

REFLECTIONS ON MARGINAL COMMUNITIES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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***Abstract:** Arunachal is a state with multiethnic tribes. There are about 25 major tribes with a number of sub-tribes. Ironically, with the passage of time, some of the tribes have grown comparatively powerful, while others still remain helpless. As a result, there is an increasing feeling of marginalization among some of the smaller tribes due to unequal distribution of resources and unequal development. Even today, Mishings are practically deprived of many civic facilities and isolated in the context of state policies, which confines them to a state of their own. They are considered as outsider or non-indigenous tribe of the state leading to citizenship crisis. Similarly, the Puroik tribe, till very recently were considered as slaves of the Nyishis and the Mijis. They are still restricted from participation in decision-making processes and deprived of enjoyment of certain rights and entitlements. In fact, many of them are still living below the poverty line, serving their masters as bonded labor even today. On the basis of these cases, the paper proposes to present a comparative account of the complex processes of ethnicization, marginalization and structural injustice and the political struggles that are taking place among the Mising and Puroik tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.*

INTRODUCTION

The term marginalization has been used to describe a variety of situations resulting from the combinations of social exclusion, political subjugation, legal sanctions, migrations, poverty, and so on, in different parts of the world (Thorat and Nidhi 2009). The concept of marginality is said to have been introduced in 1928 by Robert Park (Dunne, 2005). Marginalization is essentially a form of exclusion of an individual or group/community from meaningful participation in society. This exclusion manifests in different spheres essentially displaying the characteristics of deprivation in one form or the other (Young, 2000). Marginality can be of various types, i.e. social, cultural, political, and so on. While social and cultural marginalities are basically informal, political marginality is fully a legal form. Cultural marginality exists when a group does not fully share knowledge, beliefs, customs, etc, of the main society. Social marginality is the result of indifferent treatment of a group by the dominant groups (Patil, 2002). Some of the marginalization results from the displacement of people from their original social, cultural, economic and political habitat (Roy, 2002).

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In India, various terms like weaker sections, deprived sections, disadvantaged people, underprivileged sections, below poverty line, and so on, are in vogue to denote the groups of people who have suffered from social stigma, economic deprivation, segregation and severe poverty conditions (Bhattacharya and Baski, 2002). These factors almost always act hand in hand and boost each other leading to a syndrome, which may aptly be described as a situation of marginalization. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives, and the resources available to them. This results in crippling their contribution to society. They are prevented from participating in local life, which in turn leads to further isolation. This has a tremendous impact on development of human beings, as well as on society at large (Patil, 2002).

Tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh are no doubt marginal groups when compared to other sections of populations in India but there are also inter-tribe marginalisations. In other words, one tribe enjoys a comparatively greater level of 'development' than others. The leaders of such communities could influence decision-making and were successful in channeling benefits of various projects introduced in the state. On the other hand, numerically small communities, tended to be marginalized. They could not wield influence on the political power circle the way the numerically large communities were able to do. In fact, the introduction of democratic political system in Arunachal brought a new set of changes where small populations hardly have any voice (Singh, 2001).

This paper utilizes a descriptive-analytical approach in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of the marginalization process in Arunachal Pradesh. The paper is significant to trigger off further research to understand the extent of inter and intra marginalisation in the tribal communities of the state.

Population of Mishing and Sulung tribes in Arunachal Pradesh as per 2001 Census

<i>Name of Population</i>	<i>2001 Census</i>	<i>1991 Census</i>
Mishing/Miri	13,591	9,290
Sulung	8,240	4,432

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India & National Commission for Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes 2002

MARGINALIZATION AMONG SULUNG/PUROIK¹

In Arunachal Pradesh, empirical observations have placed some tribes like Puroiks more marginalised than their neighbouring tribes. The experience of Sulung/Puroik community is interesting from the point of a marginalization

scenario. The reservation for Puroik in all education and employment opportunities is proof of the backwardness of the tribe.

