

Changing Cultural Practices among the Nyishis of Arunachal Pradesh: A Contextual Study

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ABSTRACT

The vibrant life of the tribal people, their traditional customs, festivals, and dances are some of the significant components of their rich cultural diversity. Culture is a dynamic and ever-changing entity. The changing environment makes internal adaptation necessary for culture to change. As a result, lot of changes have also been observed in the cultural practices of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The impact of urbanisation and modernization has brought a major economic and socio-cultural transformation among the people. Their society is changing not only in the socio-economic and political realms but also in traditional beliefs and practices.

Materials and Methods: *The study is based on both secondary and primary data. The secondary data related to various attributes of Nyishi tribe have been obtained from Census of India, 2011. Besides, existing literature available in various journals, books, etc. has been consulted with a view to develop a broad theoretical framework of the present research in right perspective. Necessary primary data have been collected from 60 households, 30 each from rural and urban areas, through sample survey with the help of a well-designed survey schedule. The data obtained from both secondary and primary sources have been processed and analysed using some simple but meaningful statistical techniques for objective and logical interpretation.*

Results/Findings: *The study reveals that large population of Nyishi tribe practicing Christianity as compare to other religions. The household survey further reveals that incidence of inter-community, inter-religion, inter-tribe marriage, and incidence of widow remarriage is higher in the urban areas compared to the rural ones.*

Conclusion: *The study assumes significance in the contemporary juncture as the Nyishi people are prone to unfamiliar practices which were once unknown in their society. Notably, these practices are more frequent in urban centres than in rural areas. Rapid urbanization and invasion of modernization in tribal life and culture are the obvious factors responsible for changing cultural practices in Nyishi society.*

Keywords: *Nyishi Tribe, Culture, Cultural Diversity, Cultural Practices, Urban Centre, Rural Area.*

I. Statement of the Problem

The Nyishi, belong to Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, which constitute the largest scheduled tribe group in Arunachal Pradesh, have been playing a significant role in the culture and economy of the greater Arunachalee society in general and tribal society in particular. They with little above 3.45 lakh population (25% per cent of the state's total population) as per 2011 Census are mainly concentrated in about 6 districts of Arunachal Pradesh viz. East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, Kra Daadi, and Upper Subansiri and some parts of North Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of neighbouring Assam. The majority of the Nyishi people are still living in the rural isolated areas with age-old traditions, and modern civilization has practically left them almost untouched in many aspects. This colourful ethnic group living amidst fellow Arunachalee tribes has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits unimpaired despite the changes that have taken place in the social, political, and religious life of the people.

Although majority of them are still living in rural areas, it is noticed that for better socio-economic conditions, employment opportunities, accessibility, etc. rural to urban migration either temporarily or permanently is gaining ground among the Nyishi in recent decades, which have resulted in adoption of new urban culture sometimes at the cost of age-old cultural traditions. In respect of Nyishi society, although they are maintaining the traditional customs, some changes have been noticed in their life and culture which are affecting the core of their traditional culture. The spread of modern education, science and technology, etc. has also brought about drastic changes in the religious beliefs and socio-economic life of the Nyishi. The

Nyishi people are undergoing the process of modernisation, acculturation, and urbanization, and the impact of these factors is resulting in erosion of their traditional life and culture.

With this consideration, the present study is taken up to understand the changing pattern of cultural and traditional practices among the Nyishi tribe in the selected rural and urban areas of Nyishi villages/locality of Arunachal Pradesh.

II. Significance of the Study

India, as well as its north-eastern part including Arunachal Pradesh is the meeting point of many diverse cultures and population of ethnic and distinctive tribes that co-exist peacefully, each unique in its traditions, culture, dress, and exotic ways of life. However, due to their interactions among various social groups, the strength of traditional norms and ways of life of those tribes has been weakened. The Nyishi, one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, are also found to have changed to some extent in terms of their social, cultural, economic, and traditional practices, although they are maintaining the traditional or customary cultural pattern since time immemorial.

