

# CONSUMERISM IN TRIBAL INDIA : A CASE STUDY FROM ARUNACHAL PRADESH

S. (Roy) Mukherjee<sup>#</sup>, N. Ali<sup>\*</sup> and B. Ghosh<sup>#</sup>

<sup>#</sup>Department of Economics, University of North Bengal, NBU, Darjeeling, India

<sup>\*</sup> Department in Economics, J.N. College, Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh

## INTRODUCTION

The tribal economy all over the world was generally characterized by its primitiveness, where market was virtually absent and money played a trivial role. People produced their every need on their own. They neither produced any marketable surplus nor did they purchase anything from the market. The mode of production was mainly agrarian based, apart from which they practiced hunting, gathering, fishing, weaving, etc. A sort of stagnant but self-sufficient and self-reliant economy has been persisting since time immemorial. The colonial administration to some extent, had given some developmental touch to these societies mainly for the convenience of intra and inter-territorial expansion activities; rather the true history of development of these societies has started from the time of independence for the individual societies or for the state as a whole. And the task of development in these societies was carried out mainly on the basis of huge capital investment without estimating any result. Because of chief money flow as injected into the societies, the mode of production has also changed drastically followed by the consumption pattern. The standard of living has risen apparently, however, the developmental task has become complicated and it becomes more knotty when the market in these societies gets the globalization waves. Now these are purely consumerist societies and gaining momentum to conduct vigorous studies on different socio-economic aspects that determine development.

The study area, Arunachal Pradesh is located at the North East extremity of the Eastern Himalayan belt with the geographical extents of 26°28' N to 29°30' N latitudes and 91°30' E to 97°30' E longitude, covering a geographical area of 83,743 km<sup>2</sup>. The state is bounded by the international borders i.e., Bhutan in the west, China in the snow clad north and Myanmar in the north east; apart from an inter-state boundary with Nagaland in the east and Assam in the south. The entire state of Arunachal Pradesh is almost a rugged mountainous terrain (ranging from 1829 m ASL to 6400 m ASL) with beautiful green valleys drained by innumerable rivulets and mighty rivers cascading down from the upper elevations. The sparsely inhabited Arunachal Pradesh is predominantly occupied by the 110 major tribes and sub-tribes, and there are said to be about 20 major ethnic groups, who are affiliated to the so-called Tibeto-Burmese group of languages and with regard to their racial affiliation, they have been described as Indo-Mongoloid, Proto-Mongoloid, Palco-Mongoloid and so on (Pandey and Tripathy, 1997). The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are broadly divided into three categories: (a) the communities which form the larger cultural traditions such as the Monpas, the Sherdukpens, the Khambas, the Khampties, the Singpohs, etc; (b) the communities of the southern most parts of the state, such as the Noctes, the Wanchos and the Tangsas, who show the clear impact of the neighbouring cultures; and (c) all other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who have close cultural and linguistic affinities amongst themselves. The people have migrated in this territory in an unknown past rather from the established theories of Origin and Migration; it is revealed that the people have migrated in this area in search of agricultural land. The art of cultivation was known to them and owing to a vast land area; they started practicing shifting cultivation or *jhum*. The tribesmen all over the state produced their bare needs in the *jhum* tillage; neither had they produced any marketable surplus nor did they buy anything from the market. Moreover, in absence of any modern administration, the tribesmen developed their own societies as per their own customs, rituals and taboos. A sort of Village States were formed throughout the territory. Every village had their own Government,

own territory and own administration. The Gambura led the society on basis of the *Kebang* decision. Although primitive, they led a peaceful life over the generations. In the purely barter form of economy, people exchanged their needs mostly as an intra-tribe and sometimes inter-tribes basis. There was no circulation of money nor there existed any market mechanism. The tradition went on until the Government of India after independence created the North East Frontier Agency with effect from early 1950's; the Nehruvian principle of tribal development in the territory was adopted since then. Along with the national mainstream, the territory also received handsome allocation to start the development process.

