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Traditional Hunting Practices of the Bugun Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The paper emphasises on the traditional hunting practices of the Bugun tribe residing in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. Various traditional knowledge, beliefs and rituals associated with hunting and trapping methods practised by the tribe have been discussed here. Nearly all the tribe of the state still continues to have their own traditional methods of hunting and its practices. However their numbers have continually declined, partly as a result of change from growing towards agricultural and pastoral communities in the state.

Hunting with limited technological equipment hints us to postulate parallels for hunting strategies for early people. The indigenous hunting implements used by the Buguns were bow Rag or Rakht, an arrow Met or Mat, Spears Jheong, dagger Sharong, and dao Mudhua. Hunting implements were regarded very sacred as it was accustomed with various rituals and sacrifices which were meant for acquiring food for the family and community. Traditionally hunting was enormously done through trapping known as Mudhuang. Capturing, snaring and poisoning were also practised along with it. Numerous rituals had also been associated with hunting practices by the tribe. People here believed that certain deities who resided in the forests also contributed in the protection of forest and its creatures. The paper is a preliminary study which gives information on early hunting practices of the Buguns and highlights the cultural belief system integrated with it.

Keywords : Bugun, Traditional Hunting, Traditional Knowledge, Belief & Rituals, West Kameng

Introduction

Human being since time immemorial had been dependent for their livelihood on

hunting and gathering. Nature had provided the necessity of living creature. In the past mankind were savage, he led a nomadic life and settlement was not known to them. It was the perennial situation of life at very point. Hunting of wild animals was done not only for consumption but also for recreational practices.

“The food habits and consumption-pattern of the inhabitants stem from the physical environment, because, the inhabitants have to eat the things which grow in the environment. The pattern of consumption is taken care of by, again, the climatic conditions and bountifulness of nature, that is to say, the environment. It goes without saying that the items of economic exchanges and pattern, the adoption of occupation, garment-style and its production, construction of residential and functional houses and their construction-materials, location of villages etc, are shaped and determined by the dictates of the physical environment decidedly” (Jha, 1998).

Arunachal Pradesh the land of tribal people have been dependent on hunting and fishing since past. It has been their life line through ages. The State has been in isolation from rest of the country for a very long period with uneven region and innumerable rivulets and its tributaries throughout the territory. The area has been covered with dense forest with distinct wild beast which occasionally jeopardised the life of the people. However, hunting animals ultimately became the source of food for the people here.

The area of the study

Hunting was the means of subsistence of the Bugun tribe of Arunachal Pradesh since past. Buguns reside in the West Kameng District of the state. It is situated in the eastern most part of the region. The tribe had been very fond of hunting since past. It has been their priority since early period. Hunting has also been one of the important aspects of the people which they performed with the help of dogs as well. People believed that the domesticated dogs were usually friendly and faithful. Dogs had been very helpful for trekking or recovering the prey in the forest.

There are about thirteen Bugun villages situated in and around West Kameng District however villages like Singchung and Wanghoo had been indulged in hunting considerably since early period. At present although it has been minimised a lot yet some of the village are still in practice.

Verrier Elwin in his (1957) ‘Philosophy for NEFA’ stated “then all over tribal India, hunting and fishing is something more than a search for food: it is a religious activity involving strict taboos; on the success and failure of a ceremonial hunt depend

the success or failure of the harvest; the horns of the animal, the bones of the fish, are hung up in the hunters house, and it is taboo to desecrate them; before and after a hunt, offerings are made to the forest gods”.

In the previous year's hunting was done not only for sustenance but also for leisure, enjoyment and self pride. Women and children did not participate in hunting and poaching. It was only men who took hold over it. Hunting were organised either collectively in group, or community based and also were performed individually.

Traditionally while organising group hunting people decided the number of person who would participate. Old and young male members ranging from seven to ten years of age engaged themselves for hunting. Group hunting has always been done away from village area which usually was of 25 to 30 kms away from the locality where the people resided. Usually people who participated in group hunting were distributed with equal shares of the hunted meat of the animal.