Changes are noticed in their life and socio-cultural practices both in rural and urban areas which are affecting the core of their culture. However, the changes are rapid in urban areas as compared to the rural areas in the state. Thus, to understand the changes among the Nyishi in urban and rural areas of Arunachal Pradesh, two districts namely Kurung Kumey and Papum Pare have been selected so as to understand the various changes in cultural practices among them. Although there have been many tribal studies in India based on tribal economy, land alienation, socio-economic development, tribal culture, etc, the studies related to the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh are still highly limited. This study would also help explore the prevailing changes in cultural practices of the Nyishi in Arunachal Pradesh. Moreover, the findings derived from the study would provide inputs to the development planners and policy makers for overall progress of the tribal communities in general and the Nyishi in particular. Hence, the present research work bears immense academic significance and practical utility particularly in understanding the Nyishi tribe in urban and rural contexts in proper perspective.

III. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study are:

- i. To study the pattern of changes in the cultural practices among the Nyishi in rural and urban context;
- ii. To analyse the level of changes in cultural practices among the Nyishi in rural and urban areas; and
- iii. To understand the prevailing trend of cultural practices among the rural and urban Nyishis.

IV. Materials and Methods

The study is based on both secondary and primary data. The secondary data related to various attributes of population among the Nyishi tribe in particular and all scheduled tribes in general have been obtained from Census of India, 2011. Besides, existing literature available in various journals, books, magazines, etc. related to the topic has been consulted with a view to develop a broad theoretical framework of the present research in right perspective. Necessary primary data have been collected at household level through sample survey with the help of a well-designed survey schedule from Yarda and Hiyavillages under Nyapin circle of Kurung Kumey district and two localities of Naharlagun town, viz. Ania village and Model village (see table 1). Sample of 30 households from each selected area under Nyapin circle and 30 households from localities under Naharlagun have been considered for collection of primary data to understand the rural-urban and location-specific variations in socio-economic conditions among the Nyishi. The sample households in each area and urban locality have been selected purposively with locational and economic considerations towards having adequate representation of the way of life and various other characteristics of the Nyishi.

The data obtained from both secondary and primary sources have been processed and analysed using some simple but meaningful statistical techniques for objective and logical interpretation. The quantitative techniques adopted for the analysis are simple ratios or percentages, and certain statistical measures. Conclusions on the study area are drawn on the basis of the results derived from the data analysis and personal experience gathered through the observations during field study.

Table 1: Sample Design of the Nyishi Survey Villages and Urban Localities

Name of the Village/Urban Locality	Area	Dominant Community	Locational Context	Total No. of Households	Household Surveyed	% of Household Surveyed
Yarda	Rural	Nyishi	Remote	70	15	21.43

Hiya	Rural	Nyishi	Less Remote	64	15	23.44
Ania Village	Urban	Nyishi	---	34	10	29.41
Naharlagun (Model Village)	Urban	Diverse	Roadside	159	20	12.58

Source: Census of India, Arunachal Pradesh, 2011 and Field Survey.

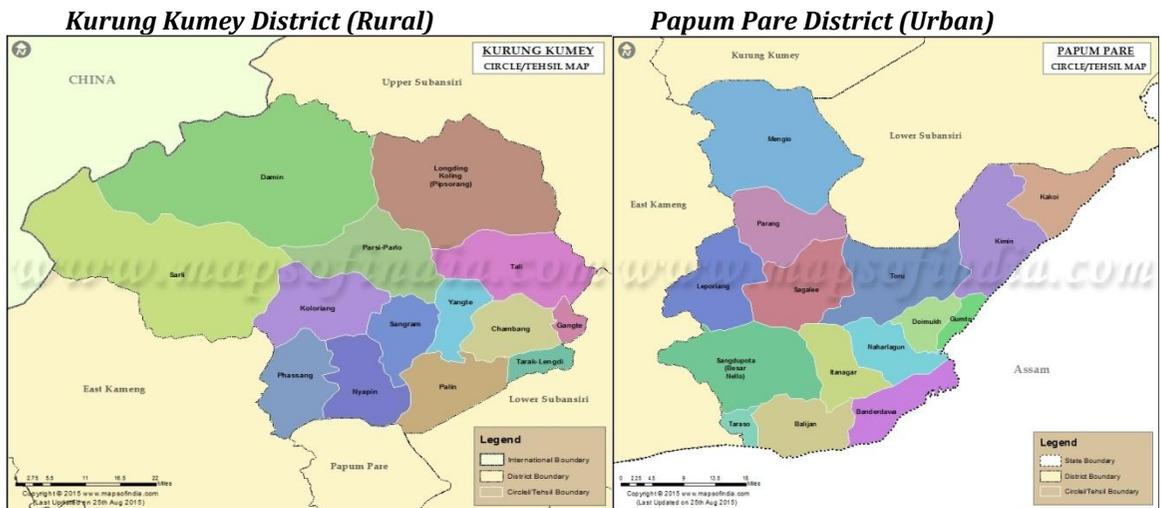
V. Location of the Study Areas

Arunachal Pradesh, located in the tropical latitudes between 26°28' N and 29°31' N and eastern longitudes between 90°30' E and 97°30' E, is the largest state in North-East India. The state covers an area of 83,743 sq. km. It is surrounded by Tibet (China) on the north; by Assam and Nagaland on the south; by Myanmar on the east; and by Bhutan on the west. The State consists of 21 districts with population of 13,83,727 as per 2011 Census.

