

Uses and Changing Nature of Lapang of the Apatanis, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Like each tribe of the state has a place of assembly and performing rituals, the Apatanis also has one known as lapang. The ritual structure lapang being located at the centre of the Apatani village and having enough space to accommodate good number of people, the structure is a convenient place of assembly to discuss, debate, deliberate and to adopt the resolutions passed by the house. This present paper aims to study the uses of lapang and the changing nature of lapang (structurally). Unquestionably, one cannot live with the same age old traditional beliefs and practices, changes are bound to take place in every aspect of our life but such changes should not be at the cost of losing one's identity. Though change is inevitable, the tribe continues to maintain and preserve the age old structure.

Keywords: Lapang, Assembly, Performing Changing nature, Uses

1. Introduction

Apatanis are one of the indigenous tribal communities domiciled in Ziro valley in the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh at an altitude of 5,754 feet and surrounded by hill ranges in all directions. They are settled in seven different villages namely Hong, Hija, Dutta, Mudang Tage, Hari, Bulla and Bamin-Michi. The total population of the Apatani is 42,352 as per 2011 census record. Apatani tribe is popularly known for their indigenous knowledge system of paddy cum fish cultivation.

In his book '*The Apatanis and their Neighbours*' Heimendorf describes Apatanis as 'Apa' = a world for regard and 'Tani' = human race. They are the descendents of Abotani who is considered as the ancestral forefather of the Apatani and are one of the most advanced tribe and are well settled communities of the state. The tribe is divided into a number of clans and sub-clans, and follows a form of animistic faith (Donyi-Polo), although recently some families have converted to Christianity.

The Apatanis are known for their rich culture and tradition and have preserved this knowledge and wisdom for generations for the fulfillment of various cultural and traditional practices. Although with time and modernization the indigenous knowledge, traditional institutions and different customary laws and practices are disappearing, the Apatanis are still observant of their rituals and festivals and their belief on these rites and rituals is deeply connected with their everyday life. Besides, the common traditions that are being observed in Apatani society like birth ceremony, marriage ceremony, death etc. The Apatanis have some special festivals that are being celebrated in the region and reflect the unique and rich culture of the Apatanis (Y.Bamin & P.R.Gajurel, 2015).

Villages of the Apatani has 2 (two) focal points and ritual centres. Firstly, a small isolated hut known as *nago* which serves as a kind of shrine where important rites are performed and the trophies of war, such as the hands of slain foes, are kept until their disposal. The *nago* used by a group of clans lends these clans a certain unity, and the *nago* is

usually named after the most prominent clan of the group and are situated close to *lapangs*. Secondly, the socio-religious platform known as *lapang*, another focal point of social life in a Apatani village. It is a ritual platform, raised about one-metre above the ground on thick wooden posts. Traditionally open air, most of the *lapangs* are now protected from the sun and rain by a wooden structure supporting a roof of galvanised, corrugated wooden sheets. There are at least four to five *lapangs* found in a village. Apart from being location of major rituals during festivals like *myoko* and *murung*, it serves as convenient space for public events in the otherwise densely packed village. Its clean, flat, dry surface serves as an excellent workplace for various tasks such as splitting long lengths of bamboo, and a convenient meeting place for groups, such as women's saving cooperatives. Apart from that, it serves as a spot for idle pursuits, especially playing cards (Heimendorf, 1962).

This paper attempts to study the uses of *lapang*, a community platform of the Apatanis thereby tries to understand the significance of it among the tribe members. The paper also attempts to study and discussed the changing nature of *lapang* in the Ziro valley. However, it is pertinent to mention that *lapangs* only of the traditional village has been included in the study, the extended villages of the various villages like *Lempia*, *Siuro* & *Siibe* of the *Bulla*, *Hong* & *Bamin-Michi* villages respectively are not included.

2. Objectives

This paper is focused on the following objectives:

- To understand the uses of *Lapang*.
- To understand the changing nature of *Lapang*.

3. Methodology

The study is mainly empirical and based on participants and non-participant observations. Thus, it is partly empirical and partly reflective. The questionnaire-cum-interview schedule was designed in English. It was translated into local dialect at the time of interview.

The study was carried out by interviewing 60 households from the 7 villages of Ziro, Arunachal Pradesh. The study was carried out by interviewing villagers & *Nyibus* (Priest).

Informations were gathered through informal discussions with the interviewees.