Ritual associated with hunting

Buguns followed numerous ritual associated with hunting. These rituals were conventionally believed to be an important aspect in the lives of the people. Prior to leaving for hunting a certain ritual was performed by the people. It has been considered that the ritual protects the hunters and their families against any evil spirit. Buguns believed that forest has been the homestead of spirits and deities and to enter into its belly for hunting they have to satisfy the nature by sacrificing some offerings.

Basically prior to proceed for hunting, the hunters has to slit bamboos into slender pieces by placing a 30 cm white coloured piece of cloth tied over it resembling a flag. These flags are then squeezed inside the ground on the right and left direction where the hunting has to be taken place. This process is known as Shabo Jhileo by the local people.

Generally sacrifices are not performed if the hunters ought to hunt small creatures, yet it is obligatory to offer local drink and grain by chanting some ritualistic prayer mentioning that they have come to the nature divinities of forest and pleads to let them acquire without fail.

However if the hunters desire to capture a huge wild hunt it becomes mandatory that they have to sacrifice a red hen with the white flags. This ritual is performed for a day with the help of a priest in an organised way.

Implements used for hunting

Implements which were used for hunting were made by the people themselves. Traditional bows and arrows, spears, and daggers have been the tool for hunting from the very early times. Bugun people had wide knowledge of the specific wood which was used for making bows and arrows. A different variety of bamboo has been used for making bows and arrows which were abundantly found in their jungles. These bamboos were attenuated with small hole inside known as Mamin Moy.

Indigenous hunting implements used were bow known as Rag or Rakht, an arrow known as Met or Mat, Spears known as Jheong, dagger known as Sharong, dao known as Mudhua. These were the only implements used for hunting different kinds of creatures in the forest. Implements were worshipped and stored in a very pious area in their homes. Generally these implements were not allowed to touch by the women. Hunting implements were regarded very sacred as it was accustomed with various rituals and sacrifices which were meant for acquiring food for the community.

The arrows were stored in a quiver made of bamboo known as Zhaat. The arrows which the Bugun people used during hunting consisted of poisonous and non poisonous one. This poisonous (aconite plant) plant has been found in the jungles known as Mrig. These plants were collected vigilantly by the people themselves and were prepared by them.

However the poisoned iron head of the arrow was always kept separately in a basket made of bamboo. These poisonous arrows were generally used for killing wild beast. Occasionally in the past it was also used when the people had to indulge in some conflict or raids towards other tribe.

Although hunting wild animals could not be performed in the entire season, it was generally done during the winter period, thus during the winter usually the catch would be large. People stocked the entire meat of the animals to be taken during the lean period. These meats were dried over the hearths of their house and were also placed over the roof to be dried with the help of sunlight.

Therefore, even though the catch has been in enormous quantity the meat never went waste as it had been always preserved by the people. However the raw meat was always boiled with bamboo shoot or in plain water with vegetables and consumed with cooked rice and chutney.

Trapping

Trapping of animals is known as Mudhuang by the people here. Apart from animals, birds were also trapped known as Phua Muduang. Snares of different sizes were used for the purpose. Traditionally these traps were made by using wood, bamboo, strings, rope etc. It has been further performed in different indigenous way of trapping animals and birds.

Young or old, Bugun males were very good hunters. They had a very good mastery on the vocals of animals also. Maybe because hunting was their ultimate subsistence of life in the early days which had ultimately passed down since generations.

Mobung is an indigenous trap which is made with a cane rope encircled in the ground and the end of the rope is tied on a branch of a tree. Rashap is another trap in which a rope or a string is tied as a knot and another end tied on a branch. Another popular trap is made by digging a deep hole covered with leaves locally known as Cho. These traps had been very helpful and were very popular among the people. Gibji Nimachow, in his book 'The Akas the land and people' (Nimachow, 2011: 329) stated, "It is a subsidiary means of sustenance for them that fulfil the requirement of flesh for consumption. Tribal people all around the globe do hunting in one form or the other".