Kurung Kumey district, one of the case study areas, is one of the youngest districts of Arunachal Pradesh. This district is named after two major rivers of the locality namely Kurung and Kumey. It is situated between latitudes 27°45' N and 28°22' N and longitudes 92°00' and 94°15' E. It spreads at an area of 6340 sq.km bordering Upper Subansiri in the East, East Kameng in the West, Lower Subansiri in the South, and China in the North. It has a population of 89,717 as per 2011 Census. The district Headquarter is located at Koloriang.

Papum Pare district, another case study area, is the capital district of Arunachal Pradesh is located between 26°55' N and 28°40' N latitude and between 92°40' and 94°21' N longitude. The district headquarter is located at Yupia, which is situated about 20 kms from Itanagar, the state capital. The district occupies an area of approximately 2875 sq km inhabited by a population of 1,21,750. There are 274 villages and 2 towns in the district.

The Nyishis are the major ethnic group in the district and they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. The migrants from neighbouring Assam and other states also form a part of the local population.



Source: www.mapsofindia.com

Fig.1: Location of the Study Areas

VI. Discussions

6.1 Changing Pattern of Religion and Languages Spoken among the Nyishi

Language is not only a tool of communication, but it also has ethnic, socio-cultural and political implications. Various ethnic groups in the North-East have their own dialects. These are often seen by those who use them as languages in their own right. In the north-eastern part of India the diverse ethnic groups use several languages. But the dominant language of the larger community has a pre-eminent place. Arunachal Pradesh also has remarkable linguistic diversity. Bilingualism and sometimes trilingualism is common in both rural and urban areas even among the unlettered. This is because when a family, a kin group or a community, moves from one region to another, its members acquire the language of their new place of domicile without giving up their native dialect. Presence of outsiders has also helped in spreading bilingualism or trilingualism in the study areas. Among the Nyishi population, it is found that most of the

population from the younger generation has forgotten their own dialect which a serious threat for the survival of the socio-cultural practices of the Nyishis.

Changes are seen with respect to religious beliefs and practices as different forms of Christianity and other religions have penetrated into people's culture. The original faith and belief of Nyishi is *Donyi-Polo*, the Supreme Being. This belief still remains in their hearts and dominates their thinking and movement (Rukbo, 2005). However, a great erosion of faith has taken place in the Nyishi society. The Nyishi traditional religious beliefs and practices are nowadays changed to manifolds as compare to as it was in some decades back. The mass religious conversion of the people to Christianity has contributed a lot in the process. Nowadays the converted people do not perform any kind of rituals related to their tradition/indigenous social and cultural life (Ramya, 2012: 25). Most of the Nyishi population in the state and in study areas has converted to Christianity. The adoption of Christianity has led to the abolition of traditional faith and practices, festivals, and even traditional drinking of rice-beer (*upo*). It is also found some of the Nyishi community is being converted to Hinduism. The traditional religious belief system of non-Christian Nyishi is the admixture of both Hinduism and animism. This may be seen from the worship of *Ane-Donyi* (the Mother Sun) in *Nyedar-Namlo*, an indigenous religious place (house) of the Nyishi people. They have become hinduised because they worship Hindu deities; observe Hindu religious celebrations, etc. But at the same time they also profess animism. So, this section of Nyishi population may be also called tribal Hindu which may be the identity for an ethnic group which has its own distinctive cultural traits including religious system. As a result of these changes, the traditional religion of the Nyishi is losing its original features (Table 2).

Table 2: Changing Pattern of Religion among the Nyishi in the Sample Survey Villages/Urban Localities

Sample Survey Area	No. of Sample HHs	Religion (in %)		
		Hinduism	Christianity	Indigenous
Yarda	15	---	15 (100)	---
Hiya	15	---	12(80)	03 (20)
Ania Village	10	04 (40)	06 (60)	---
Naharlagun (Model Village)	20	03 (15)	12(60)	05 (25)

Source:Field Survey.

