

RIVER VALLEYS AND WATER BODIES IN THE COSMOS OF THE IDU MISHMIS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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This paper highlights the cultural meanings of water and water bodies in the cultural canvas of the Idu Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh, India. We narrate stories from Idu Mishmi people's indigenous water cosmology to explore how they imagine and share memories of water and its related bodies using metaphors, and discourses created and employed by them. The paper also looks at aspects of Idu Mishmi perspectives in indigenous eco-spiritual stories and conceptual understanding and provides an opportunity to identify and articulate unique meanings of water and water bodies among the tribe. Using the physical spaces identified by Idu Mishmis in their landscape, the paper argues that the high-altitude lakes and ponds carry symbolic and ritualistic meanings and resources valued during birth, healing and death rituals.

Keywords: Water Narratives, Shamanism, Development, Environment.

1. Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is the easternmost state of India. The state borders China, Bhutan and Myanmar. Most part of the state lies in Himalayan Mountain ranges and their foothills. The state is referred to as the land of the rising Sun however the region also has got most rivers in the country. The numerous river from the mountains of Arunachal make their way to the plains and become tributaries of Brahmaputra making it the largest river in India. The rivers in Arunachal Pradesh also play a significant geopolitical role as primarily the state is divided into five major river valleys; Lohit, Tirap, Siang, Subansiri and Kameng. Moreover out of twenty-five districts nineteen are named after the rivers of the region.

The primary territories of the Idu Mishmis are divided into two districts named after the Dibang River flows from the southern flank of the great Himalaya range. Dibang river originally known as Talon by the Idus is fed by several perennial rivers like *Ithu, Emra, Dri, Mathu, Eze, Iphi, Aso, Ihi, Shiku, Jumu, Thuwu, Theya, Choppo, Ithi, Eha, Ayu, Chipu*, etc.

2. Methodology

Coverage

The study was undertaken in two districts of Arunachal Pradesh; Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley where the Idu Mishmis primarily inhabit.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

The paper is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork among the Idu Mishmis.

The fieldwork constitutes the primary source of data. The study employed field trips, interviews, and direct observation by participating in the shamanic rituals.

The Idu Mishmis follow an animistic form of religion and incorporate different shamanic rituals for the wellbeing of individuals and the community. These rituals are performed by the shamans called Igu. They play an intermediary role between people and the spiritual world. The Igu is believed to possess supernatural powers. They can communicate and get into the spiritual realm in order to find answers to the miseries of the human world.

The Igu while performing the different ritualistic ceremonies; narrate the stories in shamanic chants as during childbirth, harvesting rituals, festivals, death ritual, or while corresponding with the supernatural beings for various purposes. These ritualistic chants are in verse and metered embodying rhythm, melody, and harmony. In structure, chants incorporate rhyme, refrain, and alliteration. The shamanic chants also employ imagery and symbols replete with metaphors and other poetic devices.

At times especially in longer rituals, the shaman performs ritual dance playing different Igu musical instruments like *repu, amrala, gerambu, ajuru* etc. From time to time the shaman also performs *nya*, the ritualistic dance.

In the first stage, the shamanic rituals were recorded (audio and video) by adopting the participatory observation method.

The shamanic chants are in an archaic sacred language that is beyond the comprehension of the present generation. Therefore, the shamans were again engaged in translation. In the next stage, the ritualistic chants were put into written form by using the Roman alphabet. Thereafter the written down shamanic chants were translated as it is. In the last part, the chants were paraphrased in the English language.

The Water Narratives

The water related bodies and phenomena like rain in many instances is an ambiguous entity that functions negatively and disrupts the normal way of life. The Mishmi Hills is marred by incessant rain that cause havoc in summer. The life of tribal people comes to stand still as rains and landslides disrupt normal course like agriculture, hunting, fishing etc.

When Mir Jumla the Governor of Emperor Aurangzeb invaded Assam in 1662 and entered the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh his one of his chroniclers Mulla Darvish of Herat after witnessing the incessant rain in the region regards the place as 'another world' and writes.

Its land is not like our land, its sky is not like our sky.

Its sky sends rain down without the originating cause of clouds:

On its ground the green grass sprouts up without any aid from the soil.

It stands outside the circle of the Earth and the bowels of the enveloping Sphere. It has been separated from the world, like the letter Aliph.

The seasons all begin here at the time of their conclusion elsewhere.

Similar Experience is chanted by shaman while dealing with the origin of farming.

