wealth has made the people fall prey to the outside entrepreneurs who often encourage and abet them to take the unlawful route. The locals, especially the youth need to be channelised to spread the traditional values and ethos especially related to conservation and the traditional way of life so as to rediscover the traditional systems. The traditional institutions of governance also need to be strengthened.

There is a need to carry out an in depth survey and documentation of the traditional conservation strategies. It could be done in collaboration with the local societies, wherever functional, and also by roping in local resource persons. The indigenous technical knowledge is to be checked and respected, and needs to be incorporated in the management plans of the areas in which there is a move to have joint management of the community lands. Tribal development schemes and projects should also aim at achieving this end.

References
2 Elwin Verrier, Myths of the North East Frontier of India, (Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar), 1958.
3 Choudhury SD, Gazetteer of India, Arunachal Pradesh-Subansiri district, (Gazetteers Department, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong), 1981, 106.