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ARUNACHAL PRADESH IN TRANSITION: EMERGING TRENDS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the processes, patterns and impacts of social, political, religious and cultural changes in Arunachal Pradesh. It also highlights its transition from a traditionally isolated tribal society to one increasingly integrated with the mainstream socio-political systems of India. The introduction of modern administration, education and infrastructure after independence has significantly reduced geographical isolation and facilitated mobility, urbanisation, and the emergence of new social classes. Traditional institutions such as joint family systems, customary marriage practices and indigenous governance structures have undergone considerable transformation, giving way to nuclear families, evolving marital norms and participatory political systems like Panchayati Raj. Religious life has also transformed, with declining adherence to indigenous beliefs and increasing influence of Christianity and to a lesser extent, Hindu cultural practices. Cultural changes are reflected in housing patterns, dress, food habits and lifestyle, driven by modernisation, government schemes, and interaction with external populations. While these changes have contributed to development, education and improved living standards, they have also posed challenges to the preservation of indigenous identity and traditions. The paper concludes that Arunachal Pradesh is experiencing a complex and dynamic transition, requiring a balanced approach between modernisation and cultural continuity.

INTRODUCTION

Change is an inevitable and universal phenomenon affecting every society. It may occur in the form of substitution, variation, or modification of existing conditions. Social change refers to changes in social structure, behaviour, values, institutions, and relationships. According to K. Kuppaswamy, social change is "some change in social behaviour and in social structure." Such changes may emerge internally within society or through contact with outside cultures. The pace of change differs from region to region depending on factors such as urbanisation, industrialisation, education, communication, and administrative development.

The people of Arunachal Pradesh remained isolated for centuries because of difficult terrain, lack of communication, and inadequate transportation. However, after Indian independence, administrative expansion, education, urbanisation, trade, and interaction with neighbouring communities gradually transformed their social, political, economic, religious, and cultural life. These changes accelerated particularly during the second half of the twentieth century and continue even today.

Trends and Transformations in Social Life

One of the most visible changes in Arunachal Pradesh is social mobility. Traditional tribal society in Arunachal Pradesh has gradually shifted towards modernity. The introduction of Indian administration and modern education led to the emergence of new social groups like government officials, politicians, intellectuals, businessmen, students, social workers, and religious organisations. These groups now play important roles in shaping society. Urbanisation and education also encouraged migration from villages to towns and cities. Many people moved in search of employment, higher education, business opportunities, and better living conditions. Urban centres attracted people because of roads, markets, electricity, transport facilities, and modern amenities. Consequently, villages experienced a reduction in population, and many elderly parents were left behind while younger family members settled in towns. Migrants usually return to their villages only during marriages, deaths, elections, festivals, or disputes. The establishment of Indian administration ensured peace and security, leading to the relocation of villages from remote hilltops to roadside areas and plains. Modern roads and communication facilities made such places more suitable for habitation. Family structure also underwent significant changes. Earlier, joint families were common, but modernisation and economic factors encouraged the growth of nuclear families. This affected

kinship relations, marriage practices, and clan structures. Traditional customs such as child marriage and pre-birth betrothal have largely disappeared. Love marriages and inter-tribal marriages are now common. Premarital relationships, once rare, are increasingly accepted among the younger generation.

Despite these changes, arranged marriage within the community remains highly valued. The Nyida marriage ceremony continues to symbolise social prestige. Bride price in the form of mithuns, pigs, and local liquor still exists. Modern influences, however, introduced western-style reception parties and court marriage registration. Divorce and legal separation are also increasingly practised. Polygamy still survives in some areas but has declined due to education and economic pressures. Women in Arunachal Pradesh traditionally enjoyed a relatively high social status. Even in earlier times, they participated equally in agriculture and rituals. Today, access to education and employment has further strengthened their position. Women work in schools, offices, and other institutions and generally do not experience severe social discrimination.

Modern education became one of the most powerful agents of social transformation. After independence, the Government of India introduced integrated educational policies aimed not only at literacy but also at teaching patriotism, equality, hygiene, cultivation, road construction, and environmental awareness. Initially, education faced many obstacles. Geographic isolation made people unfamiliar with schools. Economic conditions forced children to assist their parents in agriculture, household work, hunting, and animal rearing. Early marriages also discouraged schooling. Many parents feared that educated children would become outsiders and abandon their ancestral property and traditions. In cases of child marriage, parents worried that schooling might lead to separation and conflicts between families. To overcome these difficulties, the government, village leaders, missionaries, and student organisations spread awareness about the importance of education through meetings, tours, songs, plays, and films. Schools were first established in community halls and open spaces, and later, residential schools were opened at central locations because villages were scattered. Gradually, parents recognised the value of education and started sending their children to schools and colleges, even outside the state. Today, many educated youths from Arunachal Pradesh work in government offices, businesses, and politics. Modern education thus contributed to the emergence of a new educated elite class and accelerated

modernisation and social stratification.