From the household survey conducted in both rural and urban areas among the Nyishi, it is found that most of the Nyishi are influenced by Christianity. It may be mentioned here that the percentage of Nyishi practicing Christianity is higher in rural areas i.e. 90% with Yarda village recorded 100% followed by Hiyawith 80% Christianity and in urban areas 60% of Nyishi are Christianity with Naharlagun (Model Village) and Ania village recorded a 60% each. Although some of the Nyishi are influenced by Hinduism, its proportion is quite low. Among the field study areas, Ania Village(40%) and Naharlagun (Model Village) with 15% have recorded a considerable proportion of Hindus in the population. The wholesome of indigenous believers have recorded at 20% in Hiya village and 25% in Naharlagun (Model Village).

Table 3: Changing Pattern of Languages Spoken among the Nyishi in the Sample Survey Villages/Urban Localities

Sample Survey Area	No. of Sample HHs	Languages Spoken at Home (in %)		No. of Other Languages Known (in %)		
		Nyishi	Assamese + Hindi	A	A, H	A, H, E
Yarda	15	15 (100)	---	07(46.67)	06 (40)	02 (13.33)
Hiya	15	15 (100)	---	10 (66.67)	04 (26.66)	01 (6.67)
Ania Village	10	03 (30)	07 (70)	---	06 (60)	04 (40)
Naharlagun (Model Village)	20	07 (35)	13 (65)	03 (15)	10 (50)	07 (35)

Note:A: Assamese; A+H: Assamese+Hindi; H: Hindi; E: English

So far as language is concerned, all sample households in the rural areas are found to speak only Nyishi language at home. Contrarily in the urban areas, although Nyishi language is spoken at home, the influence of other languages, particularly the Hindi and Assamese, is evidently visible. Hence, the Nyishi residing in urban areas practice bilingualism or multilingualism in respect of languages like Assamese, Hindi, and English (Table 3).

6.2 Changing Pattern of Food Habit and Wine Consumption among the Nyishi

Food or the food habit is one of the identity markers of a culture. The structure of food system is multifarious as the transformation is taking place in food system due to the impact of modernisation. The study of the tribal food system is very essential in shaping a community and its members. Consequently, its study fills the gap to understand the tradition, history, and changing cultural practices of the tribe. Nevertheless the steady alteration is taking place in this respect by the urban Nyishi populace to accept the food habit of the non-tribal communities, it shows the amalgamation of rural Nyishi culture with urban Nyishi to retain their own tribal identity.

Table 4: Changing Pattern of Food Habit and Wine Consumption among the Nyishi in the Sample Survey Villages/Urban Localities

Sample Survey Area	No. of Sample Households	Food Habit (in %)		Wine Consumption (in %)			
		Veg.	Non-Veg.	Local	Foreign	Both	None
Yarda	15	---	15 (100)	---	---	---	15 (100)
Hiya	15	---	15 (100)	---	---	03 (20)	12 (80)
Ania Village	10	02 (20)	08 (80)	---	---	02 (20)	08 (80)
Naharlagun (Model Village)	20	03 (15)	17 (85)	---	---	06 (30)	14 (70)

Source:Field Survey.

From the above (Table 4) based on the household survey conducted in both rural and urban areas among the Nyishi, it is found that Nyishi are still maintaining their traditional food habits. It is witnessed that the proportion of Nyishi consuming non-vegetarian food is 100% in rural areas whereas it is 82.5% in urban sample survey areas. Although some of the family members in a particular household are found to be vegetarian mainly due to some religious practices or ailment, it is not widespread within the entire household as a whole. Once upon a time in history, the consumption of wine was a common practice among the Nyishi and they were found to consume basically *upo* or *opo* (traditional rice or millet beer). But, in the recent times they hardly found to consume both the local and the foreign wines. The main reason behind the abolition of alcohol/wine consumption is due to the religious conversion of Nyishi people to Christianity. The Nyishi Christian churches do have strict rules against the consumption of alcohol/wine. However, very few populations are seen to consume both the local and the foreign wines in the study areas like in Hiya village (20%), Ania village (20%), and Naharlagun (Model Village) with 30%. This means that only 10% of the rural households and 26.67% of the urban households are now consuming wines.

