JOURNAL OF POLITICS

ISSN : 2277-5617

An Annual Publication of the Department of Political Science, Dibrugarh University
(A Blind Peer-Reviewed Journal)

Vol. XX, 2020

Vol. XX pp. 26-35

TIGER SIBLINGS AND THE IDU MISHMIS

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Anyone visiting the Mishmi Hills and interested in wildlife and conservation would have come across the mythological story of the Mishmi and tigers as brothers. Such narratives of tigers as siblings are popular in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh as well (Aisher, 2005; Aiyadurai, 2016). For the Idu Mishmi, the tiger (*aamra*) is their elder brother. Tiger is the most revered animal, and killing it is prohibited. In fact, it is even viewed as a 'homicide'. The kinship relation of the Idu Mishmi with the tigers and the claims that residents of Dibang valley make about tiger conservation is an important aspect to consider if one is interested in wildlife conservation in Northeast India. How the common people perceive wildlife conservation is rarely addressed in discussions on nature conservation and my monograph *'Tigers are our brothers: Anthropology of wildlife conservation in northeast India'* (OUP, 2021) addresses some of the complex issues of wildlife conservation in Dibang valley. Through Idu Mishmi narratives, the book highlights how Mishmi relate to tigers, vis-a-vis the role of the state and of science in tiger conservation and how the Mishmi's conception of 'nature' stands in contrast with the way the state and science perceive tigers and their conservation. Mishmi's indigenous ideas about tigers and their cultural and ecological knowledge are often used as a form of resistance during meetings with conservationists and researchers to question the motive and activities of tiger research and also the forest department. When conservationists and the local villagers meet, how do these actors negotiate their positions in making claims over nature? Some of these questions are central to this book.

In this article, I will discuss people-animal relations in Dibang Valley and what we can learn from the indigenous beliefs about wildlife conservation. The rescue of tiger cubs in the winter of 2012 in a remote village shaped Dibang valley district as a new conservation site. After the rescue, the district witnessed a series of conservation interventions and implementation of research projects by state and NGOs and this remote corner of India were visited by wildlife researchers and conservation groups. They mapped the tiger habitat, assessed the tiger & its prey population and this information led to the proposal of a tiger reserve *(FN: 11th meeting of the Technical Committee of NTCA held 01.09.2021, in-principle approved the proposal for India's first High Altitude Tiger Reserve: Dibang Tiger Reserve).*

While the researchers and NGOs were busy studying wildlife, the Idu Mishmis were anxious with the several actors visiting the district to study tigers and their habitat. They were particularly curious about the 'new' found interests in tigers. Idu Mishmis always knew about these tigers, but researchers took some time to get convinced about the presence of tigers in this landscape, citing low prey density as a reason. The tiger cub rescue provided the necessary 'data' of tiger presence.

'Why have a tiger reserve here? We don't hunt tigers, they are our brothers! Tigers and humans were born to the same mother. We kill tigers only as a last option, when they become a threat or when they are killed in traps accidentally. We are protecting them anyway' said a resident of Dibang Valley. During my interviews with the residents, they often stated that they do not harm tigers and in fact their kinship relations with tigers are helping the tiger population. They, sometimes, questioned why there is a need for a tiger reserve here. The fear of getting intertwined with the state's 'ever-reaching hands' and losing their lands for tiger conservation was the chief reason behind their anxieties. While some welcome the idea of a tiger reserve with the hope of employment, others worry that the ownership of their lands, forests and mountains will be compromised. This is one of many issues that brought researchers, scientists and the state in direct confrontation with the people of Dibang Valley. A common grievance of the residents was the non-consultative approach of the state and the non-participatory nature

of wildlife researchers. The local Mishmis felt a sense of mistrust towards the forest department and the research team members. This has resulted in mild intimidation and resistance, as well as hesitation or even refusal in participating in research activities. Moreover, there was a difference in the perception and understanding of nature as well as its protection and conservation that the book examines.

The book primarily argues that 'nature' needs to be decoded, not only at a conceptual level (the idea of 'nature') but also at the operational level (how to engage with 'the nature'). The book discusses the Idu Mishmi's relationship with nature and more importantly, their ethics of nature in which humans and non-human lives are interlinked and seen as continuous, not discrete categories. In addition to the cultural, commercial value of animals, the book discusses the symbolic interaction of the Mishmi with non-humans (the mountain spirits and animals), and their reciprocal engagement during subsistence activities, highlighting the tensions between subsistence-related hunting and wildlife protection that see hunting as illegal.

