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Traditional Religious Practices and Belief System of Bugun Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Since from ancient period, the tribal people followed their social practices, traditions and belief system. The traditional belief system and practice by them has always been closely connected with their daily life and social activities. The traditional religious belief system and belief on supernatural power has been predominate in entire society of Adi, Aka, Bugun, Wangcho, Tangsa, Mishmi, Tagin and Nyishi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Buguns are small population lived in Sinchung administrative circle of West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. Originally Buguns were animist and believed in existence of number of divine spirits present around their habitat and to please them certain rituals have been performed. But present scenario of Bugun society reflect different situation as many indigenous Buguns have been under the influence of structured religious group like Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Though the structured religious group had percolated in their society steadily but there are still many indigenous Bugun populations who had been strongly bonded with their sacred belief system and propagate their indigenous practices and belief system. The indigenous practices and belief system has always been a very important part in entire socio-cultural practices and belief system of the Buguns. The existing taboos associated with this traditional belief system in Bugun society cannot be undermined.

The present paper is a research undertaken by me in Bugun society under Singchung administrative circle of West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. Through this paper an attempt has been made to understand some of the indigenous religious practices and belief system among the Bugun tribe. Due to the paucity of word limit it is difficult to incorporate all the traditional religious practices of Buguns in this paper.

Key Words: Bugun, West Kameng, Traditional Belief System, Supernatural Power, Indigenous.

Introduction: Arunachal Pradesh is located in easternmost part of India with divergent ethnic diversity. The state is covered with mountain and trees all around. The state is composed of 26 major tribes and many sub-tribes. Despite its diversified cultural background, many people were unaware about the state. Geographically, Arunachal is the largest state of North East India which measures about 83,743 sq. km (approx). It shares an international border with Bhutan in the West, China in the north and Burma in the east. During British period, state was named as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The Act of 1971 declared the reconstitution of north east region and Arunachal Pradesh was commenced as a union territory. Later, it attained statehood on 20th February, 1987.

West Kameng district is habitat of different indigenous tribes like Aka, Miji, Monpa, Bugun, Sartang and Sherdukpen. The district is surrounded by Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the West, Tawang and East Kameng district of the state in North -West and Assam in the South. Bugun is one of the major tribe of state situated in Sinchung administrative block of West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. As per the population figure of statistical handbook of West Kameng district, 2016-17, Sinchung administrative block has the total population of 14534, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

The Buguns were known as *Khowa* in olden days. However, the tribe is presently known as Bugun¹. No definite conclusion is found regarding the original homeland of the Bugun. It may be due to the absence of written record.

This research is predominantly based on primary sources however secondary data are also used for the understanding of historical perspective. Primary data are collected from entire Bugun village through interview with the assistance of questionnaire. The elderly people of the community like Gaon Bura, Local Priest, Aged Teachers, Members of Panchayati Raj Institutions, elderly knowledgeable person and Anganwadi Workers were interviewed.

Secondary sources of data were collected from state library Itanagar, district library Bomdila, Statistical Office, Bomdila, books, journals, Unpublished PhD thesis and website.

Traditional Religious Practices and Belief System of the Buguns: The tribal people usually follow animism and belief in worship of deities, spirit and nature. The divine faith and belief of tribal's were in form of doctrine which stated that all accustomed objects in the sphere were related with certain soul and divine.

In Bugun society, all the rituals practice by the community is determined and performs with the supervision and direction of *Phabi* (Priest). The *Phabi* occupies important position in entire Bugun community. The *Phabi* performed various rituals to bring peace and security in the society. The ritual can be performed at individual as well community level but what type of rituals to perform in what occasion and situation is decided by the *Phabi* only².

¹ Narrated by Amje Phinya, Aged Teacher, Govt.hr,sec,school, Singchung, on 5/5/2021.

² Schedule interview with Shri Dawa Sarai, Head Gaon Bura of Singchung Village on 12/04/2021, time 2PM.

The supernatural power and traditional belief system has influenced the basic social settings of the Bugun tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Buguns believed in the existence of number of divine spirits exist around them. To please this spirit they performed various rituals by sacrificing animals.

Bandong is a powerful mythical belief of the Bugun people which they have followed since ages. *Bandong* is a totem structure performed by Bugun clan. During *Bandong*, male organ is worshipped. As per their believed system, if they performed *Bandong* they would be blessed with a child³. The Buguns are believer of nature as well as unseen spirits which has been imperceptible and untouched power. The Sun, the Moon, the Sky, the Trees, the Water, the Mountains etc has been their supreme deities and worshipped by offerings, sacrifices and prayers. The Buguns do not belief in idol worship but they considered *Shiniya*, a traditional totem of supernatural monolith structure as their worship area. A special ritual known as *Lurak /Lorak* is performed by the Bugun when a first male child is born in a family⁴.

