

# Mon Shugu: The Ancient Art of Monpa Paper - Making in Mon Tawang Region, Arunachal Pradesh

Genden Lhamu

Ph.D. Scholar Department of Buddhist Studies University of Delhi- 07, New Delhi, India

**Abstract:** *The Monpa people of Arunachal Pradesh, India, are renowned for their unique and long-standing tradition of paper-making skills that originated over a thousand years ago. Mon Shugu is made using traditional techniques that have been passed down across generations. Mon Shugu/Mon Shog symbolizes the rich cultural heritage of the Monpa people, an ethnic tribal group living in India, Bhutan, and Tibet. The Mon Shugu, or traditional paper-making method, is a testimony to the sustainable use of indigenous knowledge and resources and the preservation of centuries-old craftsmanship. Tibetan Buddhist texts and commentaries have extensively used these papers due to their strength and durability. The plant used for making the Mon Shugu is called the Shugu Sheng (*Daphne papyracea*), also known as the Himalayan nettle tree, which grows well in this Eastern Himalayan region. The bark of the plant is used primarily for paper-making, while the flowers are used to treat ailments and for ritual practices. The present article explores the intricate processes of making Mon Shugu, from the selection of raw materials to the final product, and the cultural significance this art embodies within/among the Monpa community in Arunachal Pradesh, shedding light on its role in preserving their unique cultural narratives, religious manuscripts, and artistic expressions. The article aims to highlight Mon Shugu's importance in preserving and dispensing Buddhism in the Himalayan region. In addition, it will explore Mon Shugu's role in conserving Buddhist culture and heritage in the area.*

**Keywords:** Mon Shugu, Monpa, Art, Culture, Heritage, Buddhism, traditional/indigenous knowledge.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Geographic location

Arunachal Pradesh, also known as the “Land of the Rising Sun,” is one of the 29<sup>th</sup> constituent states of India, located on the northeastern tip of India. It is situated between 26.28° N and 29.30° N latitude and 91.20° E and 97.30° E longitude and has an area of 83,743 sq. km. It shares its boundaries with Myanmar (Burma) to the east, Bhutan to the west, Tibet to the north and northeast, and the Indian states of Assam and Nagaland to the south. Arunachal Pradesh is the least populated State in the country, as per the 2011 Census, the population of this landlocked State is 13,82,611, of which 7,20,232 are males and 6,62,379 are females with a population density of 17 persons per sq. Km and the sex ratio of 920 and a decadal growth rate of 25.92 percent.

Arunachal Pradesh is home to 26 major tribes, 110 sub-tribes, and numerous minor tribes belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid group, each with its own unique traditional culture, customs, and language. There are three broad cultural groups based on socio-religious affinities. The first group consists of the Monpas and Sherdukpen, who inhabit the high mountain ranges bordering Tibet and follow the Mahayana Sect of Buddhism. In contrast, the Tai Khams

Adhere to the Hinayana sect of Buddhism. The second group includes the Mijis, Akas, Nyishis, Tagins, Apatanis, Adis, and Mishimis, who practice the Donyi Polo religion; their worship aligns with the phases of agricultural cycles. The third group consists of the Nocktes, Wangchos, Tangsas, and Tutsas from the Changlang and Tirap districts, who follow a basic form of Vaishnavism, while the Tangas worship their God at the Rang Frah Mandir. Some tribes have adopted Christianity. These different tribal groups have a rich tradition of colorful festivals such as Lossar, Nyokum, Dree, Boori-Boot, Si-Donyi, Mopin, Solung, Reh, Tamaaladu, Sangken, Chalo-Loku, and Oriah.c

### 1.2 Buddhism

The introduction of Buddhism to the Mon Tawang region dates back to the 7th century, during the reign of a king named Kala Wangpo. The religion gained further prominence in the 8th century with the arrival of Guru Padmasambhava, whose visits have sanctified several locations. In the 11th century, the region received the blessings from the revered Buddhist master Pha Dampa Sangye, whose thrones, footprints, and meditation caves can still be found at Brakar, Bhaghajang, and Chagzam. By the late 13th or early 14th century, the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (1284-1339), established the Khyiney Gonpa to the north of Jang village. During the 15th and 16th centuries, key figures such as Thangtong Gyalpo (1385-1464), Tsangton Rolpai Dorje, Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), and Lama Ogyen Zangpo contributed to the further dissemination of Buddhism in the region. While Buddhism had already taken root in Mon Tawang before the establishment of the Tawang Monastery, its formal consolidation and expansion began in earnest following the monastery's foundation. The numerous monasteries and sacred sites dispersed throughout the Tawang region reflect the area's profound connection to Tibetan Buddhism. One of the most prominent religious centers is the Gaden Namgyal Lhatse Gonpa (*Ga ldan rnam rgyal Lha rtze dgonpa*), popularly known as Tawang Monastery, which translates to “Celestial Paradise in the Clear Night.”