The Sulungs are generally found to inhabit the neighborhoods of the Nyishis and Mijis. In both cases, the Sulungs are found to be occupying the fringes of settlement, geographically, as well as socially. The Sulung traditionally were the bonded labor of Nyishi, involved mostly in agricultural works. However, the state government adopted the liberation policy to free them from slavery by paying Rs.500 to the 'owners' way back in 1964. In spite of that, the bond of master-slave still exists between the Sulungs and their erstwhile masters.

According to David Pertin (2010) there are 10,024 Sulungs living in the state as per the data available till 2008, out of which, the East Kameng district has 6,927 people, which covers 69.1% of their total population, 2,379 persons in Kurung Kumey, 478 persons in Papumpare, 186 in Subansiri district and 54 persons in West Kameng district. (Ibid).

Considering their problems, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh had also constituted many committees to sort out their issues. But it was in 1997 that the state government, under the Bounded Labour Abolition Act, 1976 formed High Power Committee to study their socio-economic status. More recently, in 2011 the government again constituted a High Power Committee on Sulungs to study their socio-economic status and their problems. Some of the important recommendations made by High Power Committee are as follows:

1. Release of Sulungs from bondage and obligation to their masters.
2. Earmark land for settlement of Sulungs in the East Kameng.
3. Employment opportunity or job reservation in the state government departments for the Sulungs.
4. Nominate one MLA from the Sulung community and a post of ZPM should be reserved for the Sulungs in the Panchayati Raj system.
5. Rehabilitation and resettlement of Sulungs at Potal and Balem forest areas near Assam border.
6. Establishment of an autonomous Puroik Development Agency in the state.

In fact, in spite of the policy of positive discrimination being in place for a long time, the condition of the majority of the Puroik people have by and large remained the same. The State government has initiated many programs

for their upliftment. For instance, a few years ago, Shri Vopai Puroik was appointed as Extra Assistant Commissioner, currently posted at Anini, and Shri Koshok Halley was appointed as Range Officer in Forest Department, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh. Not only that, more than 30 families of the Sulungs had been allotted Govt. land to settle at Seppa town under East Kameng district, and plots of land have also been allotted at Papu-Nalah in between Naharlagun and Itanagar, popularly known as Taniang colony.

However, the areas for allotted government land at East Kameng is only for 30 years² lease and the land allottees have been paying annual lease rent to government, otherwise, the ownership of the land will return to the government. The government's apathy in initiating a concrete policy to rehabilitate them by providing substantial alternative livelihood has led to their displacement. Most of them still prefer to lead a half-nomadic life rather than living in a permanent settlement. Tayuk Sonam (2013) stated that in Seppa rehabilitation colony where some 30 Sulung families have started living permanently without any basic amenities including livelihood, educational institution, water supply, etc., clearly shows a lack of a policy push at government initiative to solve Sulung problems. Even in other areas of Arunachal, the onus of rehabilitating and resettling lay on the victims themselves.

According to Sonam (2013) "though Sulungs claimed to be liberated themselves from the clutch of erstwhile masters, but it is not a real freedom rather it is a transfer of right to exploit from the hand of the masters to a purview of the administration. Now, they have getting more dilemmas under new masters because neither the state government is properly initiating and fulfilling their desired level of demands nor allotted them a permanent land for settlement in the state".

Their participation in political system is also not significant. In fact, their participation it seems is only limited to voting. According to Sonam (2013), even if they participate in electoral politics or in other political activities, they have to act as per the wishes of their respective masters. However, it was only in the periods of 1980-1985 and 1985-1990, that two Sulungs became Members of Legislative Assembly. But, they were only nominated posts considering their social and economic background in the state. Now the provision to nominate persons of the Sulung community as MLA in the state politics has also been discontinued.