4. Study Site

The study area is Ziro Valley, Lower Subansiri district of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. The valley consists of 7 villages viz. Hong, Hija, Dutta, Mudang-Tage, Hari, Biila and Bamin-Michi.

Lapang

Every Apatani village has several ritual platforms which are locally known as *lapang*, each of which belongs to a clan or group of clans. When a clan splits into two exogamous groups, one group constructs a new *lapang*. The platform is raised about one metre above the ground with several big wooden posts (*tuli* in apatani) as pillars, on top of which numbers of heavy hardwood planks are laid. The largest platforms are about twelve metres long and four metres wide while the small ones are half of that size (Haimendorf, 1962). Normally, the size of the *lapang* is 26.7 ft. in length and 12.5 in breadth.

Interestingly, there are specific trees with which *lapang* are prepared and they are locally known as *Salyo* (Scientific name - *Michelia Champaca*) and *Dolo* (Scientific name - *Exbucklandia*) etc. These trees are found only in deep jungle so it takes 3-4 days or even a week for the locals (male members only) to find and prepare it. During these days, they stayed in jungles. The *lapangs* are normally prepared with traditional tools such as axe and machete but today, modern equipments are also used. After it is prepared, another group of male member of the clan also goes to the jungle to extend their help in bringing it. While bringing (pulling & pushing) it from the jungle, the participants make a traditional chant 'ho' to boost up the energy for all the pullers/participants till the village.

Since Apatanis live in a very close-knitted settlement pattern, the *lapang* provides a convenient space for public events. This is used as a place for various purposes such as ritual, gathering, meeting etc. It is also traditionally considered as a sacred place where women folks (who have crossed puberty) are not allowed to climb on the *lapang*. It is believed that such act would bring bad omen to men members of their clan/village whenever they go for hunting in jungle.

The primary purpose of *lapang* is as a stage for *Murung*. A day or two before the feast begins, young clansmen spend several hours on the platform winding stiff lengths of cane into ropes that will be used to lead and tether the mithuns and cows to it. Then, on the day of the sacrifice, it becomes a platform for public display (Haimendorf, 1962).

Basically, *lapang* is repaired after every 2 years by their respective clans/villages just before they host a local festival called *Myoko*. This festival is celebrated for well being and wealth of their respective families and to keep the social

fabric intact. It is celebrated in rotational manner in such a way that every village or clan gets a chance to host it once in every 3 years. The preparation of this festival starts after the completion of harvesting, by hunting a monkey which is locally known as '*Biding Lanii*' and then it is sacrificed to the spirit of this festival called '*Myoko Ui*'. It is normally held during early days of November but the actual festival is held in March.

As mentioned above there are 7 main villages of Apatanis. Of these villages, 85 *lapangs* are there and they are given below (fig. 1) as village-wise:-

Village	Nos. of Lapang
Dutta	4
Bamin-Michi	7
Mudang-Tage	10
Hari	13
Hija	15
Hong	17
Bulla	19

Figure 1: Village-wise nos. of Lapang in particular village

C.V.F. Haimendorf (1962) stated that most of the Apatani villages have four to six *lapangs* but the no. has changed in the present days with the clans splitting into exogamous groups as shown in the fig. 1.

Uses of Lapang

According to the available sources, both study materials and personal interview with priests, village elders and youths, the uses of *Lapang* are discussed below:-

- Settling Disputes:** Every tribe of the state has a common place which is used as a meeting place of village elders, e.g. *Kebang* of the Adis. This place is used for many purposes including settling dispute; a case to be heard or decision to be taken for the interest of the community. Likewise, the Apatanis also have such place called. *Lapang*. All the important decisions/cases concerning their respective clan/village of the Apatani society are taken / heard here in the *lapang*. Such kinds of meetings are held as and when required. The annual audit of the village/clan level welfare trust is also conducted here.
- Performing Rituals:** Rituals are symbolic in nature and it is related to tradition, supernatural spirits, belief systems, life cycle ceremonies, festivals, narratives, agriculture and healing. *Murung* is one of the major ritual celebrations among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the primary function of this ritual celebration is to appease the supernatural spirits in order to get good health, wealth and prosperity. It is celebrated in the month of January after carefully observing the chicken liver omen test. Without omen test, such celebration cannot be solemnized. On the day of celebration, priest climbs on *lapang* and chants the hymns. After the completion of chanting, mithuns and cows are brought to the *lapang* where they are sacrificed by the clansmen (Kani, 1993).
- Recreation for men:** Given the ample open space the platform provides during the leisure time, clansmen/villagers use the *lapang* for recreation like playing cards, dance, sing and spend time merrily.