The important benevolent deities worship by Buguns is *Saritchappam*, *Sharua*, *Shajam*, *Masiyamana*, *Khasikhara*, *Ditchmango*, *Wongthiang Wongdum*, *Shurung Nyannyong* and *Amuuajamuo*.

. *Dyingkho*, a river deity is also performed by the tribe. As per the believed system of the Buguns, these divinities had a phenomenal power hence offering is to made to satisfy them⁵.

Numerous malevolent deities were also regarded by the Bugun which they thought is detrimental spirit. *Kasong Kho* is believed to be dreadful soul which lived in big streams and believed that anyone crossing that stream is bound to fall ill. *Khabong* is another evil as per the believed of Buguns; the person who take bath or drink water from it remained in ailing condition for rest of their life. Buguns considered *Rokmua*, a very big tree as a residual place of dreaded spirit and it is their believed that one should not cut it down else negative impact may be there with the person who cut down the tree. *Hiyao Jhanli* is another spirit of mountain who believed to be lived within the big stones through which brownish red colour water flowed. People are afraid to cross such streams⁶.

During hunting, it is believed that evil spirit namely *Ebiyathong* were presents in the jungle which may cause danger for the hunters if they don't take care of it.

Many tribes in India have rich ethnological myths with their sacred belief system. The traditional lore of Bugun affirms that *Achhin-Phumphuluwa* was the creator of the entire living creature on the earth. They regard him as the master of the universe. As per their

³ Narrated by Amje Phinya, Aged Teacher, Govt.hr,sec,school, Sinchung, on 5/5/2021.

⁴ Narrated by Shri S.Bachung, Bichom, Public Leader, on 21/05/2021, time 7 PM.

⁵ Narrated by D.Sarung, Namfri Village, Age 40 yrs, on 5/4/2021, time 11 AM.

⁶ Basar, Ritter, Socio-Cultural history of the Bugun tribe of Arunachal Pradesh since nineteenth century,2022. (Unpublished PhD thesis).

mythological narration *Hanai*(Sun) and *Habiya*(Moon) is believed to be prominent creator of human beings in earth. They believed sun and the moon as life giver and supreme authority of human existence⁷.

The traditional mythological narratives occupied a significant place in the lives of Buguns. Buguns worship numerous spiritual deities also in the form of totem. They believed every artifact exist around them had soul and spirit. They performed various types of rituals in different occasion by sacrificing animals like ox, cow, pig, hen, sheep, egg etc. The sacrificing of animals is depending upon the degree of rituals and all the rituals are performed by *Phabi*. Generally it is believed that during the time of prayer *Phabi* is controlled by the spirits with he tried to interface.

Buguns believed in the transmigration of the soul. They believed that soul passes from one body to other even after death in various manners like animal, human, plant, etc. they believed that even after the death of a person the soul passes through a different phase of life.

Tshabo is a religious celebration celebrated thrice a year in different name by Buguns. It is celebrated for better crops, good harvest and progressive and healthy life of the people. *Ruha Tshabo* is celebrated in the month of December and January. While performing rituals for *Ruha Tshabo*, the *Phabi* pray that the dry branches of trees should not fall on the people so that people would be sound and safe. *Sashi Tshabo* is celebrated in the spring season in the month of March and April when the new leaves starts to bloom. While performing the ritual, the *Phabi* invoked for the new beginning of lives of the people with good health and prosperity. *Muthung Tshabo* is the third ritual which is celebrates in the month of August and September. During the celebration, the first harvest is offered to the deity. No sacrifice and dances are performed in this celebration⁸. *Phabi* with some amount of harvest moved at least 2 km away from the village and performed the rituals in forest by offering the Supreme Being.

Buguns though less in number of population and in spite of the percolation of institutionalized religious group in their society, still strongly practices it old age belief system. Though many have been converted to Buddhism, Christianity etc. but new waves of protecting their cultural practices and identity has emerged among the youth. At present no of *Phabi* are very less among the Bugun community even then they tried hard to preserve their traditions and culture and hence from time to time they organized indigenous festivals, celebrations, rituals etc. Due to the flow of people, commodity, technology etc traditional belief and practices has been affected mildly but feeling of tribalism still exist among the Bugun population abundantly.

⁷ As narrated by R.Murphew, Public leader, Wangho Village, on 2/4/21, time 5 PM.

⁸ Amje Phimya, Aged Teacher, Singchung Village, on 18/4/2022.

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Field study has been undertaken for the collection of primary data in entire Bugun villages. The data were collected through conducting interviews with the elderly and knowledgeable person, priest, aged teachers, PRI members and anganwadi workers.

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