They have only countable numbers of educated persons in the state and even fewer in government service. They still have little access to education. No schools are established in most of the Sulung villages. According to high

power committee report 1997³ “they have hardly any access to educational institutions to qualify themselves to competitive job exams; they have been barred by their masters from taking up government jobs, and they have been in dark in regards to avail other opportunity to improve their socioeconomic status due to isolated and secluded nature of existence”.

Although they have their own community organization called All Puroik Welfare Society (APWS) working for the welfare of the society, it again appears that this organization is not as vocal as visible in other tribes’ organizations. The organization had recently submitted a memorandum to the state Government to establish an Autonomous Puroik Development Agency (APDA)/Puroik Area Development Affairs (PADA) and rehabilitation or resettlement of the Sulung families at Pota and Balimuk forest areas near Assam borders. However, the proposed Autonomous Puroik Development Agency has now been withheld owing to financial constraint.

Interestingly, what we observed was that, they are very reluctant to change unlike other neighboring tribes that are progressing so fast. They seem to be happier with isolated life and a hand to mouth earning system. They also have a strong attachment with nature and desire to remain connected to their roots, close to their place of origin.

MARGINALIZATION AMONG MISHINGS

Denial of political rights is a part of everyday reality in present Arunachal Pradesh. With a total population of close to 15000 people, the Mishing minority makes up just over six per cent of the population of Arunachal Pradesh. The marginalization process of the Mishing is partly historical. The root of the present problem of statelessness of the Mishing in Arunachal Pradesh lies in the creation of Assam-Arunachal Border in 1951. The minority Mishing people living in Arunachal Pradesh fell prey to the evil plan of Gopinath Bordoloni, who skillfully convinced the gathering at Sadiya to join Assam instead of remaining in the state of Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA). In the years since the creation of this border, they have lived in Arunachal as ‘citizens without the rights of citizens’.

There has not been any significant effort either by the Indian Government or from the state government to solve the problems of the Mishing living in Arunachal Pradesh since time immemorial. Following the non-recognition of their ST status in 1997, the Mishing perception of marginalisation sharpened.

Present all along the Assam-Arunachal borders, they are neither claimed nor protected by any state. On the contrary, the general tendency is to consider them as parasites and to reject them on first sight. Anti-Mishing feeling in

Arunachal Pradesh was first observed during the Chakma Movement. Anti-foreigner movements in Arunachal Pradesh, triggered by the son of the soil agitation in Arunachal Pradesh in 1995-97, which sought out Bangladeshi migrants to be deported to their respective countries of origin, have made these migrants vulnerable to growing instances of nativist backlash. The anti-outsider politics came sharply into focus by the 'son of the soil' agitation in Arunachal Pradesh.

Although the targets were the illegal migrants from Bangladesh, the Mishings were also included in the anti-foreigner discourse. In many Arunachal facebook forums, numerous debates were carried, giving a clear picture of what majority of natives think about the Mishings. In one such thread which I initiated, hundreds of people presented their views and I found that people hailing from western tribes were out-rightly opposed to the notion of giving APST status to them. For them Mishings is just another Assamese tribe that needs to be treated as an outsider, whereas, some Adis presented mixed opinions. Some of them agreed with the opinions of many western tribes that they are outsiders and no special treatment should be provided to them by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Meanwhile, those in disagreement said at least some concessions should be granted to Mishings. They argued that the Mishings share a part of their history with them and are indigenous to their land.

Furthermore, many think that it is a ploy by the Adis to increase their political stronghold, especially the Nyishis, because today they are at the topmost hierarchy of the Tani Pyramid, numerically the largest and spread across central and western Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, many tribes, specifically, Tagins, Apatanis, Galos, and Idu-Mishmi follow suit because if we look into the history of these tribes they have always been staunch defenders of their distinctiveness in their respective tribes. 'The Mishings', as Nani Bath (2010) writes, 'irrespective of their length of stay in Arunachal virtually became dangerous unwanted foreigners, who were threatening the socio-cultural and political identity of the Arunachalee in their traditional homeland'.

