



Research Paper

Significance of ‘Mithun’ in the Nyishi Folk Culture and Tradition

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ABSTRACT:

The importance of ‘Mithun’ (*Bos Frontalis*) in the Nyishi customs, tradition, religious belief and rituals is deeply rooted since time immemorial. It is a semi-wild animal which is found mostly within the hilly areas of North-Eastern India like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. For the Nyishi community, the mithun is not merely an animal, it is also a sacred symbol of good fortune. It is often sacrificed in various ceremonies of the Nyishi such as marriage, traditional festivals, and religious festivals to please various spirit and deities. The Nyishi people believe that the sacrifice of mithun brings peace, prosperity and good fortune for the community. Furthermore, mithun holds particular significance in marriage customs, where it is traditionally presented as a form of bride price to the family of the groom. The profound association with mithun to the Nyishi community is often seen as an expression of their collective cultural identity and sense of community's unity. It is also observed that rearing of mithun and its sacrifices demonstrate its harmonious blend of cultural heritage. This research paper examines the multifaceted significance of mithun in the Nyishi folk culture, rituals and ceremonies. Through an interpretive cultural-anthropological approach, the mithun emerges not simply as livestock but as a central, value-laden figure shaping cultural identities, social status, kinship, and collective memory.

KEYWORDS: Significance, Mithun, Nyishi, Folk Culture, Tradition.

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I. AIMS AND OBJECTIVE

The paper is based on the traditional belief and social folk custom regarding *mithun* and its uses among the Nyishi community. Behind this research paper, there are some aims and objectives which can be highlighted as follows:

1. To explore the cultural significance of *mithun* in the Nyishi community.
2. To assess the socio-economic importance of *mithun* among the Nyishi.
3. To analyze the role of *mithun* in strengthening community bond among the Nyishi.
4. To examine the importance of *mithun* in traditional practices and customs of the Nyishi.

II. METHODOLOGY

In the present research paper, descriptive and analytical method have been applied. Extended field visits have been conducted in some Nyishi inhabited regions especially in Arunachal Pradesh and some parts of Assam where the Nyishi people live to observe rituals, ceremonies and technique of rearing the *mithun*. Along with the field visit, some interviews have been done with informants including elders, ritual specialists, *mithun* owners and local religious as well as social leaders. The data required for the present research paper have been also collected from various secondary sources like academic articles, ethnographic reports, journals, magazines and dissertations.

III. INTRODUCTION

The Nyishi is the one of the most prominent and largest indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh, a beautiful mountainous state of the lower Himalayan range. The region has high mountain ridges and deep valleys with large number of rivers and streams. The Nyishi people are scattered in some of the major districts

of Arunachal Pradesh like Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, East Kameng, Kurung Kameng and also some in some parts of Sonitpur, Biswanath and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Regarding the the Nyishi tribe, L.A. Waddel made some remarkable statements: "This wild and little known tribe inhabits the mountains on the north side of the Brahmaputra between the Miris and the Akas to the North of where the Darrang and Lakhimpur districts adjacent each other" (Waddel, 42). Generally, it is said that the Nyishi belongs to the Tani group which also include other tribes such as the Adi, Apatani, Galo and Tagin. It has been found that the Nyishi tribe has been referred with various names by different historians and anthropologists. They have sometimes been called Dafla, Tagin Dafla and Abor Dafla (Dun, 255). It is true that there is no a historical evidence of the origin of the Nyishi. Historian S.K. Bhuyan mentions about the Nyishi (Dafla) in his edited Book *Assam Buranji*: "During the invasion of Ahom Kingdom Narnarayan (1540-1587) in the year 1562, the Nyishi joined hands with the Koch forces against the Ahom. It is to be noted that this is the earliest reference of the Nyishi found in any record in Assamese" (Gogoi, 150). There is no authentic source about their earliest ancestors or origin, but some of the mythologies and oral traditions of the Nyishi people indicate that they have been known as 'Nyishang' since times immemorial. Regarding the nomenclature of the term Nyishi, Tana Showren mentions in his research book, "The name 'NYISHI' is derived from two words: 'Nyi' or 'Nyia' and 'Shing' or 'Ashing'. The 'Nyi' means 'Human' descendent of 'Aathu Nyia', while 'Shing' or 'Ashing' meant 'Being' or higher region or highland' (Showren, 58). From that point of view, it can be said that the Nyishi are the people living in highland regions.

