

**Pre-Colonial History
and Traditions of
Arunachal Pradesh**

**Editors
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Pre-Colonial History and Traditions of Arunachal Pradesh

Pre-Colonial History and Traditions of Arunachal Pradesh is a study of three important regions i.e. east, west and central Arunachal Pradesh. It is an attempt towards objective understanding of the pre-colonial traditions of the communities of the state in historical perspective. Most of the publications on this issue have been written by the western authors and they are often biased. The perusal of their writings tempts us to put forward a regional perspective and this study is an endeavour in this direction. This book will be helpful for researchers as well as general readers.

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Historiography of the West Kameng and Tawang Districts

Rajesh Verma

Humankind is known for a number of special qualities which separate it from other species. One of these qualities is the power of collective memory by which humankind is able to recollect and reconstruct the past events. This exclusive humankind quality has been at the core of the progress of ideology and civilization in the world. This progress is largely reflected in the various forms, methods and principles of history writing, 'historiography'. This paper is an attempt to present a comprehensive historiographical narrative, from a very relevant perspective 'ethno history', of the tribes of the West Kameng and Tawang districts of western Arunachal Pradesh. It is also to fill in the gap in the historiographical studies of Arunachal Pradesh. This area has not attracted the attention of scholars working so far on the historiography of the region.

I

The power to recollect past events and to pass it over to generations to come resulted in the recording of events and activities in a definite form of art that came to be known as art of writing history or historiography. Historiography is at present an established method of history-writing with set principles and methodologies. The term 'History' has been derived from the Greek language and

as a 'special form of thought', 'inquiry' and scientific method, it developed again in Greece in 5th century B.C. Herodotus and Thucydides are regarded as the first scientific historians of the world.¹ Since then it has passed through a number of innovations and experiments and has taken a formal and mechanized shape.

History cannot be written in vacuum or in other words without authentic evidences, literary or archaeological. It is not out of context here to mention that some societies had left sufficient number of evidences of their activities which made easier for the future generations to write history. On the other hand the situation is different in various other societies that did not leave traces of their activities either in written or monumental forms. In such case the oral sources provide valuable information on different aspects of the past activities. They are applied in the reconstruction of the past of various tribal societies of the world.

In case of history of a tribe, also referred as 'ethnic' or 'indigenous' communities, many prefer to use the term 'ethno history'. J. Axtell defines ethno history as the "study of ethnographic cultures and indigenous customs by examining historical records". It is, in fact, the study of history of various ethnic groups that may or may not exist today. "Ethno historians go beyond the standard use of documents and manuscripts and use such source materials as maps, music, paintings, photography, folklore, oral tradition, site exploration, archaeological materials, museum collection, enduring customs, language, and place names".²

B. S. Cohn, while writing on ethno history in the *International Encyclopaedia of Social Science* (Vol. 6, 1968) has inserted European contact theory. He considers ethno history as historical study of any 'non-European peoples' (or 'indigenous peoples') before and after European contact.³ In this way comes the pre-colonial and colonial concept of ethno history writing.

Traditional history is different from the Ethno history in the

sense that the former gives importance to events and happenings, while the latter gives greater emphasis on the 'meaning beyond behavior'. A conventional historian looks for the facts in a culture and interprets them according to the set principles, values and beliefs. There are chances of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of true meaning behind the event and fact studied. But an ethno historian studies a more comprehensive meaning behind behaviour, event and fact. He does not apply his own interpretation to the events from other cultures. In this way, an ethno historian gives simply a 'cultural biography' of a community. In the modern times, ethno history as a special branch of historiography appeared in the United States of America in 1950s as a means of understanding the history of American Indians "from inside, rather than being judged as extended object of study." Since then, a number of western ethno historians, namely, James Axtell, Robert Darnton, Natalie D. Davis, and Keith Thomas, to name a few, have influenced ethno history writing to a larger extent. They have combined historiography with anthropology and adopted empirical and inductive methods of study to write the history of a 'primitive' community.

