



## Indigenous artifacts of *Adi* tribe in Arunachal Pradesh: Are they waning amidst the waves of globalization?

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Received 02 October 2019; revised 01 April 2020

The tribals lead the life with natural simplicity relying on primal truths reinforced by eternal values. The strength of the tribes is that they are able to successfully cling to the primal skills and natural simplicity. Their creations speak of evolutions over time, and the arts and crafts created by them have timeless appeal. The primal instinct in all of us is evoked whenever we come across the crudest tribal handicrafts. The present case study was conducted during August and September 2019 and the study included combination of methods such as research viz., household survey of 44 *Adi* families, followed by a focused group discussion was adopted and also documented the artifacts of *Adi* tribe in East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Further, the study also aimed at unearthing the kinds of possible threats that arise due to globalization which may affect traditional craftsmanship. Multitudinal sets of traditional artifacts created out of indigenous wisdom have been documented which affirm that the life of the *Adi* is intertwined with the forest products especially bamboo, canes and their products. However, the prevailing trend of globalization, with characteristics of immense, unexpected emphasis on capital, labour and information, is having growing influence on material culture and in this scenario, especially new generation prefers more of plastic products in their day to day lifestyle. On the contrary, traditional artifacts of *Adi* could offer innovative and sustainable solutions which can act as alternatives to plastic products.

**Keywords:** Bamboo articles, Cane crafts, Objects, Plastic, Traditional craftsmanship

**IPC Code:** Int. Cl.<sup>21</sup>: B65G 47/57, C13B 5/04, G02B 21/02, B24B 9/20, A61K 36/00

Northeast India is home to many tribal and sub-tribal groups. The tribes dwelling in Arunachal Pradesh of Northeast India have a tradition of making wide range of crafts, and every tribe excels at craftsmanship. Whatever craft products are made by them, the acumen and creativity of tribes are expressed in the quality of such craft products. Carpets, painted wood vessels masks, bamboo products, cane crafts, wood carvings, weaving, jewelry and other kinds of crafts are made by the *Adi* tribe<sup>1,2</sup>. In the Himalayan hills of Nyingchi Prefecture, a major collective tribe called as *Adi*, or Bangni-Bokar Lhoba people are living, and they dwell in the temperate and sub-tropical regions within the districts of East Siang, Upper Siang, West Siang and Dibang Valley. *Abor* is the older term derived from Assamese meaning 'uncontrol'. Some of these tribes live in Southern Tibet (a little more north than South Tibet), in surrounding areas of the Indian border. The term *Adi* literally means "hill" or

"mountain top"<sup>3</sup>. *Adi* tribal communities are well versed with artworks and they make handicrafts out of cane and bamboo for domestic use<sup>4</sup>. Some popular handicraft items are trays, baskets, haversacks, hats, mats and headgears with artistic designs. The tribal women possess appreciable expertise in handloom weaving<sup>5</sup>, and they weave wide range of craft items like jackets, coats, skirts, bags blankets and shawls. As the Arunachal Pradesh is abundant with cane and bamboo, the state is popular for cane and bamboo handicraft articles like colourful basket mats, cane belts, attractive smoking pipes and even jewelry<sup>6,7</sup>.

Also the tribal population uses bamboo and canes for house construction, household utensils, furniture, tools and implements like dibbles, hunting and fishing traps and weapons like bows and arrows, spears and armour. *Shaakhsaazi* communities in Kashmir make basket and furniture using wicker handicraft technique from seven plant species<sup>8</sup>. A study of handicraft fair of Rajasthan documented 45 plants and 7 animals based creative items having aesthetic,

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domestic and personal utility value<sup>9</sup>. Rajasthan is also famous for one of traditional handicrafts called ‘*Namdass*’ one kind of coarse variety of felted wool used for traditional floor covering<sup>10</sup>. Tribal women of Jeypore district of Odisha use wetland plant called *Bena* for making around two hundred varieties of craft items which are used in socio-religious rituals and as modern life style accessories<sup>11</sup>. Even in fishery sector a study<sup>12</sup> revealed that the Nicobari tribe of Andaman and Nicobar Islands uses traditional crafts called *Hodi* which is built using indigenous trees available in island for exploitation of fish and the craft is used for 18 types of fishing practices such as spearing, light fishing, cast netting etc. *Kom* tribe of Manipur is good at making traditional crafts out of eight plant species, which are used in weaving handloom. However, the tribes are experiencing constraints in making indigenous artistic works due challenges posed modernization and open markets<sup>13</sup>.