Tiger brothers of the Idu Mishmis

According to Mishmi mythology, the Mishmi and tigers were born to the same mother and were siblings; the tiger was the elder brother, and the human, the Mishmi, the younger brother. This myth and the taboo against hunting tigers was told to me by an Igu (shaman): One day, the younger brother hunted a deer and left it with his elder brother before going into the jungle to collect firewood. On his return, he was terrified to see his brother eating the meat raw. He told his mother that his elder brother was a tiger. 'If he can eat the raw meat, then one day he will eat me too,' he said. This became a serious concern. A plan was made by their mother to have a competition between the two brothers. The one who crossed the river and reached the other side of the bank first would kill the other. The tiger decided to swim across the river, whereas the Mishmi took the bridge. The tiger was the first to reach the bank. When the tiger was about to come out of the river, however, the mother threw an ant's nest at the tiger's body to prevent him from winning. To get rid of the ants, the tiger went back into the river and scratched himself against a rock. The Mishmi, meanwhile, reached the bank and

shot the tiger with an arrow. Thus, the tiger died and its body floated in the river. It was swept away to a far off place. After several years, a bird saw the bones of the tiger scattered on the riverside. The bones were white and bright under the sunlight. The bird thought them to be eggs and sat on them to incubate. It is believed that the large bones transformed back into a tiger. From the tiny bones emerged a leopard, a leopard cat, a clouded leopard, and civet cats. This is the story of the tiger being born again. Therefore, tigers cannot be killed. According to the Mishmi, tigers can only be killed or trapped when there is a loss of property or for personal safety. If a tiger is killed, an elaborate ritual (*tamamma*) is conducted over five days, with restrictions on both the family members of the one who killed the tiger, as well as on the villagers as a whole. There are five clans (Meme, Umpo, Mena, Mischi, and Misiwo) of the Idu Mishmi who are exempted from performing this ritual. Members of these clans are believed to be the descendants of Sineru, the first priest of the Idu Mishmi. However, killing a tiger is a taboo for them too.

Human-non-human entanglements

People are related to nonhuman animals and entities in multiple ways. These relations are complex, diverse, and multifaceted. Animals are believed to be under the control of the guardian spirits of the forest. The relationship of these communities with nature has changed substantially with the shift in their socio-economic situation and nature came to be seen as a commodity. Overlapping of human and nonhuman worlds is part of Mishmi social worlds. For example, similar to many indigenous people, the Mishmi do not make a distinction between the human world and the non-human world; all nature is 'one', including the world of spirits (Fig 1). The Mishmi constantly engage with animals and spirits during farming, hunting wildlife, or slaughtering domesticated animals. The Mishmi believe that spirits take care of domesticated animals (*mitu-sipa*) and wild animals (*ngôlô*). This belief is so strong that spirits are often talked about as if they are people; the Mishmi are respectful towards and fearful of them. For example, when I asked someone in Anini what would happen if women ate wildmeat *(FN: Among the Idu Mishmi, women do not eat any wild meat, except fish (anga), rats (kachingo), and birds (pra) because they believe that something unfortunate*

will happen if they consume it.), she told me, 'ngôlô humko maarega' (ngôlô will beat us), and that *ngôlô* watches over people from afar. Shamans or Igus (Fig. 2) play an important role as mediators between these worlds, which give them a central role in the religious practices and beliefs of the Mishmi society (Dele, 2017; Chaudhuri, 2008). Igus are respected for their services during funerals, births, farming, hunting, and slaughtering of domestic livestock. The Mishmi acknowledge the role of spirits for all their life events and believe that their lives are ultimately governed by spirits, both benevolent and malevolent. Therefore, the Mishmi are expected to act in accordance with the obligation to give, to receive, and to pay in a reciprocal way through a dense network of exchanges that exist between the animals, and the spirits. The Mishmi's social world is a network of their associations with humans and non-human beings (animals, rivers, birds, and spirits). The presence of several spirits in farms, homes, forests, and mountains as well as the significant roles of these spirits is reflected during harvesting, healing rites, funerals, and birth ceremonies.

The relationship between humans, animals and spirits is acknowledged through rules and regulations in the form of fear and respect, and is mediated by blood. This fear is manifest in the way wild animals, their meat, and their skulls are treated. There is a strict physical separation between wild and domesticated animal skulls on the trophy board. Mixing of wild and domesticated animal meat is also seen as a taboo, and therefore the two are never cooked together. *Ngôlô* is the most important spirit for long-distance hunts, such as those for musk deer, and is believed to be the caretaker of wild animals (the animal master). *Ngôlô* should be respected so that hunters are able to continuously get animals. In exchange, hunters make a payment in the form of a piece of metal and a small piece of meat from the dead animal. Like *ngôlô*, there are other spirits that offer health and wealth for an exchange. For example, *Aasa* is the spirit that looks after large trees and the forests near villages. Cutting these large trees is believed to annoy these spirits. In general, large trees are not cut down unless they are required for house construction. People cover the stumps of a chopped tree with mud and trees to prevent *Aasa* from seeing it. There are trees that should not be cut without performing certain rituals. The Mishmi act is in accordance with the obligation to

give, to receive, and to pay. For example, an act of reciprocity is followed when meat is shared. The person who shoots the animal gets the head. The rest is shared with others. The Mishmi have strong ethics when it comes to sharing both domesticated and wild animal meat. During festivals, meat is widely distributed among relatives and guests; similarly, sharing of meat between villagers is crucial during weddings and funerals. Therefore, wildlife hunting and slaughtering domesticated animals are taken very seriously as these activities signifies a complex network of exchanges exists between these two worlds, in which the slaughtered domesticated animals and the hunted wild animals form part of the exchange process. If certain taboos are not observed, there could be a disruption in the circulation of energy, causing illness, death, bad harvest, and hunting failures.