- d) **Punishing the criminals:** In the earlier days, the apatanis did not have any formal administration of justice. *Buliang*, the village council of the tribe meet informally and tend to take action without arranging for a formal hearing and trial. The Apatanis do not hesitate to inflict the death penalty if they see no other way of eliminating a disturbing element from their midst. For instance, the execution of *Chigi Duyu*, a member of a patrician family of Dutta village, who had been involved in various doubtful cattle deals and was known as a thief for years. For public display, he was tied to *Taliang lapang* of *Hibu* clan of Hang village; his legs were fastened in a log, tied to a *lapang*. Later, he was banished from the apatani society by exterminating him (*Heimendorf*, 1962).
- e) **For tying domesticated animals:** The hardwood poles of *lapang* were used for tying domesticated animals like cows and mithuns by the villagers in days of yore.
- f) **Entertaining guest:** The Apatani traditional houses are very small and it does not have enough space to accommodate guests during any social events like *niipo apin* (feast when a new baby is born), the *lapang* proves to be a very convenient place to accommodate the guest during the function. The platform is used for serving and enjoying foods. It is also used for recreational purpose by men.

From the above uses, the *lapang* of Apatanis acts as an important place for various purposes. It is closely attached to the socio-religious life of the tribe. Its clean, flat, dry surface is also an excellent work space for various tasks, such as splitting long lengths of bamboo, and a convenient meeting place for groups, such as the many women's savings cooperatives. It is also a good spot for idle pursuits, especially playing cards.

Changing Nature of Lapang

With the changing time, the Apatani society has also embraced changes in their social, cultural, economical and religious life. The *Lapang* which was originally built of heavy wooden planks, cane ropes and bamboos without any roof over the platform has now been shifted. Today, cement, iron rod and other construction materials are used to build *lapang* and tin roof over it to protect it from rain. Some *lapangs* are now protected from the sun and rain by a wooden structure/iron pipes supporting a roof of galvanized corrugated iron sheets. Moreover, when a *lapang* is repaired, its wooden posts and planks are replaced with concrete supports and slabs. It is maintained and repaired by the clansmen after every 2 years before the offshoot of the festival of *Myoko* in the month of March. Moreover, every village has a modified *lapang*.

Village	Nos. of Heritage Lapang/ Original form of Lapang	Nos. of Semi-Concrete Lapang	Nos. of Fully Concrete Lapang
Hong	1	16	Nil
Bamin-Michi	Nil	7	Nil
Mudang-Tage	Nil	8	2
Hari	Nil	13	Nil
Dutta	Nil	3	1
Hija	Nil	15	Nil
Bulla	1	18	Nil

Figure 2: Village-wise nos. of Original form, Semi-Concrete & Fully Concrete Lapang

As it can be observed from the above table (fig. 2) that most of the *lapangs* in the Apatani villages are either semi-concrete or concrete, only 2 *lapangs* are in original form. Of the 2 original *lapangs* one is *Takar Lapang* of the *Hibu* Clan

of Hong village which had been declared as a heritage *lapang* by the Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh on 14th September, 2006 and the other one is *Tanyang lapang* of Bulla village.



Figure 3: Takar Lapang of the Hibu Clan



Figure 4: Neha Lapang, a modified lapang



Figure 5: Talyang Lapang of the Hibu Clan, a modified lapang

As shown above, fig. 3 depicts Takar Lapang is totally made of the traditional construction materials and is still in the original form and nothing is kept on it respecting the age-old traditional beliefs while both fig. 4 & 5 are modified *lapangs*. Cements, iron rods, sand, tins etc. can be seen protecting the platform from sun and rain. Moreover, the platform is used to keep construction materials.

The tribe switching to concrete and semi-concrete *lapangs* from the original form is due to the intervention of the forest department, according to the respondents. The reason for intercession of the forest department is the felling of large nos. of trees every year for the construction of *lapang* and for other purposes which will affect the ecology of the area in the long run. According to the respondents, the forest department provided funds for the modification in *lapang* with modern materials available other than woods.