In spite of emerging challenges, still, the traditional handicrafts are thriving at various parts of the globe. For instance, in Balkan countries i.e., Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, rump Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) and Bosnia Herzegovina, also, more than 11 plant species are being used for making mats, wood articles, rugs and basketry<sup>14</sup>. In Southern Spain, a study<sup>15</sup> has revealed, a well-preserved collection of 138 basketry items were made exclusively from olive tree by a local craftsman. Thus, both national and international studies reveals the potentials of indigenous craft items in contributing to socio-economy and cultural heritage of the indigenous people.

In fact, the value and significance of such intangible cultural heritage of worldwide tribal community is recognized by the UNESCO and subsequently passed a convention in 2003 to protect intangible cultural heritage i.e., “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities and groups<sup>16</sup>. The purpose of that convention is to create awareness about the importance of such indigenous products and the respect and mutual appreciation of the associated people and their culture<sup>17</sup>. There is a need to identify this kind of heritage and protect them especially in an era of globalization coupled with tremendous unprecedented economic change, failing which such heritage may likely to disappear slowly but surely. In view of its importance, the need for

protecting this kind of cultural heritage is voiced out by several cultural heritage experts<sup>18</sup> not only to maintain the identity of the community but also to realize their economic advantage and other values<sup>19-21</sup>. In this context, the UNESCO had started “Living Human Treasure” Program to officially recognize the talented tradition bearers and practitioners including artisans and prevailed upon its member state countries for adoption of this program<sup>22</sup>. Thus, with this background, in view of the relevancy and importance especially in northeast region of India, the present study looked into nature and kinds of indigenous and traditional objects used by *Adi* tribe of East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, India and also paid attention in documenting the possible threats which may hinder traditional craftsmanship in the era of globalization.

### Study area

The present study was carried out in East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh during August and September 2019. The district is located at 28.07°N 95.33°E in the central part of Arunachal Pradesh (Fig. 1) and the district is a part of the Middle Himalayas and the Siwalik ranges. The *Adi* people are one of the most populous groups of indigenous peoples in the state. Their faiths and beliefs and their material culture are linked with surrounding natural bio-resources<sup>23</sup>. The Pasighat town is the oldest town in Arunachal Pradesh – established in 1911 A.D and is the headquarter of the East Siang District. In June 2017, Pasighat became one of the cities under Smart Cities Mission development scheme of the Government of India. The purposively selected village Runne inhabited by *Adi* tribe is situated about 13 Km away from Pasighat town. Based on primary data compiled during the study, the village has a geographical area of 208 ha with a total population of 308 persons. About 91% of villagers primarily dependent on agriculture and allied activities and 40% of its total area is covered by the forest. In this village, the population comprised of 176 females compared to only 132 males. Out of the total (44) households (HH), Radio sets were possessed by 40 HH, and television sets were found in 33 HH while all the HH had mobile phones.

### Methodology

The term ‘material culture’, in widespread scholarly usage is generally referred as any material



Fig. 1 — Traditional artifacts use by the *Adi* tribe/ Domestic and agricultural objects

object (e.g. bamboo baskets, cane furniture etc.) or group of material objects that can be touched, handled and used for carrying out social activities by the people. The primary concern of the studies on material culture is focused on the mutual relations between people and the object and more specifically such studies deal with how the objects are put to use by the people and in other words what various objects do for, and to the people<sup>24,25</sup>. Thus, material culture is commonly implied by objects and traditionally referred to portable smaller objects. The present study focused on the kind of usage of indigenous and traditional objects by *Adi* tribe of East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Further, the study also looked into identifying the potential threats that may affect traditional craftsmanship in the era of globalization i.e., various advances in transportation and communication technology have given impetus for the process of enhanced interaction among people, companies and governments worldwide which in other words comprehensively called as globalization. Multi - methods research viz., household survey of 44 *Adi* families and a focused group discussion with village elders (16 participants) of Runne village in East Siang district was adopted in the study. We had discussion with the community for Prior Informed Consent (PIC) agreement and later their representatives signed the agreement.

### Results and Discussion

Documentation of indigenous and traditional artifacts used by the *Adi* tribe was done using structured survey schedule designed for the study. List of the domestic and agricultural objects along with corresponding vernacular names which were documented during the household survey are presented in Table 1 and Fig. 1).