Shift in Political Structures

The political history of Arunachal Pradesh reflects gradual administrative evolution. During British rule, the region was known by various names, such as the North-East Frontier Tract and later the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Administrative divisions changed several times between 1914 and 1965. In 1972, NEFA became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh, and in 1987, it achieved full statehood within the Indian Union. Under British rule, the frontier areas remained largely isolated because the British considered the region economically unprofitable and geographically difficult. They followed a policy of limited interference and indirect administration through Political Officers and local intermediaries. After independence, the Government of India adopted a more systematic administrative policy. The Constituent Assembly appointed the Bordoloi Committee to recommend a suitable administrative structure. The committee suggested that tribal customs and traditional institutions should be preserved while overall administration and development remained under the government. Initially, people were suspicious of outsiders and feared loss of land and freedom. Indian officials, therefore, introduced administration gradually and carefully without disturbing traditional authority. Village leaders such as Gaon Buras and Gaon Buris were recognised and incorporated into governance. New administrative centres were established with designated officers such as Circle Officers, Assistant Commissioners, and Deputy Commissioners. Their duties included developmental works, maintenance of law and order, revenue collection, and judicial functions. After the Chinese aggression of 1962, the government strengthened its administration and introduced institutions such as Kebang and Bango for the settlement of local disputes. These institutions combined customary laws with modern administration. Political Interpreters (Kotokis) and village elders became important intermediaries between the government and the people.

The Panchayati Raj system was introduced in 1967 following recommendations of the Ering Committee. Institutions such as Anchal Samitis and Zilla Parishads encouraged local self-government and political participation. Traditional leaders initially dominated these bodies, but educated younger generations gradually replaced them. In 1972, adult franchise was introduced, and people began actively participating in elections. Arunachal Pradesh now has 60 Assembly constituencies, and democratic political participation has become an important feature of modern society.

Transformation of Indigenous Beliefs under Modern Influence

Modernisation and external influences significantly affected indigenous religious beliefs. Earlier, tribal communities depended entirely on their traditional faiths and rituals. Natural events such as floods, storms, and unusual animal sightings were often interpreted through spiritual beliefs. Modern education and scientific knowledge have gradually reduced superstitions and taboos. The importance of traditional priests known as Nyibs declined, and many rituals are no longer practised in their original form. Hindu influence increased through education, media, and interaction with outsiders such as teachers, businessmen, police personnel, and government employees from neighbouring states. Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, Diwali, Holi, and Shivaratri became popular in urban centres. However, most tribal people did not convert to Hinduism because of differences regarding beef consumption and caste practices.

Christianity had a much stronger impact. Many students studying in missionary schools in Assam converted to Christianity and later spread the religion in their home areas. Christian missionaries established schools, churches, and

healing centres and actively promoted conversion. Conversion to Christianity brought major changes in religious and cultural life. Converts often abandoned traditional rituals, sacrifices, and belief in spirits and indigenous deities. Christian priests replaced traditional Nyibs in many ceremonies. Expensive traditional rituals involving animal sacrifice also encouraged conversion because Christianity appeared simpler and less costly. Christianity produced both positive and negative effects. Positive changes included discipline, cleanliness, sobriety, and reduction of alcohol and smoking habits. Regular church attendance also created a sense of community. However, critics argue that conversion weakened traditional beliefs, rituals, customs, and cultural identity.

Patterns of Cultural Change and Adaptation

Modernisation also transformed the cultural life of Arunachal Pradesh. Village settlements shifted from hilltops to roadside and plain areas because of road construction and improved communication. Government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Saubhagya Scheme, and Jal Jeevan Mission improved roads, electricity, and water supply in villages. Housing patterns changed significantly. Traditional bamboo and thatched houses are gradually declining, especially near urban areas. Modern houses made of wood, bricks, cement, and tin sheets are becoming common. Wealthier families now build RCC houses. Government schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan encouraged the construction of toilets and bathrooms, while the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana introduced LPG cooking gas, reducing dependence on firewood. Traditional dress and ornaments are now mainly used during festivals, marriages, and ceremonial occasions. Modern clothing, such as jeans, shirts, jackets, and shoes, replaced traditional attire in daily life. Similarly, traditional ornaments gave way to modern jewellery made of gold, silver, and alloys. Death rituals also changed, particularly among Christians. Traditional practices involving sacrifices, construction of bamboo altars, and citation of the Nyibs (priest) are often replaced by Christian prayer services and burial ceremonies. Non-Christian communities continue traditional rites, though in simplified forms. Traditional music, dance, and songs lost popularity among the younger generation due to the influence of television, cinema, mobile phones, and the internet. Modern dance forms such as hip-hop and contemporary dance became popular. Traditional musical instruments were replaced by guitars, drums, and keyboards. Nevertheless, original folk songs and tunes still survive during festivals and ceremonies. Language also changed because of increased interaction with outsiders and educational migration. Hindi emerged as a common lingua franca, especially in schools and urban centres. Students studying outside the state became exposed to new languages, cultures, and lifestyles, further accelerating cultural adaptation.

CONCLUSION

The people of Arunachal Pradesh are gradually adapting to modernity while maintaining parts of their traditional identity. The development of roads, electricity, education, healthcare, and communication transformed social and cultural life. Government schemes and administrative expansion improved living standards and connected remote villages with urban centres. Education and migration created new opportunities in employment, business, and politics. At the same time, modernisation weakened some traditional institutions, beliefs, and customs. Christianity, urbanisation, and external cultural influences particularly affected indigenous religion and cultural practices.

Despite these changes, traditional institutions such as Nyida marriage ceremony, folk songs, customary laws, and village councils continue to survive in modified forms. Arunachal Pradesh today represents a society in transition where tradition and modernity coexist side by side.

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