India has a large number of such tribal or indigenous communities as still follow their traditional life-style. Some of them (e.g. tribes of central India and Jharkhand) are considered to be the original inhabitants of India, while many (e.g. the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh) have migrated from the neighboring countries (Tibet, China, or Burma) in different periods of time. In spite of several waves of invasions of the so-called advanced nations the tribal communities of India have been able to preserve their traditional cultures. Because of their so-called isolation from the mainstream civilization and their lack of scripting ability the tribes of North East in general and those of Arunachal Pradesh in particular did not keep their records of past activities. Here some exceptions may be cited. The

Monpas of Tawang and the Khamptis of Lohit have their scripts so they can be said to have their historical records.

II

Pre-colonial history of Arunachal Pradesh refers to the history of the tribes before they came in contact with the British in this region. It does not mean that they were living in isolation. It has been proved by several Assamese and Tibetan sources and the modern researches of Indian historians that they had trade and cultural relations with Assam, Bhutan, Tibet and Burma before the advent of the British in this region. The British contact, however, brought a radical change in politics and economy. Roughly this date is placed at 1826 A.D. when the British occupied Lower Assam and extended colonial influence in the hills thereafter. It was during the colonial rule itself that a large number of works on pre-colonial history of the region in general were produced. But they were brought out as 'manipulated ethnic history' or in other words, history with definite aims such as perpetuation of colonial domain and civilizing mission. So, one cannot ignore the influence of colonial rule on history-writing of the pre-colonial period in this region.

The British also functioned as ethnographers and gathered first hand information on tribal communities, apart from going through historical records available in various forms. Thus, accounts prepared by John Butler *A Sketch of Assam*, William Robinson *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, E.T. Dalton *A Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, W.W. Hunter *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Alexander Mackenzie *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Captain R. S. Kennedy *Ethnological Report on the Akas, Khoas and Mijis and the Monpas of Tawang* can be put in the category of ethno history. However, B. K. Roy Burman does not recognize Mackenzie as ethno historian but as "a chronicler of events which were relevant from the point of view of colonial

administration.”⁴ He has highlighted the Ahom-Aka relations and the Ahom-Bhutia relations in historical perspectives. Many historians of later period, including Sir Edward Gait *A History of Assam*, followed the description given by Mackenzie in respect of the tribes. They were not historians or ethno historians in true sense, but serving the needs of the empire.

In the writing of pre-colonial history, the historians/ethnographers took assistance of a number of Assamese sources, most particularly, the *Buranjis*. Assam Buranji of Naobaicha Phukan and Padmeswar Singh, and Assam Buranji of Harakanta Barua provide the description of Ahoms relations with the Akas and the Nyishi, including the grant of posa to them.⁵ Gait, who had written the first historical work on Assam in real sense in modern times, held high opinion of the Ahom conquerors of Assam who had a “keen historical sense”, because they used to preserve the records of their activities in the form of Buranjis. However, Gait had the same opinion as that of James Mill regarding the inhabitants of other parts of India who, as they thought, had “no idea of history before the advent of the Muhammadans.”⁶ Probably very few historians of India would agree to either James Mill’s or Edward Gait’s remark. Occasional references made about this region in the Brahmanical literatures, epics and the Greek and Chinese account,⁷ though do not tell about history in real sense, they provide a good sequence to history of this part of the world.

The two districts, namely, West Kameng and Tawang, are situated in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh having international border with Tibet and Bhutan. From the racial and linguistic points of view the Monpas and Sherdukpens belong to Tibetan stock and they follow the Mahayana Buddhist faith. The Akas/Hrussos have Mongoloid appearance and they follow shamanistic animist faith.⁸ As has been mentioned earlier, like the Khamptis of the Lohit district, the Monpas do have a script and

their historical records can be found in the Tibetan Literature. The Tawang Monastery and various other monasteries scattered over the western part are big repository of Tibetan literature, both religious/canonical and secular literature (e.g. accounts books, agreements, *sanads* and *parwanas*).