The present study has documented 30 indigenous and traditional artifacts used by *Adi* tribe of Runne village in Belong circle-II of East Siang district. The study revealed that most of them are made out of bamboo and cane. Cane and bamboo products are extensively used in the complete material culture of Arunachal Pradesh. The objects made of basketry-technique have social significance and also possess many symbolic values in the culture of the people. The symbolic value may be for instance (i) basketry as item of dress and (ii) basketry as an object of political tribute. Objects of basketry technique are used for constructing different religious structures like altars, effigies which are used in performance of

Table 1 — List of the documented artifacts and their usage

<i>Representing figure No.</i>	<i>Vernacular name of Indigenous &amp; traditional artefacts</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Uses</i>
1	<i>Kaedeng/Dekam Paeki</i> ***	Clay	Storage object (earthen pot) mainly used for storage of dry food items
2	<i>Bilan</i> *	Bamboo	Hanging object for storing food items for protecting from rats and other animals
3	<i>Pekak</i> *	Bamboo	Grain/liquid measuring object
4	<i>Geri</i> *	Dried bottle gourd shell	Object for storing water and is used for carrying drinking water to the field
5	<i>Bilan</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	Object for storing meat
6	<i>Petok</i> **	Bamboo/Cane	For making & storing of local rice beer ( <i>Apong</i> )
7	<i>Dore</i> ***	Bamboo	Dining table for keeping rice plate and other edibles
8	<i>Tali</i> ***	Bamboo/Cane	Traditional bag use by men folk
9	<i>Bilan</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	Basket for storing meat,/fish
10	<i>Borjung</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	For making & storage of local rice beer known as <i>Apong</i> .
11	<i>Kiro</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	For carrying firewood by women folk
12	<i>Papur</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	Dustbin
13	<i>Pejung</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	Object for storing water and is used as mug
14	<i>Ebong</i> **	Bamboo/Cane/ <i>Tokopatta</i>	Traditional/local umbrella
15	<i>Petir</i>	Bamboo/Cane	For keeping and carrying birds (poultry)
16	<i>Danggi</i> *	Bamboo	Walking stick
17	<i>EyokSobuk</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	For carrying <i>Dao</i> by male-folk
18	<i>Penyo</i> ***	Bamboo	Spoon for cooking & serving food
19	<i>Apo</i> *	Bamboo/Cane	For threshing of rice
20	<i>Megaap</i> **	Bamboo	Use in fire place for holding firewood, coal and utensil
21	<i>Perap</i> **	Bamboo	Hanging case for drying rice/meat
22	<i>Lakli</i> **	Bamboo	Mini bag for carrying small objects
23	<i>Tage</i> *	Bamboo	Cloth weaving tools
24	<i>Gale Sumkeng</i> *	Bamboo	
25	<i>Ugari</i> *	Bamboo	Thread spinning tool
26	<i>Eppop</i> *	Bamboo	Mini carpet for drying food grains
27	<i>Kurpek</i> **	Leaf	Big carpet for sleeping and sitting
28	<i>Koret</i> **	Wood	A thread spinning machine for separating cotton
29	<i>Moi</i> *	Bamboo	For leveling of wet paddy field
30	<i>Kumsung</i> *	Bamboo & <i>Tokopatta</i> ( <i>Livistona jenkinsiana</i> )	Constructed a few meters (10-15 m) away from the main village for storage of rice and other food grains and protection against fire

The number of Asterisk (\*) indicates the intensity of waning of particular object as perceived by the community.

religious ceremonies and rituals and other associated decorations. *Apatanis*, *Nyishis*, *Adis* tribes make effigies representing deities and spirits which are made out of split bamboo in basket work<sup>26</sup>. The rich material culture of the tribe and their self-reliance can be gauged by the observation that traditionally they have been using these artefacts with high intensity in their day to day life. Although many objects were reported in a study<sup>4</sup> which had been carried out a decade ago, the present work carries forward it by investigating additional dimension of the threats which is working against the rich material culture of indigenous people. Indeed, culture (material and non-

material) is not static in nature and always changing though, the speed of change may differ from community to community. The desirable change is ever anticipated by the society. Strong bonding of the indigenous people with their culture and sturdy sense of place could safeguard and sustain their tradition amidst the waves of change, but nobody knows 'how long' the tradition can be sustained and obviously it depends upon the velocity of wind, i.e., the intensity of globalization.

#### *Potential threats of material culture and craftsmanship*

The focused group discussion conducted in the study area revealed that various plastic products are

replacing the traditional household objects which are made out of bio-resources, especially from bamboo and canes. Though the rich, traditional artifacts of the tribes have potentials for providing innovative solutions that can act as alternatives to plastic products, the majority of the people especially youngsters now prefer plastic for everything (Fig. 2). The usage of various plastic products is easily noticeable in the rural area of the district, as in the rest of India in spite of the fact that there is growing literature which exposes the fact of toxic effects of plastic especially the thermoplastics on human health and environment<sup>27</sup>. Consumer preferences towards handicraft products are declining due to the availability of sophisticated industrial products including plastics products due to globalization of markets and trade. Indeed, Northeast India is strategically located from the geopolitical perspective and is having boundary with several neighboring countries, i.e., Bangladesh, China, Bhutan and Myanmar Economic Corridor.

