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Apa Tani tribe on the road to prosperity

by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf

In the remote valleys of Arunachal Pradesh in the former North-Eastern Frontier Agency between Assam and Tibet some tribes prosper uninfluenced by Hindu and Buddhist cultures. The author describes the lifestyle and explains the spectacular economic success of the most remarkable of these, the Apa Tani.

The Himalayas form a natural barrier which for centuries separated the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent from the peoples and cultures of the windswept plateaus of Inner Asia. But whereas the Central Himalayas were traversed by a number of trade-routes along which caravans of pack animals maintained a trickle of trade between Nepal and Tibet, the tangle of pathless woodlands stretching from Eastern Bhutan to the extreme north-eastern corner of India served as a refuge for primitive tribal communities. There archaic styles of life and culture could persist in the isolation of secluded valleys unaffected by the march of progress in neighbouring countries.

In this region, formerly known as the North Eastern Frontier Agency and now constituting the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh, there are no caravan routes as the precipitate gorges of rivers which break through the Great Himalayan range prevented trade which was dependent on animal transport. Rainfall many times heavier than that of the Central Himalayas sustains thorny thickets and forest which discourage all but the most intrepid traveller. Difficulties of communication rather than the nature of the neighbouring regions of Tibet and India seem to be responsible for the fact that the tribal populations which inhabit the mountainous tracts extending between Assam and Tibet have remained for centuries untouched by Hindu as well as Buddhist civilization.

Isolation by physical factors persisted even until the middle of the 20th century because of political decisions taken by the Government of India during British rule. The area between the northern fringe of the Assam plains and the crest of the Great Himalayan range, traditionally...
regarded as the border between India and Tibet, remained outside the administrative control of the Government of Assam. Until 1944 this tribal country was as strange to the Assamese of the plains as to the Tibetans beyond the Himalayan passes. It was inhabited by a number of tribes of Mongoloid race and Tibeto-Burman language who were virtually ignored by the outside world.

The most remarkable of these tribes are the Apa Tantis of the Subansiri region. They live in a single valley lying at an altitude of 1500 metres and ringed by wooded mountains rising to heights of more than 2400 metres. Within the confines of this valley - ten kilometres long by three kilometres wide - a civilization has developed which is different from that of all the surrounding tribes.

When in 1944 my wife and I first entered this valley after a strenuous trek through the pathless forests of the outer ranges, we found ourselves among people who had seldom, if ever, encountered an outsider. The Indian rupee coins we had brought with us were of little use, for the Apa Tantis regarded as the border between India and Tibet, remained outside the administrative control of the Government of Assam. Until 1944 this tribal country was as strange to the Assamese of the plains as to the Tibetans beyond the Himalayan passes. It was inhabited by a number of tribes of Mongoloid race and Tibeto-Burman language who were virtually ignored by the outside world.

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rates in the plains of Assam are driven along the main road, and usually grazed for some time in the Apa Tani country before being sold to Nishis from neighbouring villages. The old barter system has almost totally been replaced by a money economy and many Apa Tani have accounts at the Ziro branch of the State Bank of India.

How can the commercial success of the Apa Tani which contrasts so sharply with the dismal economic position of most of the tribal populations of peninsular India be explained? The principal reason for their ability to take full advantage of the opening up of their country was and is the virtual absence of competition. The so-called 'One Line' policy of the Government of India requires that even Indian citizens have entry permits to Arunachal Pradesh. No outsider is allowed to establish a business, and though a few non-tribals, including the Assamese and Nepals, are employed as salesmen in shops owned by Apa Tani, they do not represent a threat to the local businesses. The Apa Tani are favoured even in the granting of public contracts, although in major projects the exclusion of outsiders is not possible because the local tribesmen do not have as yet the experience and resources to take on contracts for such works as bridge-building or the construction of modern buildings. Even so, their present lack of public works has enabled some Apa Tani to acquire considerable wealth. It is not unusual for businessmen to own motor-scooters, trucks, jeeps or even cars. Some of the homes are lit by electricity and a few have telephones. It is from proving detrimental to the tribesmen the protection of their habitat has proved a boon, and the policy of restricting the entry of potential competitors has been vindicated.