Trapping of animals was done normally in the month of November and December. During this month large number of wild animals could be trapped easily. Usually during dawn people went into the forest for hunting and would come back to their respective village late night or after two or three days. They generally slept in the jungle beneath a tree itself.

Common animals which had been hunted through ages were deer Duchuii, bear Shuthum, stag Sijiab, wild monkey Sudung, fox Shalyah, wild fowl Phrek, wild cat Niam, squirrel with thin tail Thajang, squirrel with thick tail Thruui, wild goat Shuzou, antlers Shrai.

Birds of different varieties were also trapped like Phukung, Khuantham, Fraik, Fkhuii, Oonboob, Fhrut etc.

However, the portion of the hunted animals was distributed evenly to all the members who had participated in the group hunting. The skeletal head of the hunted animal was given to the hunter whose arrow had hit the animal in the initial period. Verrier Elwin mentions in his "Philosophy For NEFA' (Elwin, 1957: 71) that "Tribal people

everywhere are meticulously careful about the division of meat and fish, and at feast and festivals, after a successful hunt, it is distributed according to certain traditional rules”.

The skin of the hunted animal is slit out from the meat very perspicuously and dried under the sun for days until it gets resistant to mites. These skins are then used as a matt known as Pith and also hanged on the wall of the house. Liver of bear is used as a medicinal purpose made only by priest.

The horns of the stag is cleaned and hanged on the walls of the hunters house for decoration it also brings a sense of achievements for them. Even today one can see some traditional Bugun houses have the skin, horns and facial structure of animals which were killed by their forefathers and hanged as a social status in the village. In the previous days it used to be a prestige for a man who hunted and hanged the parts of animal in their house as it increased the social status of that particular person in the area where they lived.

In individual hunting a person goes alone to the forest with a dog. However it is believed that a married man is restricted to have any physical contacts with his wife before leaving for the jungle as it would bring misfortune and he would come back from jungle without any hunted animal. It is considered that if a person comes back without any catch from the forest it brings disgrace to his personality.

Table-1
Names of the hunted Animals and Birds

English Name	Local Name	Consumed by male/ female/children	How is it prepared
Bear	<i>Sthoom</i>	Women and children do not eat.	Cut and roasted in fire or boiled it with water in a cooking bowl.
Deer	<i>Duchuii</i>	Male/Female/children can eat.	-do-
Stag	<i>Shjiak</i>	Female used to eat	-do-
Monkey	<i>Sdhung</i>	Only Male could eat	-do-
Wild cat	<i>Niam</i>	Women ate	-do-
Squirrel with Thick tail and Thin tail.	<i>Thruui/thjang</i>	-do-	-do-

Wild Pig	<i>Decheng</i>	No	-do-
Birds	<i>Phukung/ Khuantham/ Fraik, Fkuii, Oonboob, Fhrut</i>	Male/Female/children can eat.	-do-
Antler	<i>Shrai</i>	Male can eat	-do-
Cow	<i>Suwua</i>	Male/Female/children can eat.	-do-

Sources: Field study 2017

Conclusion

The traditional hunting structure of the Buguns had changed over the time. People from their substandard living standard have transformed to an organised life and have witnessed various developments. Living in extremely interior area they never cared to expand themselves towards the outer world in the past.

However with the change of time Buguns have opened up themselves with the rest of the world and they are marching towards progression. Considerable changes can be witnessed in the living standard of the people at present. Government have also opened up centres for animals which provides with numerous medication facilities.

Eventually at present many villages has stopped hunting. Hunting practices has been banned in Bugun areas since 1962. In Tenga valley and Singchung area establishment of the army unit has brought enormous changes in the mindset of the people. Nevertheless even today some villages like Lali, Sachida and Namfiri still hunt wild animals in the dense forest of West Kameng district but it has been minimised a lot. Steadily the practice might come to a standstill as the traditional institution cannot be detached instantly from the cultural perspective of an indigenous tribe as it has been deeply rooted from within.

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