Lango khenja shali abaka gachi chimeh.

Padu imu indu ba bida shayi eya edzaba biya ladza.

Padu imu thruchimi indu ba-ne cheto athunu libah.

Shayi yilu nomani edza ba-ne malu ludu veyana lubru agra bra li-ba biya ladza.

Malu cheto ethonu liba goyana khilibru aga bra liba bida. Malu cheto ethonu liba.

Lango khenja ena aga bra liba biya ladza

Elwin, 1959 The Art of the North-East Frontier of India "After the jungles have been cleared for agricultural land, the rain started pouring in. The cloud and mist assembled and opened rain poured without stopping. The trees and plants which had been cut for the agricultural plot began to grow again by etho-aga (one and two fingerbreadths). Many seasons of cultivation and harvest fledged. The felled forest again grew and became plants and trees".

The cultural discourses manifest how the tribe view the water bodies and act accordingly. Among the natural phenomenon it's the rain that brings most miseries to the people in the past among the people hills in Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, for respite the Idus have attempted to control rain through shamanic rituals like *Ara-hri*. There is also ritual to bring rain and storm but it's the rain stopping ritual that is sought more by the tribe. *Ara-hri* is done during the cultivation season to burn down felled trees and slashed plants. Late in burning the fields' results into fleeting of cultivation season and one may starve the whole year. Rain stopping ritual is also done while conducting big rituals like *Reh* and *Ya*. The rain spoils the rituals and obstructs the path of people coming from far of places therefore it needs to be stopped.

On the other hand, rain is bought by the shaman in anger when people die of unnatural deaths especially caused by spirits. Incessant rain called *tsi* occurs when people break the taboos and infringes customs.

In the cultural discourse of the Idu Mishmis, the water and water bodies apart from playing spiritual and aesthetic roles are also symbols of evil and perils. In Zahiwu lake resides serpent Beka that makes people drown in water. Similarly, Ade Maku Lake is an evil lake of discord that makes people fight and kill each other.

Seasons in Idu Mishmi's Landscape

The Idu calendar has twelve months and the appearance of the New Moon and natural

phenomena like the flowering of a particular tree, the singing of specific birds and insects, and the appearance of different migratory birds determine change of Months and arrival of

different seasons. The tribe broadly recognizes only two seasons; summer and winter. The summer roughly starts from April and winter arrives by November.

| Idu Name of Months | English | Season According to the Idus | Remark |
|--------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|---|
| Lohla | January | Winter | Snows in many regions |
| Rahla | February | Winter | Snows |
| Muhla | March | Winter | From mid-March winter starts receding. |
| Enala | April | Summer | |
| Shula | May | Summer | Rainy |
| Thala | June | Summer | Rainy |
| Achila | July | Summer | Rainy |
| Piila | August | Summer | Rainy |
| Chhila | September | Summer | |
| Machela | October | Summer /Winter | Half Summer and Half winter. Snow starts falling in High mountains for Mishmi Hills during the last part of October |
| Tangrala | November | Winter | Snow in higher altitude |
| Maoula | December | Winter | Snows |

Idu Life Stages and Water

The water plays a pivotal role in the cultural canvas of the Idu Mishmis. The shamanic chants manifest the different aspects of water and related bodies.

Chithu Huluni. The identity of the Idu Mishmi is founded upon the concept of *Chithu Huluni*: the twelve water river valleys (*chithu*: water source, *Huluni*: Twelve). They identify themselves based upon the twelve river valleys where they reside. Etho, Shiku, Ihi, Emra, Ahi, Mathu, Dri, Talon, Ithun, Chiyu, Chipu, and Ilu. Their identity is centered on these rivers and the Idus for example, living in Ithu river valley is called Mithu, Mindri for the people living by the side of Dri River, Mitaloh for Idus living in Talon River valley, Mimrah for people living by the side of Emra, Mimathu for Idus living in Mathu River valley, Mihi for the people living by the side of Ahi River, Ihi-ah, Ilu ah, and Shiku ah for Idus living by the side of rivers Ahi, Ilu, and Shiku.

The shamanic discourse throws light on the reasons behind the thought process and the significant position of water in the Idu Mishmi cultural and memorial discourse. Water and Spirituality.