Historians and ethnographers have utilized these sources for the reconstruction of the pre-colonial history and culture of the people of this region. In case of the Monpas the historians do not have to starve but to struggle to get evidences of their past. A proper knowledge and understanding of the language and culture have resulted in a good historiography on the Monpas. Thus historians have been able to say confidently in relation to Monpas' migration and concentration at Tawang, their rule over the Mon kingdom, their conflicts with Tibet and Bhutan, their adoption of Tibetan script in the 11th century and their conversion to Buddhism.⁹ Captain Kennedy, who was a Medical Officer and accompanied the Aka Promenade (1913-14), in his Ethnological Report describes about the racial complexion of the inhabitants of West Kameng and Tawang namely, Monpas, Akas, Miris and Sherdukpens. He also describes that the Monpas were the "late immigrants" to the Dirang valley where a serious dispute developed with the tribes such as the Aka and Miji, and that the Monpas built the *Zong* or fort at Dirang as a means of defence.¹⁰ On the basis of available Tibetan records it has been historically proved that prior to the construction of the Tawang Monastery (17th Century), Tawang was traditionally inhabited by the Monpas who had been reigning over the Mon kingdom that stretched from Tawang to Sikkim. It was later on absorbed into the control of neighbouring Bhutan and Tibet. The Monpas adopted Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism in the 17th century under the influence of Mera Lama. But some elements of the pre-Buddhist Bon faith remained strong among them as before.¹¹ Later on, the Sherdukpens also came under the Buddhist influence, and along

with the Monpas they also started keeping historical records in Buddhist monasteries. Thus, like the Ahoms the two also developed the sense of history.

As has been mentioned previously, oral tradition plays a dominant role in writing cultural history of a tribe. Allen Nevins of Columbia University started the first oral history project in 1948-49. In India the scope for conducting oral history project has been immense because of the presence of a large number of indigenous populations. In India, the Nehru Memorial Library started the Oral History Archives in 1966 to facilitate research work in this field. Tamo Mibang rightly points out that the oral information becomes the only reliable source in areas where the documentary evidence is inadequate. He has utilized traditional songs and dance of tribes as source material to interpret their history.¹² However, it may not be inappropriate to mention that with the passage of time several interpolations take place in oral tradition and the originality of a tradition comes under question mark. It then takes the form of a myth and it is a painstaking task of a historian to separate myth from reality. Verrier Elwin, in his book *Myths of the North East Frontier of India*, gives the description based on some Buddhist folk tradition regarding the origin and migration of the Sherdukpens. It connects their origin both from Tibet and Assam royal families and mentions that *Gyaptang Bura* was the first Sherdukpen king.¹³ On the other hand R.R.P. Sharma in his book *The Sherdukpens* gives another version of origin and migration and mentions *Japtang Bura* as the Sherdukpen king.¹⁴ On these two versions of the tales, Jai Prakash Singh has presented an interesting interpretation of history of the Sherdukpens. In one of his articles presented in the NEIHA Session of Kohima (1987) he tries to prove that the Buddhist tradition was developed as against the Sherdukpen tradition to explain their origin “with a purpose of attracting them to the Buddhist faith.”¹⁵ He points to

the proposition that the Sherdukpens did not want to adopt Buddhism in the beginning. The Buddhist Sherdukpen beliefs indicate that they fought against the Tibetan Buddhists and resisted the spread of Buddhist faith in their homeland.¹⁶ This interpretation also points to the narrative of the 'Little Tradition' and the 'Great Tradition' in which the latter submerges the former. Although the 'Little Tradition of Arunachal Pradesh tribes had developed in complete isolation from the 'Great Tradition',¹⁷ it can be seen from historical records that the Buddhism emerged as the dominant religion in the two districts and overshadowed the 'Little Traditions' of the region.