Again, the word 'Mishings' immediately associates Assam Mishings with Assam, in the mind of the dominant native of the state and somehow creates a perception, however false, that they are a population who have the option to return to their land of origin. This myth of a 'double homeland' makes them soft targets of ethnic group assertions fighting over available scarce resources often leading to loss of home, hearth and livelihood. This fear may have been further intensified by the Mishings Autonomous movement in upper Assam adjoining Arunachal border. This created the 'myth' of a greater Mishings Autonomous Council.

Efforts were made to convert all Mishings into Adi communities so they can at least get a ST certificate. For all that, in other areas of life, the conditions of the Mishings arguably improved under Adi ST, such as educational opportunities increasing marginally. Suffice to say, this did little to compensate for the thorough and near-total destruction of Mishings self-identity.

With the aspiration to be accepted by the dominant natives of the state, they actively rejected the Hindu form of their lifestyle. They also observed Assamese Bihu during mid-April. But recently, popularity of Bihu among Mishings has decreased. The reason is very clear – they want to associate themselves with Tani tribes which do not follow Assamese culture. However, the natives rejected them as “inferior” and the indigenous groups often rejected them because of their self-important status. Their roles gave them some privilege, but not equality. This rejection and oppression resulted in a variety of forms of adaptation which gave rise to many negative psychological consequences that are reflected in terms of ethnic identification, group boundary formation, quality of life, and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

Intervention for reducing marginalization requires political will, constitutional safeguards and efficient enforcement mechanisms (Nath, 2005). Unfortunately, the issue of marginalization in Arunachal Pradesh has failed to raise any serious response. It appears from the study that the state government hardly has any good policy for the uplift of marginalized communities. Their plans have so far proved to be insufficient.

The state government has failed to protect the rights of those Mishings who still remain settled in the state, although all of them were born and grew up in the state. The fact that the Mishings are from Arunachal is known to everybody, but there has not been any serious effort to end this problem. The efforts of the state government for identification of Mishings have not met with much success, and there is still no politician to represent their voices. As a result, those few who had education could not find secure jobs because of non-recognition of their nativeness in the state.

As a matter of fact, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh’s approach to the problem of Mishings has succeeded only in spreading a threat perception. As a result the state borders continue to instill confusion, inferiority complex and social stigma to Mishings tribe. The magnitude of the problem and its implications are such that there seems to be no easy solution to it. Open acceptance of the reality by the political forces in the state is also unlikely.

Similarly, the Sulung tribe continues to suffer from the social stigma and their neighboring tribes still appear particularly unsympathetic toward them. Again, given the policy of reservation for the Puroik population in government jobs, it appears that only the members of creamy layers are in a position to avail this benefit while backwardness looms large over others. A major proportion of the Sulungs are still dependent on others for their livelihood.

Marginalization in Arunachal Pradesh can be seen as a phenomenon which is precipitated by the unwillingness of the dominant native to loosen its strong political dominance. Here, the political dimension of exclusion involved in the state is partly controlled by the dominant communities.

In addition, some of the dominant tribes have developed a negative attitude of superiority in comparison to their fellow tribes, which has given a rise to the feeling of relative deprivation. Perhaps the essence of democracy as well as cultural pluralism which India represents, lies on a basic mantra, that is, "we live together means we share together". In order to translate this possibility into a reality, perhaps, the dominant tribes that have progressed a lot, have to share additional responsibility, to ensure that in our collective onward march, we take special care of our own brethren whose voices have remained unheard so far, and that will be the biggest challenge to all of us irrespective of ethnic divide.

Note

1. From 1976, officially the Sulungs were changed into the Puroiks; however, Sulung is the original nomenclature of this community.
2. Terms and conditions for allotment of Govt. land to the Sulungs issued by D.C Seppa on 14th June, 2001.
3. Report of High Power Committee on the Bonded Labour, 1997.

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