Following the Nehru-Elwin theory, the territory takes-off its journey by disposing the sum in road construction, school building construction and infrastructure development programs, by importing the entire technological know-how from out side the territory. Therefore, the lion part went off from the state in terms of salary and cost of inputs. However, a few hands of the territory itself received a considerable amount, which were influential to the extent of educational qualification, social status (village headmen etc.) and political likeness. The classless society fragmented into classes. In the following years, the Chinese Aggression (1962) made the planners to feel the development task otherwise. The territory achieved the Union Territory Status in the year 1972 and the first ever General Election was held in the year 1978. Thereby people's participation in the development activities started to take place. The Plan Allocation for the territory raised many-a-fold. The initiation of modern political system blessed the society with easier money flow from the Union Government; rather market mechanism did not developed or any noticeable production started to be accrued. The easy money to a large deal drained away from the state in order to purchase ostentative needs for some of the people.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The present paper is a broader documentation of obtained field data relating to production, consumption, investment and other economic activities performed at the household level at the cross-sections of the study area, selected randomly keeping various diversities in mind. Data gathered from the field have again been checked with very sparsely available Government level publications and other related references. Filtered data have been analyzed statistically for accruing the result discussed henceforth. For the sake of an extensive study, interview was taken from the various age groups of people with a sample size of 120 covering 24 villages of 8 districts of the state in order to sketch out their varied perceptions on consumption domain.

**Table 1.** Occupational structure of the sample households

Name of the occupation	No. of Respondents	% of the respondents
Landless agricultural labour	9	7.5
Landless non-agricultural labour	4	3.33
Marginal cultivators	7	5.83
Small cultivators	13	10.83
Medium cultivators	29	24.16
Large cultivators	9	7.5
Business and supply (including Govt. contractors)	19	15.83
Service	28	23.33
Other (not mentioned)	2	1.66
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2:** Family income of the sample households (Rs. /Year)

Income level	No. of respondents	% of the Respondents
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Less than 25,000	11	9.16
25001- 50,000	6	5.00
50,001-75,000	7	5.83
75,001-100,000	6	5.00
100,001-125,000	5	4.16
125,001-150,000	17	14.16
150,001-175,000	19	15.83
175,001-200,000	18	15.00
More than 200,00	31	25.83
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	

**Table 3:** Distribution of consumption expenditure of the sample households (As percentage of total income)

Expenditure heads	Expenditure as % of total income
Food	3%
Clothing	25%
Shelter	1.2%
Education	10%
Medicine	12%
Cosmetics	16%
Recreation	20%
Farm inputs	4.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>91.2</b>

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is found that the traditional tribal society in the study area, Arunachal Pradesh is in transition from a mere subsistence earner to a surplus producing one. The transition is however, not obeying any established theory. In the days of market mechanism, the mode of production has also got a drastic change in respect to the functional relationship of various inputs involved in the production process as well as in its distributional aspects. From a mere subsistence level of mode of production, the economy as a whole has been reorganized for the market. Thus, generation of personal income has achieved priority among the tribesmen. As revealed from the field investigation (Ref. Table 1), nearly 50% of the respondents have vertically shifted their profession i.e. from the traditional agricultural practice to secondary and tertiary sector. The rising literacy level alone is not the only cause of shifting the choice of profession of the tribesmen in the study area as found in the field investigation rather this vertical mobility is a spontaneous result of development of infrastructural setups.

Table 2 shows a clear cut distinction of the income generating groups into high income group and low income group. The virtual absence of middle income group polarizes the society in the study area. Out of the 120 households, it is found that a total of 17 households (14.16%) have yearly income less than Rs 50,000, which is considered as the basic requirement for maintaining livelihood of a five members' family at the present market price. Again, amongst this lower income group, 11 households (9.17%) are hardly able to earn their daily requirement from their present structure of occupation. Interestingly, this group of people comprises mainly the occupational groups (permanent occupation) of 'agricultural labour' and 'non-agricultural labour', whom we found living below the poverty line. However, it is also revealed from the household level study that the people of this category are engaging themselves in other

subsistence activities like gathering, rearing, and fishing etc. based on the local forest resources. However, 'hunting' is a practice, persisting into the society irrespective of any economic group.