6.3 Inter-Community, Inter-Religion, and Inter-Tribe Marriage among the Nyishi

India is still, by and large, a traditional society with inflexible caste system. Caste plays a very important role in the selection of mates in marriages. To most Indians, it is difficult to think of marriage beyond the own caste. To think of marriages between different castes and different religions is a difficult and socially unacceptable proposition. Recently the process of modernization, democratization, and development has brought a lot of positive changes in Indian society. Similarly, among the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, a marriage within the same community is the norm of the Nyishi society. But it is being observed that the traditional binding of the community in marriage selection is gradually loosening over time. With this, it is observed that inter-community (with non-tribal communities), inter-tribe, and inter-religion marriages in Nyishi society are being prevalent. This change in the marriage pattern among the Nyishi tribe is a very recent phenomenon due to the impact of modernization, socio-cultural interaction, socio-economic development, and globalization. Various socio-economic and demographic factors also affect the pattern of inter-community marriages among them. There is, however, significant spatial variation in the pattern of inter-community, inter-tribe, and inter-religion marriages. There seems to be higher rate of such marriages in socio-economically advanced urban people. It is expected that the incidence of such marriages will increase with the increase in the degree of modernization and socio-economic development.

Table 5: Inter-Community, Inter-Religion, and Inter-Tribe Marriage among the Nyishi in the Sample Survey Villages/Urban Localities

Sample Survey Area	No. of Sample HHs	Inter-Community Marriage	Inter-Religion Marriage	Inter-Tribe Marriage	Incidence of Widow Remarriage
Yarda	15	---	05 (33.33)	---	02 (13.33)
Hiya	15	03 (20)	06 (40)	---	04 (26.67)
Ania village	10	03 (30)	04 (40)	03 (30)	---
Naharlagun (Model Village)	20	02 (10)	11 (55)	07 (35)	06 (30)

Source:Field Survey.

From the Table 5 above, it reveals that incidence of inter-community, inter-religion, inter-tribe marriage, and incidence of widow remarriage is higher in the urban areas compared to the rural areas. The proportion of inter-community (with non-tribal communities) and inter-tribe marriage is found to be as high as 30% and 35% in Ania village and Naharlagun (Model Village) respectively, whereas there is no instance of such marriages in rural study areas. It is also witnessed that the proportion of inter-religion marriage is high as compared to the inter-community and inter-tribe marriage with Naharlagun (Model Village) at 55%, Hiya and Ania villages having 40% each, and Yarda village having 33.33% of inter-religion marriage. The incidence of widow remarriage is found to be equal in both urban and rural areas with highest being Naharlagun (Model Village) at 30%, followed by Hiya village with 26.67%, and Yarda village with 13.33%. There is no incidence of widow remarriage reported from Ania village.

VII. Conclusion

The major findings and conclusions derived from the study are:

1. The percentage of Nyishi population practicing Christianity (75%) is witnessed to be highest compared to Hinduism (11.67), and others (13.33%).
2. Although the Nyishi use their mother tongue/dialect among themselves and most of them know Arunachal Pradesh's *lingua franca*, Hindi for conversation with the other communities in the state, some of the urban Nyishi of younger age group have started forgetting the Nyishi language/dialect.
3. The consumption of alcohol/wine is found to be declined drastically in Nyishi society. Very few populations are seen to consume both the local and the foreign wines in the study areas like in Hiya village (20%), Ania village (20%), and Naharlagun (Model Village) with 30%. This means that only 10% of the rural households and 26.67% of the urban households are now consuming wines.
4. The household survey further reveals that incidence of inter-community, inter-religion, inter-tribe marriage, and incidence of widow remarriage is higher in the urban areas compared to the rural ones. The proportion of inter-community (with non-tribal communities) and inter-tribe marriage is found to be as high as 30% and 35% in Ania village and Naharlagun (Model Village) respectively, whereas there is no instance of such marriages in rural study areas. It is also witnessed that the proportion of inter-religion marriage is high as compared to the inter-community and inter-tribe marriage with Naharlagun (Model Village) at 55%, Hiya and Ania villages having 40% each, and Yarda village having 33.33% of inter-religion marriage. The incidence of widow remarriage is found to be equal in both urban and rural areas with highest being Naharlagun (Model Village) at 30%, followed by Hiya village with 26.67%, and Yarda village with 13.33%. There is no incidence of widow remarriage reported from Ania village.

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