Arunachal Pradesh has borders with the states of Assam and Nagaland to the south and shares international borders with Bhutan in the west and Myanmar in the east. Chinese products enter India through Myanmar and other border points in the

North East including Nampong through Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh. A report revealed that the trend of consumer preferences in India is many times towards Chinese products including plastic products due to the fact that such products are comparatively cheaper (around 60%) than that of branded products<sup>28</sup> or indigenously made craft items though sometimes the quality of the former products are not up to the mark. Various Chinese consumer products which are making inroads into Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and other parts of North East India includes domestic furniture, electronic goods, paper products, packing products, pictures, frames, paintings, jewelry, jade carvings, bone carvings, toys, home decorations, festival, party and religious decorations. This scenario of shift in consumer preferences has also influenced the artisans of various handicraft products to close their business and migrate to the cities for better job opportunities and enhanced income. Owing to such an upside-down scenario, several traditional crafting skills and techniques are started disappearing from the society which is compounded by the fact that fewer younger generations is interested in learning such traditional business skills<sup>29-33</sup>. As a result, over the years - especially in recent past, there is substantial decline in usage of handicrafts articles and thus such indigenous products are losing its place in the society while there is a steady growth of usage of industrial products possibly these products have relatively longer durability (though they are non-biodegradable), variety in terms of size, shape, colour as well as comparative economical value<sup>34,35</sup>. As another major contributing factor for declining of the traditional handicraft business, most of the young people are not expressing interest to inherit the traditional bamboo and cane craftsmanship mainly due to the fact that process of making handicraft is relatively lengthy and also complicated.

Moreover, there are difficulties to find a good teacher/master/mentor with adequate skills in craftsmanship who is willing to teach especially when they are constrained in case the members of family especially youngsters are reluctant to learn and in this kind of changing scenario, such traditional knowledge may get vanished over the time<sup>36</sup>. In fact, from North East India perspective, globalization poses significant challenges to the survival of the traditional craftsmanship, a domain of intangible cultural heritage and ultimately this situation is leading the traditional heritage vulnerable. The effects of these



Fig. 2 — Plastic objects on sale at local shop in weekly *haat* at *Solung* ground, Pasighat

challenges would have adverse impact on the people's livelihood and can be more noticeable especially in the case of small indigenous groups, for whom such indigenous handicraft business is basic livelihood option<sup>35,36</sup>.

### Conclusion

*Adi* tribe is engaged in the material culture which is predominantly made out of the product of natural bio-resources-wood, bamboo, palm leaves, cane, etc. drawn from a nearby forest. There is a need for cautious tradeoff between availing the benefits of globalization and protecting the uniqueness of local culture. While placing local culture at the heart of development policies does not imply that strategies are to be conservative, rather there is a need to invest in the augmenting the potential of indigenous knowledge, local resources, skills and materials to harness available creativities, talents so as to ensure sustainable progress. There are emerging signs of globalization posing significant challenges to the survival of traditional forms of craftsmanship similar to the threats which are being faced by any other forms of intangible cultural heritage. To counter any threats to the traditional craftsmanship, legal measures like intellectual property protections, patent or copyright registrations are to be promoted which can help local community to benefit from its traditional artefacts. Sometimes, legal measures intended for addressing certain other issues in a community can encourage craft production. For instance, local ban non-degradable and toxic plastic bags can stimulate market demand for handmade paper bags, containers woven from grass thereby giving boost for sustenance of traditional craft skills and knowledge. Framing innovative policies and launching innovative programs which can encourage recognition and respect for the diversity of cultures both material and non-material may create the conducive environment for mutual understanding in the community, dialogue and peace. In spite of economic and cultural globalization, we do hope that traditional cultures coupled with indigenous business acumen being kept alive and preserved. For, we have the reason to believe that *Adi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh would like to keep their own regions different enough that they have their own unique "sense of place" in a sustainable manner.

### Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the respondents and Village Head (*Gaon Burah*) for their active participation and sharing valuable information on the

Artifacts. Authors are also grateful for the insightful comments offered by the anonymous peer reviewers of this manuscript.

### Conflict of Interests

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Author Contributions

DKP conceptualized the study, compiled primary data and prepared first draft of the manuscript. PA & TR reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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