It is however, to note that the present study has revealed the fact that at around 90% of the people in the study area are living with middle and high income, contrary to the general perception that the tribal people are generally backward and living below the poverty line. Poverty persists there rather in very shadow form. Apart from their known sources of income, easy money flow into their economy. Field study reveals a vertical mobility of the occupational structure of tribesmen as well as their consumption pattern.

The tribal society in the study area has shown the tendency of a steady rise of income level, when the collected field data has been compared with the available secondary data. Out of the 120 samples, 90 (75%) families were found to have an annual income of Rs. 100,000 or above; surely belong to the 'High Middle Class to Higher Income Group' categories. Thus, consumption pattern of the tribesmen as found from the field survey (Table 3) has also been evolved likewise.

It is however, to note the fact that very small amount of the total income (3%), the average households do spend on food. This is because of the fact that the tribesmen do produce all their the necessary requirements for food from their farms and merely the items, which could not be produced in the farm sector, are bought from the market; these include salt, sugar, mustard oil and so on.

Apart from food, they do spend a very trivial amount on their shelter. Construction of house is not a regular phenomenon for the tribesmen in the study area. At an average, the local people build their house every 10 years; moreover, the materials for construction are collected from local forests too. Apart from these, the required labour is gathered from the community; so that the cost of constructing houses is nominal as compared to the other components of total expenditure.

Education is now an emerging phenomenon among the of tribals. The average tribal family spends a considerable portion of the total income on education of their wards in the form of school/ college tuition fees, hostel fees, cost of dresses and educational stationeries, tuition fees for the private tutors, etc. As it is revealed from the field survey that the wards of a bit well-to-do families are accommodated in the school hostels in the far flung urban centres and because of lesser density of higher educational institutions, the students have to stay in the hostels and other self-arranged rental houses during their study in colleges and institution of higher studies. As we found from the sample universe, an average of 10% of the total income is spent for education.

Another noteworthy component of the total expenditure was the 12% expenditure of their total income on medicine and other health related problems – a very much uncommon phenomenon so far in the study area. It was even some decades ago, that the local *miris* (village medicine man) had taken care of the physiological problems by means of traditional system of medicine, which radically disappeared because of the active presence of modern form of allopathic medicine and Medicare. Although the rugged topographical features retard the adequate growth of infrastructural facilities in the study area, the people of remote villages still prefer to go to the health centres of modern medicine and sometime they do prefer to be present in the luxurious nursing homes located outside the state. Thus, expenditure on medicine has risen considerably in the study area.

Expenditure on cosmetics and recreation are other new dimensions of the tribal livelihood as it is found from the field study that the younger generation uses imported cosmetics of high price. And the expenditure on recreation has been raised rapidly in the form of television and other electronic media of entertainment; although living in the remote villages, the facilities have an active presence in the study area.

Since the field survey was conducted among the villagers, who are basically attached to the agricultural activities directly or indirectly, they do have an expenditure in the form of purchasing farm input; although very insignificant (4%). The medium and large cultivators are investing a considerable amount of their total income to purchase modernized farm inputs such as fertilizer, insecticides, pesticides, fungicides, hybrid seeds and sometime they do employ mechanized farm equipments like tractor, power tiller, sprayer etc. hired from the Department of Agriculture and other organizations.

From the analysis of the distribution of consumption expenditure (Table 3) it is revealed that the high percentage of consumption expenditure (91.2%) of the sample households implies their marginal propensity to save (MPS) is automatically low. This may be the reason that the tribal communities in the study area have taken the first generation test of liquid money that too in the era of globalization and consumerization (Roy Mukherjee et al., 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Experience gathered through this study shows that the tribal society in the study area is in transition. But the changes are not synonymous when compared to the other parts of the country or the world. Changes are rapid and sometimes jumbling to the heights without obeying any established theory of social transition. Impelled from the way of the modern living, the tribesmen are now running after cheap money easily available at their surroundings in the form of abundant natural resources, which they are exploiting without caring the future consequences. The moral limitations, by which the tribesmen were once guided to protect their environment within the traditional framework and had a deep belief on the mother nature, has been detracted to a large extent due to the outrageous presence of so-called market forces, which are more prominent in the days of globalization and consumerization. The faster rate of degradation of natural resources in the study area thus warrants further studies.

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