The relations of the Mishmi with animals are undergoing transformation because of the changes in their socio-economic situation. Cultural taboos, which were instituted to prevent the over-hunting of animals, are eroding due to changes in the belief system. The Mishmi who convert to Christianity do not follow hunting taboos. For example, those who have converted do not display animal skulls in their houses and have abandoned the ritualistic ways of worshiping spirits. However, they continue to hunt without necessarily following the rules. The Mishmi who are inclined to the Hindu belief system have stopped slaughtering mithuns, while some have even stopped eating meat. Those who have converted look down upon the traditional Mishmi beliefs as 'primitive' practices. The changing Mishmi–animal relations also need to be seen in the light of wildlife conservation practices brought in by conservation NGOs and the government.

Wildlife conservation in Arunachal

Places such as Arunachal have recently been subjected to a growing academic interest from ecologists and conservationists. Wildlife research in this region has increased in the region partly because of its inclusion in the Eastern Himalaya 'biodiversity hotspot' (Myers, et al. 2000). Setting up of protected areas has been one of the major approaches to conserve wildlife. Arunachal's forest department has set aside large tracts of land for conservation in the form of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. There are 11 wildlife sanctuaries and two national parks in the state, which are also designated as tiger reserves. The forest

department's engagement with the local communities for wildlife conservation has been slow, and it was not a priority for the government for a long time. NGOs (World Wide Fund for Nature, Wildlife Trust of India, and Nature Conservation Foundation) have played an active role in the conservation of protected areas, namely Pakke Tiger Reserve and Namdapha Tiger Reserve. However, lack of road connectivity and basic infrastructure made this region immune to active governance for a long time. Therefore, implementation of laws has been rather weak. In addition to this, due to the lack of economic alternatives for sustaining livelihoods in the region, people continue to hunt and trade wildlife parts to earn some extra cash (Hilaluddin, et al, 2005; Aiyadurai, et al. 2010).

Many NGOs have been working with indigenous peoples and implementing conservation projects by actively engaging with communities. There has been little or no social assessment or analysis of these projects to examine their impact on the local communities, and how these interventions are perceived by the local communities. Community-based conservation projects have been implemented in Arunachal to wean hunters away from hunting. Schools are being set up and awareness and health programmes are being conducted to encourage local communities to participate in conservation projects (Datta, 2007). In places such as Arunachal, the local people are dependent on wild animals and forest resources for subsistence, and have complex relations with the animals. Any conservation measure needs to take into account the locals' attitude towards natural resources and, especially, people-animal relations. Sociological studies on community-based conservation projects are now emerging from Northeast India (Aiyadurai and Banerjee,2019; Nijhawan, 2018; Roy, 2018). How the local people react to the conservation efforts of the state, NGOs, or biologists depends on their relations with the animals themselves. The cultural linkages of the Mishmi to the natural world and their subsistence-based livelihood place them in opposition to contemporary conservation practices (Aiyadurai and Velho, 2018).

This book explores multiple layers of wildlife conservation and asks why, how and in what ways the discussion of conservation and development needs rethinking. Primarily, the book is concerned about tiger conservation and its predicaments in Arunachal and it concentrates on the diverse human-nature

relations, especially Idu relations with animals. The state's view of tigers as national animals and the biologists' view of tigers are ecologically endangered species stand in opposition to the indigenous interpretations of nature that see animals and their habitats intrinsically connected as part of human lives. The story of the tiger brothers of the Idu Mishmi is a reminder to consider alternate ways of knowing nature and to give space to indigenous voices to make conservation more socially meaningful and inclusive.

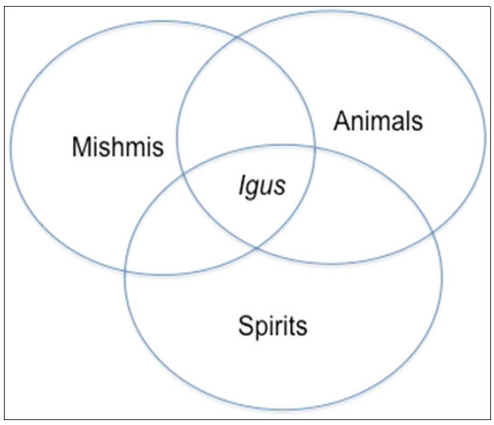

Fig. : 1

Fig. : 2

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Acknowledgements:

I am thankful to my Idu Mishmi friends and the residents of the Dibang Valley and Roing in Arunachal Pradesh for their support during my research. I thank Isai Amudu for her help in proof reading this manuscript.