In spite of the modification in the traditional structure of the *lapang*, the Apatani tradition deprived its women folk from climbing on it. Menstruating women were not allowed to climb on the *lapang* because they believed that women

would bring bad omen to the men whenever they go for hunting in the jungle. But today, with the introduction of modern education and being educated of equal rights cutting across gender or sex, the taboo of women bringing bad omen to men is not practiced. Women, today, climb on the *lapang* to spread the food grains to dry, to keep construction materials etc.

With regard to modification and changing nature of *lapang*, there were mixed reactions among the respondents. While some appreciated the involvement of the government in the construction of *lapang* by providing funds for building concrete structure because building of *lapang* requires huge manpower and today most of the clansmen have moved out of the village to towns, cities, other states and abroad for higher studies and in search of better life and opportunities. In such situation, it is not plausible for every clansman to come back after every 2 years for the construction/maintenance of *lapang*. So, it is more convenient for the locals to make with modern concrete so that it will last for longer years. Many supported women climbing on the *lapang* and keeping the construction materials as they were

of the opinion that these days lapangs are rarely used for societal work. Some were of the opinion that the eccentricity of the age-old ritual structure should be retained without teasing it.

Earlier, Lapangs were constructed by each clan of the village but today due to less in clan member, many of them shares Lapang and they together construct and use it. For instance, in the *Bamin-Michi* village, *Tamo* and *Roto* clans, *Hano* and *Racho* clans, *Talo* and *Budhi* clans in Hong Village, *Mom*, *Kure* and *Rabi* Clans in Bulla village, *Haj* and *Puna* clans of Hija Village etc. There are again some *lapangs* which are maintained by other clan members due to extinction of the clan members. For instance, *Naru* clan's *Lapang* is maintained by the *Punyo* Clan of Hong Village.

5. Discussion

Lapang is an indispensable part of Apatani's socio-religious life; major ritual like Murung is conducted on it. Every clan have their own *lapang* in their village which acts as a place of assembly for the male elders where all the major decisions concerning the village, the valley and Apatani society are discussed and resolutions are adopted.

Furer-Haimendorf (1962), has rightly stated that 'the Apatanis do not hesitate to inflict the death penalty if they see no other way of eliminating a disturbing element from their midst'. To prevent actions of any one which affects the Apatanis in common were eliminated as can be understood from the story of '*Chigi Dyu*' which was done at *lapang*. In furtherance of the prevention of the minor crimes, criminal's legs were locked with a wooden lock and the body was tied to a pole of *lapang* for public display.

Lapang is considered to be one of the very important parts of Apatani's socio-religious life. In the bygone days, the platforms were kept neat and clean by sweeping it and no other personal belongings were kept on it. But today, all kinds of construction materials are kept viz. *rod*, *cement bags*, *bricks*, *wooden planks* etc. on the *lapang*. One can easily find how disorderly the construction materials are kept which gives a mucky looks.

It is pertinent to mention that for the integration and strengthening of the seven villages of the valley, *Dapo* pacts were signed for assuring peace among the seven Apatani villages on *lapang*. According to Elwin (1988), *dapo* are the formal treaties of friendship between the individual villages.

The tribe is one of the most advanced tribe among the tribes of the state. Apatani women are well exposed to scientific education and aware of their rights which empowered them to thwart the age-old traditional practice of not letting them climb on *lapang*. Today, women across age group climbs on the platform for various purposes.

Notwithstanding its importance and effectiveness in the socio-religious life of the Apatanis, the structure and uses of *lapang* is subjected to change due to the influence of modernity. The introduction of modern education, introduction of indian legal system, introduction of modern housing materials etc. It is therefore, from the socio-

religious point of view, it may be suggested that the structure and uses of *lapang* be re-visited as per the needs of the changing time without defacing structure.

6. Conclusion

Like each tribe of the state has a place of assembly and performing rituals, the Apatanis also has one known as *lapang*. The ritual structure *lapang* being located at the centre of the Apatani village and having enough space to accommodate good number of people, the structure is a convenient place of assembly to discuss, debate, deliberate and to adopt the resolutions passed by the house. Unquestionably, one cannot live with the same age old traditional beliefs and practices, changes are bound to take place in every aspect of our life but such changes should not be to the extent that the tribe losses in absolute its identity. Though change is inevitable, the tribe should continue to strive to maintain the sanctity of *lapang*.

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