From birth to death, water and water bodies shape and drive diverse social and

cultural setups. An Idu Mishmi, when born, is incorporated through birth ritual where in *Machinu*, the cleansing ritual is performed. Water (*Machi*) and different water bodies are invoked by the shaman *Igu* and the newborn is cleansed with spiritual water. During the funerary practice, the first ritual is washing the corpse and spiritually cleansing through lament. The soul guided by the shaman makes an arduous journey covering two hundred and sixty-seven spiritual places and stoppages consisting of natural landforms and water bodies. The worlds of the living and dead are believed to be divided by a river called *Kandi*. The crossing of this river changes the status of living to dead.

Similarly in *Anjaa* the laments of Idu Mishmis water again is essential and significant component.

In the first stage of the funeral ritual lament chanting is directed and addressed to the dead. This starts when the corpse is washed and readied for the funeral proceedings. The lamenters start *anjaa* and address the dead informing of his death.

"O departing soul at your birth you were washed with life-giving water ibu mashelo.

While you were alive, the water for you were lbumashelo the source of life that fed you,

cleansed and sustained your life. Hyeee aaaa aaaaaa (wailing).

The life force water in you seems to have dried therefore you are no longer alive. The water which was Ibu mashelo for you have become Ibumalu, the liquid of dead. Before the final journey take bath with life-giving water for the last time and go.

Hyeee aaaa aaaaaa (wailing).

Role of High-Altitude Wetlands in Idu Cosmology

Water bodies like Rivers, Lake and falls play important role in the cosmos of the Idu Mishmi culture. They are spiritual guardians and abodes that bestow material and spiritual need of the tribe. The table below explains the water bodies whom the tribe considers sacred and invoked in different rituals. From time to time the Idus also offer sacrifices to these places through shamanic rituals.

The Table of water bodies deemed spiritual by the Idu Mishmi tribe

| Spiritual Place and its Supernatural Guardians | Status/ Role and characteristics |
|--|--|
| Aduya | Aduya river is place of wealth and prosperity, invoked and made offerings for prosperous life in many shamanic rituals. |
| Doko | This spiritual lake also bestows wealth and prosperity. It's also associated with fishes and fertility. Invoked for prosperity and fertility. |
| Ilu | Lohit river plays significant role as many <i>mrabas</i> the passage to the next lies in its bank. |
| Ilu Iphini | Ilu Iphini is the place of Andizu the almighty guardian shaman of Reh ritual. This is the place of spiritual dance Chita Nna during the Reh ritual. In this Mraba also flows a river Ayume Pawu wu. The river is named after a minor shaman called Ayume Pawu. |
| Kandi / Andomo | It's the river of death. The soul crosses in a boat to the next world. |
| Mitungu | Spiritual place of Mithuns. This place is also a lake. Invoked and made offerings for bestowing of Mithuns. |
| Dondo | Spiritual place of Pigs. This place is invoked and made offerings for bestowing Pigs. |

Environmental Changes and Community Memories

Mayudia mountain range had one of the most dangerous passages for the Idu Mishmis. This route was significant as it was a doorway to the plain from where the tribe accessed the Sadiya Market. Due to snowfall every year, dozens of people died while attempting to cross the mountainous path in winter.

In 1900 the British government undertook punitive expeditions against the Idu Mishmis of Ithun valley. The treacherous snowy route in December and January took life of two dozen porters. Similarly in the living memories of the Idu Mishmis there were several instances where many lives got lost due to heavy snowfall. Mrs. Pikho Mega 79-year-old lady from Elope, a village beyond Mayudia in the middle Dibang Valley she recounts in an interview the memories of the dangerous path, "in the earlier days every year the Idu Mishmi country echoed

news of several people dying in the snow while passing through the snow-laden Mayudia Mountain. When one got stuck it was impossible to pull him out. The more you struggled more you got buried inside. Therefore, on many occasions' people just bid goodbye to the stranded companion and continued their journey. The stuck people also accepted their fate and handed their ornaments to their relatives. Ibizu the snow animal ate the stuck people after they died.

More casualties were witnessed when roads started to be built in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many labourers from plains were not used to that level of cold climate therefore they perished in the snow. The last causality in the snow I remember was in 1988".

Being the native of a village in middle Dibang Valley beyond the Mayudia ranges I have also witnessed the change in the snow level of the area. Every year heavy snowfall

would block the road despite constant bulldozing. Returning back from school at Roing for vacation in March posed many adventures while tracking the snow-laden road for miles and miles. The first vivid memory I had of snowfall experience was in 1987 as a student of class II returning for vacation in March with my uncle and cousin got stranded in the snow. Jeep the hero of the Second World War could not manoeuvre through the treacherous snowy terrain. We spent the night inside the vehicle itself. At night stepping out of the vehicle I could see the splendid scene of glittering mountains in full moonlight and the whole region looked like a sunny day?