IV. DISCUSSION

Arunachal Pradesh is a state of great ethnic diversity as more than 36 different tribes are found here. Among these various tribes, the Nyishi is one of the most prominent indigenous communities who has a rich cultural heritage. They have elaborate and colorful cultural and religious practices rooted firmly in their practices with traditional beliefs and socio-economic structures. Among the various elements that play a significant role in their cultural identity, *mithun* (*Bos Frontalis*) hold a revered position. The animal is woven through ceremonial customs, economic exchange systems, and communal obligations. Its prominence in various domains—religious, sociopolitical, and narrative—makes it a key entry point for understanding Nyishi cultural foundations. Studying the *mithun*, therefore, allows a deeper appreciation of how the Nyishi conceptualize relationships between people, the environment, and the spiritual world. In the Nyishi language it is called 'seve'. *mithun* is also a state animal in Arunachal Pradesh. Along with the Nyishi, *mithun* is considered a valuable animal for Tagin, Galo, Adi etcetera. *mithun* which is a semi wild animal is considered not only a vital part of the Nyishi community but also an integral component of their social, cultural and religious life. *mithun* is considered a symbol of wealth, prosperity, and a distinctive social status among the Nyishi community. Generally, *mithun* is left freely in the jungle by the Nyishi people. Although, the *mithuns* move freely in the jungle, they have their own owners. It has been observed that in order to avoid disputes and confusion, the owners of the *mithun* have adopted the practice of branding their earlobes either by cutting them in specific ways or by poking them in a particular unique pattern. This process is sometime carried out according to the clan affiliations with each clan using its own unchanging logo as a cut mark.

Nyishi involvement with *mithun* rearing originated within forest-dependent livelihoods where shifting cultivation and subsistence gathering shaped daily existence. Nyishi oral traditions frequently describe the *mithun* as a creature connected to ancestral spirits or forest deities, suggesting that its domestication was accompanied by ritual and metaphysical considerations (Hazarika, 2016). The *mithun*'s ability to thrive in dense forests without intensive human supervision suited Nyishi ecological practices. Many oral accounts describe the *mithun* as an animal linked to forest spirits or ancestral forces, suggesting that its domestication carried both practical and spiritual dimensions. This bond between animal and environment continues to influence how the Nyishi perceive the *mithun*—as a creature belonging to the forest yet entrusted to human care. It is mentioned that *Mithun* hold a significant and respected position among the Nyishi people from various perspectives. This importance can be understood in the following ways:

THE MITHUN AS A MARKER OF SOCIAL STATUS AND WEALTH

Among the Nyishi community, *mithun* is just more than an animal, but is represent wealth, social status and identity of an individual. Traditionally, the number of *mithun* owned by an individual or a family signifies their position within the community. The ownership of a large number of *mithun* does not just represent the wealth of an individual but also show the power, respect, and influence within the community in decision-making or ritual leadership. *mithun* is one of the costliest animals in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and that is why the wealth of an individual of family is often measured by the number of *mithun* they possess. In this regard, it is supposed that the larger the herd, the greater the respect, influence, and power in the Nyishi society. In traditional Nyishi society, owning *mithuns* is a prestigious achievement. Hosting communal events involving

mithun sacrifice also functioned as a display of socio-economic capacity. Through such public acts, families reinforced their status, reaffirming their ability to mobilize resources and maintain inter-household networks.

SIGNIFICANCE IN MARRIAGE (NYEDA) CUSTOMS

The *mithun* holds an important and significant role in the traditional marriage system among the Nyishi community, and this ceremony is known as 'Nyeda' in the Nyishi language. One of the most important customs in traditional marriage system of the Nyishi is the giving of *mithun* as a part of the bride-price. The groom's family presents *mithun* to the bride's family as a symbol of respect, gratitude and goodwill. The number of *mithun* given generally reflects the groom's social and economic status. In the past, a Nyishi traditional marriage ceremony could not be imagined possible without the presence of the *mithun*. In this regard, Tob Tarin Tara in his book *Nyishi World* (2008) states, "Now a days, traditional marriage procedure are hardly observed and only a formal invitation and sacrifice of *Mithun* take place and gift are exchanged in the commercial intention in some cases" (Tarin, 20).