B. P. Mishra, utilizing an Aka legend as described by Captain R. S. Kennedy in his Ethnological Report regarding the origin of Akas and other tribes, narrates the legend in the birth of the idea of social inequality. It goes like that the Assamese and Akas of the royal blood came down from heaven to earth by 'a golden ladder'; the remaining Akas had a silver ladder; the Tibetans and Monpas were given a ladder of iron; the Nyishis and Adis had to be satisfied with a bamboo ladder, and so on. It shows the superiority feeling among the royal Akas against the commoners.¹⁸

In this way, there has been a combination of conventional history and ethno history in the historiography on Arunachal Pradesh. In recent years the prevalence of ethno history is getting over the conventional history in the sense that there is a keen awareness among the new researchers, who generally belong to their own community, to write the history and culture of their communities from within. While on the one hand, it can promote good ethno history, it can, on the other hand, develop into a serious error of history writing, i.e. the glorification of one's own culture which has already taken the shape of ethnicity in many parts of the North East. Tana Showren, in his article 'Ethnohistory in Arunachal Pradesh: Difficulties and Scope', writes that "ethnographical research

proper has not yet been started in Arunachal Pradesh. Till recent past, most of the professional researchers and anthropologists were interested only in the conventional studies of history and culture of the tribes and their relations with the British.”¹⁹ He points to the merits and demerits of ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders observations on the tribes which makes the difference in history, rather ethno history writing.

Record based history, also known as the conventional history, has a fix boundary line beyond which one cannot endeavor to write anything except school based subjective interpretations. This is the limitation of the conventional history writing. But the ethno historians are more privileged in the sense that they work with the society which has an extended culture and a living history. Even if an ethno historian is unable to give the minute details of genealogy and chronology, but he can explain the process of social-cultural formation in a better manner.

The Directorate of Research of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh started the process of serious research by the appointment of research officers at district level. They did the most stupendous work by collection of information directly from the concerned tribes and areas. The Directorate has published a series of articles in *RESARUN* and also got published the district Gazetteers compiling information from all available sources. It has proved to be a significant step in historiography in Arunachal Pradesh.

G. S. Pillai, an administrative officer who was posted in the Kameng District prepared a note on the institutions of the Monpas. His note was also utilized by Verrier Elwin in his book *Democracy in NEFA*. On its basis Elwin narrates that “the first reliable evidence of village self-governing institution amongst the Monpas occurred in the 11th century when the Tawang valley was converted to Buddhism by *Terthum Pemalingpa*.”²⁰ Elwin also quoted the books of R. R. P. Sharma, *The Sherdukpens* and Raghbir Sinha, *The Akas*

who were posted as research officers in the Kameng Frontier Division. These books have, later on, been quoted by a number of scholars in pursuance of their research works.

One can distinctly find these works closer to ethno history because they do not go deep into the changing thought process and theorization of myths and facts. To write history it is important to enter the mind of a historic or even pre-historic man and 'make his thought one's own'. R.G.Collingwood writes that "if one cannot do this, all one can do is to arrange his relics in some units of tidy order, and the result is ethnology or archaeology but it is not history."²¹ An ethno historian normally avoids giving his interpretation on social and cultural structures of an ethnic community.

Works of ethno historians are much similar to the works of anthropologists or social anthropologists. Citing examples of Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliff Brown, B. K. Roy Burman writes that they put more emphasis on functionalism and structural-functionalism and they are "not too much enamored of the search for historical root for an understanding of social morphology or, social physiology of a people."²² A clear cut impact of sociological and anthropological methodologies can be seen on writings of tribal communities in the region. Most of the works contain little of history and too much of culture. Generally the social structure and social functions such as norms, customs, traditions and institutions are highlighted and they are connected to the age-old traditions. They describe the tribal society in terms of solidarity of village community, significance of clan and family, working of traditional institutions and indigenous resource management system. This structural-functionalism approach has been criticized for being unable to account for big social change, or for inherent structural contradictions and conflict. So sometimes, it is also called as 'consensus theory' which is not always true. It may be

because of the difficulties of historians in finding written sources which can reflect conflict and contradiction. Conflicts are more visible in the present time when the tribal society has been opened for outsiders and they have come in contact with several foreign ideas. Thus, the myth of tribal solidarity is slowly being exposed.

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