Every year presented a similar ordeal for us the people who live beyond the Mayu mountain ranges. On many occasions, the road would be invisible covered in heavy snow. The Border roads task force responsible for maintaining the route would stick 12 to 15 feet long bamboo on the side of the whole stretch of road. In many locations, the bamboos got fully immersed in snow. Therefore, the elders tracking with us would try to trace the pug marks of *Achangu* (Leopard Cat). They said that the *achangu* never forgets the way. Therefore, the marks would lead us to the right path.

In those days the snow remained up to first week of May. While returning for school after a vacation in May we used to witness snow still in many pockets of Mayudia.

In the present times, snowfall has declined immense folds. There are no reports of road blockade due to snow melts and the mountain experiences flakes for just seven to twelve days in a year.

Similar scenarios are being experienced by the people of Anini, another important town in Mishmi Hill inhabited by the Idu Mishmis. In his book *Enticing Frontiers*⁴, Bhattacharjee narrates how every year the town experienced snowfall. In 1981 the snowfall was 18 CM high. In the recent times snow level at Anini have gone down considerably.

Change in Perspective/ Shifting Change of Perception

Water and related bodies as manifested in this study occupy a significant place in the Idu Mishmi socio-cultural milieu. Their roles and

attributes are many but the most essential aspect is that they are revered and feared entities.

However, in the present times in many circumstances, the tribe witnessed hitherto believed faith being shaken and tempered. The modern way of life has changed the status of revered and feared water bodies. Many lakes tabooed in the past have been re-modelled into a tourist destination. Today's tourist attraction lakes in the region like Sally Lake and Mehao lake were in the earlier times feared and revered as the tribe believed that in them resides spirit serpent Beka. Both the lake was a tabooed place for the tribe. Even talking loudly would bring the wrath of the spirits and would pour heavy rain. Today these places have become places of boating and picnicking.

Many rivers feared have been bridged digging deep on their bank and even at times diverted the powerful flow. The indigenous tribes who had seen and considered the turbulent rivers, mystic deep lakes, and high spiritual mountains as a colossal entity beyond sacrilege witnessed these components of nature controlled and tempered. Ethadu Dele eighty years old from Elope recounts, "When Road projects started from Roing to Hunli we used to bet among ourselves that the company won't be able to cross Mayu Pass. But *Gonlo* of Mayu seems considerate to the *Mechas* (Non Tribals). Their bomb blasting and machines seem not to bother *Gonlos*. Similarly, we thought that building bridges by digging the spirit-possessed banks of Ithun and Talon won't be possible. But today the modern machines have overcome the wrath of these mighty river spirits".

The Idu Mishmis have been witnessing the onslaught on their spiritual natural entities by modern machinery in the present times. However, in days to come more components of nature revered by the tribe is bound to be wiped out due to the development projects like dams and highways. The Idu Mishmis revere, invoke and offer sacrifices to *eno* the sacred natural entities in their vicinity of the village consisting of mountains, rivers, streams, and lakes. Many such spiritual spaces are offered sacrifices and invoked for centuries will be submerged. The Idu Mishmis being a tribe living in the margins surely need development and has to march

ahead to modernity but the age-old customs also need to be preserved and protected. The expurgating the components of a cultural canvas wipe out the indigenous knowledge and history of the tribe altogether associated with that natural space.

The government strategy only looks at the environment and economic dimensions of development through the Detail Project Report (DPR) and Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). In the territory of the indigenous tribe like that of the Idu Mishmis the Government also should pay heed to the important component, the Cultural Impact Assessment that has a far-reaching impact on the community and need inclusion in the policy making.

The onslaught and tempering of natural entities revered by the tribe changes their

outlook toward the natural entities that are cultural components. Today most of the Idu Mishmis, especially the present generation view the components of nature as an economic source through government developmental packages. The long-pending issue of compensation in court over the hydro projects manifests the economic and utilitarian approach of some Idus.

3. Conclusion

All these narratives and approaches are bound to be effected by modern developments like hydropower and highway projects. The changes are happening and can be found in people's experiences, memories and understandings of climate change in relation to the river valleys and water bodies.

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