The spectacular economic development of the Apa Tani did hardly have taken place without rapid educational changes among many sections of the tribe. The first primary schools were established in the 1950s. At first Assamese was the medium of instruction, and this was later changed to Hindi. However, an agitation among Apa Tani saved the language from extinction. In the Ziro high school, Apa Tani boys and girls study side by side with Nishis as well as some of the children of non-tribal government employees. Many of the students have gained admission to universities and colleges, such as Panikhat, Dibrugarh, Gauhati and Shillong, and some have gone as far as Calcutta and Delhi. In 1978 there were thirty-three Apa Tani graduates, and among these were fifteen senior government officials, a pilot in the Indian Air Force and two doctors. There were also 342 in junior government posts, the defence services and police force. Compared to developments among tribal populations of peninsular India this is impressive progress.

The fortunes of an educated elite and the material benefits of successful traders must not be taken as an indication that Apa Tani society as a whole is in a state of turmoil and rapid transformation. In some spheres of life including agriculture there have been few changes, and traditional values and practices persist with minor modifications. The Apa Tani have always been extremely industrious and skilful cultivators of rice and other crops grown on their terraced fields. Those fields were tilled by hand, with the help of iron hoes and various wooden implements. There was never a question of using ploughs and bullock-drawn ploughs, the Apa Tani stuck to their traditional methods and continued to grow their staple crops of rice and millet in the same way as they had always done. They did readily adopt the cultivation of newly introduced vegetables, both for their own consumption and for sale in the market of Ziro. Indeed this is one of the ways in which women can earn the cash required for the purchase of novel commodities.

One significant change in the Apa Tani's agricultural economy has occurred. Previously men and women took equal shares in the cultivation of the land, and labour-gangs working on the rice-fields consisted usually of both young girls and young men. Nowadays many gangs are made up only of girls, and men working on the fields are mainly old or middle-aged. Young men prefer to engage in trade, government employment or contract work. Another change which may not be for the better is the replacement of the local crafts by imported machine made goods. Weaving, a craft in which Apa Tani women were expert, has declined, largely because mill-made cloth obtainable in the Ziro bazaar is cheaper than the much superior hand woven textiles. Moreover, college educated men tend to dress in shirts, trousers, pullovers and sometimes tailored coats. Similarly iron pots have replaced the earthen pots formerly made by Apa Tani women.

The basic structure of Apa Tani society has withstood recent economic changes remarkably well. The division of the tribe into two hereditary classes has remained unaltered, but slavery was abolished in the early 1960s and slaves have been absorbed into the mass of free commoners. Inter-marriage of the two classes persists as an ideal and many patricians still consider mixed marriages as objectionable. In practice, however, such marriages take place and are tolerated although they create for the spouses some difficulties in the performance of rituals. Some of the young educated Apa Tani advocate the liberalization of marriage rules to permit unions even between Apa Tani and members of other tribes such as Nishis. A few such marriages have already taken place but the couples do not live in Apa Tani villages, where they would still encounter opposition and exclusion from rituals, but have settled either at Ziro or even outside the Apa Tani valley.

The most important factor in the development of social stability is the establishment of peace not only within the Apa Tani society, which was always well-ordered, but also between Apa Tani and their tribal neighbours. Raiding, kidnapping and the holding to ransom of hostages are things of the past, and today Apa Tani can travel far afield in the pursuance of trade without running any risk to their life and freedom. Disputes within villages or between inhabitants of different villages are settled by councils derived partly from the old system of clan-representatives and partly of elected members of village panchayats, the smallest units in the new system of grass-root democracy.

In 1978 fully fledged parliamentary democracy was introduced in Arunachal Pradesh, and several Apa Tani contested a seat in the Legislative Assembly. The winner in the contest is the son of one of the richest and most prominent Apa Tani, who was once a famous war-leader and later devoted his organizational talent to building up extensive business interests. His son, who belongs to the educated elite, now holds the position of Speaker in the Legislative Assembly. Modernization has affected many aspects of Apa Tani life, and there is every prospect that this relatively small tribe with a total population of about 15,000 will make a significant contribution to the development of the Subansiri District and possibly the whole of Arunachal Pradesh.