As Fürer-Haimendorf (1982) notes, the traditional practice of exchange of gifts and presentation of *mithun* as the bride-price, is not merely considered as an economic transaction; it formalizes alliances, strengthens kinship ties, and symbolizes mutual respect between lineages. The *mithun* thus acts as a social mediator, enabling reconciliation, cooperation, and the formation of durable inter-family relations. It can be stated that in the traditional marriage system of the Nyishi, the *mithun* is considered essential from the beginning of the marriage process until its conclusion. That is why Tana Showren states, "The total number of 'Sebbe' (*Mithun*) heads are bargained through lengthy negotiation and other auxiliary items are automatically determined if the number of *Sebbe* heads are fixed. In any simple marriage of the Nyishi the number of *Sebbe* ranges four to eight, while in average or rich people's marriage it would fluctuate from eight to twenty-five *Sebbe*" (Showren, 85).

THE MITHUN IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Mithun plays a significant role in the religious festivals and activities of the Nyishi community. During any traditional religious festival like 'Nyokum' 'BoorY Boot', Longte Yoll, *mithun* is sacrificed to appease deities along with the ancestral spirits of the tribe. Sacrifice of *mithun* in religious festivals are believed to maintain communal peace, and acquire divine blessings as well as protection to the family and community as a whole. The act of offering *mithun* as sacrifices serves as a powerful ritual expression of the Nyishi community's devotion, symbolizing bridges that connect the living with ancestral spirits and deities by purifying and renewing the relationship between the community and the supernatural forces governing their lives. On the occasion of feasts related to various rituals, the host family has to offer of one or more *mithuns*. These ceremonial offerings reinforce community solidarity and recognize the host's generosity and leadership. The display of *mithun* horns on homes or community structures becomes a visual testament to past achievements, effectively transforming ritual participation into lasting social memory. Ritual practitioners frequently invoke the *mithun* during healing rites or seasonal ceremonies aimed at securing well-being and agricultural prosperity. The *mithun* frequently appears in ceremonies marking life transitions—such as funerals, initiations, and marriage feasts. During death rituals, for instance, the sacrifice of a *mithun* is believed to honour the departed and facilitate their journey into the ancestral realm. The animal is perceived as a being capable of carrying offerings to spiritual entities. In this way, *mithun* function both as spiritual mediator between the human being and supernatural power.

PENALTY

In the Nyishi community, *mithun* plays a crucial role not only in cultural and religious spheres but also within the customary legal system. Among the Nyishi community, the *mithun* is often used as a form of penalty or compensation in the resolution of disputes and conflicts. It has been found that when conflict arises regarding land disputes, personal disagreements, or accidental harm, in that situation to solve the problems between the two parties, *mithun* are offer as compensation to the aggrieved party. It is also important to note that the number of *mithun* requires as a penalty depend on the nature of the offenses.

V. CONCLUSION

Modernization, state policies, and market economies have brought changes and transformations in traditional *mithun*-based practices among the Nyishi community. Sedentarization, expanding road networks, and government-led *mithun* breeding programmes have introduced new husbandry methods (Hussain, 2013). Along with free-ranging husbandry, organized breeding, government-supported conservation initiatives, and public festivals have introduced new ways of valuing the animal. Nevertheless, despite structural changes, the animal continues to be indispensable during rituals and feasts. Cultural festivals dedicated to the *mithun*—organized by

Nyishi groups and state agencies—have played an enduring role in the politics of identity and heritage preservation in a rapidly globalizing context.

In conclusion it can be mentioned that *mithun* continues to play an important role in the life of the Nyishi community. It occupies a place of profound cultural, social and spiritual depth in the life of the Nyishi tribe as a medium of social harmony, economic exchange, and also as potent spiritual symbol, as well as a catalyst of strengthening cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Furthermore, under Nyishi customary law, *mithun* serves as an important means for upholding and restoring justice and social balances, whether through conflict resolution, compensation or reconciliation process. Even in the midst of changing socio-economic realities, the *mithun*'s cultural relevance remains largely intact, attesting to the resilience of Understanding its significance thus provides an essential lens for interpreting broader patterns of Indigenous identity, ritual practice, and human–environment relationships in Arunachal Pradesh.

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