### 1.3 The people

The Monpa tribe is a dominant ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh, they are also found in Sikkim, Spiti, Ladakh, and neighboring countries of Tibet, Bhutan, and Myanmar; Monpa means a ‘person to a person who is from the Mon region’ Here Mon region refers to the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Most of them follow Tibetan Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. The advent of Buddhism in the area is believed to have originated in the late

7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century by Khandro Drowa Sangmo and Guru Padmasambhava.

Tibetans also use the term Mon to designate people living in lower regions, also called Lho-Mon/southern Mon. In Bon and Buddhist texts, Mon is considered one of the original Tibetan races. The Mon-keh (belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language group) is the lingua franca of the Tawang and West Kameng districts, though variations in tone and phonetics are there from village to village. The Tawang Monpa live in the Tawang region (Tawang district, the Dirang Monpa in the Dirang region, and the Kalaktang (Kha legs steng) Monpa in the Kalktang region in West Kameng district.



#### 1.4 Mon Shugu

The Monpa people are renowned for their long-standing tradition of paper-making skills that originated over a thousand years ago. Mon Shugu is made using traditional techniques that have been passed down across generations. The plant used for making the Mon Shugu is called the Shugu Sheng (*Daphne papyracea*), also known as the Himalayan nettle tree, which grows well in this Eastern Himalayan region. The bark of the same plant is used primarily for paper-making, while the flowers are used to treat ailments and for ritual practices.

Earlier, it was known as *Boi Sho /Bod Shog*, Bod meaning Tibet, and shugu meaning paper. However, in recent times, it has come to be known as the Mon shugu as the Mon people were the ones who were practicing the art since its inception and have since gained popularity as its present name. Mon Shugu has been an integral part of the Monpa culture, This fine-textured handmade paper is highly regarded for its durability and suitability for religious texts and manuscripts due to its thickness. It is often used for printing Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and other religious documents due to its ability to preserve the text for a long time.

The Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh in the Tawang region has recently revived the age-old practice of making handmade papers (mon shugu) using indigenous resources with the help of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), Government of India. These papers are used for making Buddhist manuscripts, Buddhist texts, writings, Wind horse

flag/Long ta (rlung-rta)-fan/darchok (Lung means Wind and ta means horse, and fan/ darchok means flag) prayer flags, writing materials, etc. It is also used for making flag poles during Buddhist festivals. These papers have been used since ancient times for writing Mantras, sutras, and Buddhist epics. This indigenous technique of paper making aims to develop the Monpa traditional craft and also bring in employment opportunities among the people.

#### 1.5 Technique of manufacturing of Mon Shugu

Making Mon shugu is environmentally friendly; it eliminates the need to cut down whole trees. There is no need for the use of chemicals and other artificial agents. The best variety from the Shugu Sheng plant is collected, which is located in a forest far away from the village. It is a tedious process; gathering the bark takes a whole day. The people who make this paper are referred to as the Shugu Choigan. The Monpa handmade paper will be made from the bark of a local tree called Shugu Sheng, *Daphne papyracea*, also known as the Himalayan nettle tree, as the primary raw material. The paper is made from the inner fibrous bark. The plant used for papermaking is also used in ritual practices and has medicinal purposes. The process begins with the collection of the inner bark from the nettle tree. The main harvesting of the bark of the *shugu sheng/ Daphne* plant is usually started in March to April and continues till December before the blooming flowers.

This bark is then soaked, pounded, and boiled in ash water for over 10 hours to create a pulp. The softened bark is beaten to create a pulp, which is spread on a wooden frame or sieve to dry. Next, they will put the pulp and mix it with water, stirring it continuously. The sheets are sun-dried for at least 2 days, and the resulting paper is smooth, durable, and well-suited for writing and printing.

#### 1.6 Uses of Mon Shugu:

The quality of Mon Shugu paper is renowned for its ability to preserve text for extended periods. Mon Shugu has been mainly used for writing religious texts, Buddhist epics, and printing Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and other texts, contributing to the dissemination of religious knowledge in the region. Mon Shugu's (paper) has played a vital role in preserving and disseminating this knowledge. It has been used for writing, printing, and hand-copying religious texts, contributing to the spread of Buddhism in Tibet and beyond. They are used in rituals and pujas, and are used in prayer wheels. They are used in the *lungta* (horizontal flag), which is used in rituals. They are used for artistic purposes and making exquisite gift items, etc

The flower of the *Shugu Sheng* plant is also used as an offering during the rituals in altars. These flowers are also used as incense (sang/ tsang sheng) and in perfumes/aromatics and have medicinal value (dressing wounds). It is also used for heart ailments and for treating fever in Tibetan medicine. The flowering season is usually in February -March.

**Table 1:** Tools used for making Paper

S.NO	English Name	MONPA Dialect	Purpose
1.	Pestle	Lag tong/Shang tong	For beating the shrub into a paste.
2.	Mortar	Gor lab/ Do lab	For beating the shrub into a paste.
3.	Sieve	Shang grubzhi	For drying the paste into the final product
4.	Cauldron	Langa	For boiling the bark.
5.	knife	Khyochung	For cleaning and cutting the bark

### 1.7 Economy

Mon shugu is currently found in Mokto Village, Tawang district, and Shangti Village, West Kameng district. In the olden days, the people from Mokto village would pay tax to the Tibetan government in the form of shugu. Every village has its form of tax payment, the Kharseneng area would pay for red rice, the Khet and Gyamdong sides would pay for bamboo handicrafts. Depending on what the village is known for, the excess production, or their specialization, they would have to pay that product as their tax.

Earlier, the Monpas would sell these papers to countries like Tibet, Bhutan, Thailand, and Japan, as no paper-making industry existed in these countries at that time. This local industry gradually declined, and the indigenous handmade paper was taken over by the inferior Chinese paper. The traditional way of making Mon Shugu is time-consuming, as its raw materials are not easy to source. Besides, the process of collection, cleaning, boiling, beating, drying, and cutting of paper is hands-on and very time-consuming. At present, some types of machinery have been added to the process to lessen the time spent on the process while keeping the quality of the paper intact.

The Buddhist practitioners write religious texts on this paper, which are then inserted into the prayer wheels at monasteries and nunneries. The nomads (*Brokpa*) would also use this paper for making their prayer flags. These *mon shugu* have also been used for making handbags, envelopes, and a base for paintings. There is a strong need to advocate the importance of this tradition and knowledge, and spread awareness among the younger generation to revive this once-forgotten tradition. The significance of reviving the *Mon Shugu* centers on the preservation of the traditional culture as well as the Buddhist Tibetan heritage.

### Conclusions

Paper was exported since ancient times, but owing to its expensive manufacturing process and easier technological advancement, the ease of manufacturing paper of inferior quality became more popular and thus, replaced the age-old tradition of *Mon Shugu*. This chemical-free, eco-friendly paper, strong tensile strength, a lightweight, and durable nature of the paper has continued to contribute to its characteristic features.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in preserving and promoting traditional Monpa papermaking techniques. Efforts have been made to revive these traditional practices and ensure their continuation. Prime Minister Modi has advocated the revival of Mon Shugu in his *Mann ki Baat* campaign. He emphasized rejuvenating the art and gave employment to the local people. The uniqueness of this art

helps in the protection of the environment as well as opening new avenues of income for the residents. With government aid, the traditional Paper and Handicraft Marketing Society has been recently set up to help advertise and popularise this dying tradition. The Monpa handmade paper unit will also serve as a training center for the local youths. KVIC will provide marketing support and explore markets for locally manufactured handmade paper.

### References

- [1] Biswal. Ashok (2006). *Mystic Monpas of Tawang Himalaya*, Delhi: Indus Publication Company
- [2] Tenpa, Lobsang (2018). *An Early History of the Mon Region (India) and its relationship with Tibet and Bhutan*, Dharamshala, India: The Library of Tibetan Works & Archives
- [3] *Arunachal's Monpas look up to e-platforms for preserving handmade paper*. The Arunachal Times.
- [4] Wangchuk, Rinchen Norbu (2021). *Arunachal is Reviving its 1000-year-old art of making paper that doesn't harm trees*. The Better India.
- [5] Mizuno, Tenpa (2015). *Himalayan Nature and Tibetan Buddhist Culture In Arunachal Pradesh, India Springer* Tokyo Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London
- [6] Norbu, Tsewang (2008). *The Monpas of Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh*, Itanagar Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
- [7] See-  
<https://www.thebetterindia.com/247143/arunachal-pradesh-mon-shugu-ancient-paper-making-technique-tawang-monpa-tribe-kvic-india-nor41/>
- [8] See-<https://textilevaluechain.in/in-depth-analysis/monpa-handmade-paper-of-arunachal-pradesh/>