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The Role of Oral Traditions in Protest, Conflict Resolution and Restoring Peace: Changing Practices Among the Idu Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh, situated in India's northeastern frontier, is home to a range of indigenous tribes whose cultural practices remain deeply rooted in oral tradition. Beyond transmitting communal history and values, these oral narratives have long functioned as mechanisms of resistance, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding within tribal societies, a role oral tradition has played in societies around the world wherever communities sought to express dissent against dominant powers. Where written records were inaccessible or actively suppressed, marginalised groups have often turned to oral narrative to preserve cultural heritage and carry collective memory forward as a resilient form of resistance. Among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, myths, legends, folk tales, songs, and customary laws passed down across generations continue to serve several purposes at once: preserving cultural heritage, transmitting communal history, and, importantly, offering mechanisms for resistance, dispute resolution, and the maintenance of peace. This paper examines oral tradition as a dynamic and adaptive practice among the Idu Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh, focusing in particular on Abbelah, a traditional mechanism for addressing disputes through mediation and negotiation. It considers how oral traditions sustain cultural norms, articulate collective rights, transmit customary knowledge, and structure processes of mediation and reconciliation, arguing that by reinforcing community-based practice and shared social norms, such traditions have historically underpinned social cohesion and conflict resolution through customary law and community consensus. At the same time, the paper traces the changing dynamics of Abbelah in contemporary Idu society, considering how shifting social values and attitudes, greater exposure to external institutions, and the growing reach of modern legal mechanisms have reshaped traditional approaches to conflict resolution.

Key Words: Oral Narratives, Abbelah, Indigenous conflict resolution, customary practices, cultural heritage.

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, located in the northeastern frontier of India, is home to diverse indigenous communities with distinct cultural traditions, social institutions, and customary practices. Much of this cultural knowledge has historically been carried through oral tradition — myths, legends, folktales, songs, narratives, customary laws, and collective memory. These are not merely forms of cultural expression; they have also served important social and political functions, transmitting values and historical knowledge, preserving collective identity, articulating community rights, and providing frameworks for responding to social conflict and external challenge.

Oral tradition has historically served as an important means by which communities preserve and communicate experiences that were never set down in writing. It can also open a space for expressing dissent and remembering injustice, resistance, and collective struggle. For indigenous communities, transmitting such memories can strengthen a shared sense of identity and provide a basis for responding to challenges affecting their land, culture, customary practices, and way of life — so that oral tradition functions both as a repository of collective memory and as a living practice, adapted continually to changing social circumstances.

Within the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh, oral traditions remain closely woven into everyday social life. They carry knowledge of customary norms, relationships, obligations, community values, and accepted forms of behaviour, and have historically informed mechanisms of mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, and dispute settlement. Rather than treat oral tradition as mere folklore, then, it is worth understanding it as a social institution that has actively contributed to the regulation of community life.

This paper examines the role of oral traditions in conflict resolution and the restoration of peace, with particular emphasis on the Idu Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh. It focuses especially on Abbelah, a traditional mechanism of dispute settlement built around mediation and negotiation, and considers how the dynamics of Abbelah have shifted in contemporary Idu Mishmi society as a result of broader transformations in social values, patterns of interaction, conflict, and the growing presence of modern legal institutions.

Oral Tradition as a Medium of Protest and Resistance

Oral traditions have historically given marginalised and indigenous communities an important means of preserving collective memory and articulating experiences of resistance. Where written documentation was limited, or controlled by dominant groups, oral narrative allowed communities to hold on to their own understanding of historical events, social injustice, and collective struggle. Through story, song, chant, and other forms of oral expression, communities have been able to voice grievance, reaffirm identity, and pass memories of resistance from one generation to the next (Vansina, 1985; Finnegan, 1992).

Among the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh, oral tradition contributes in much the same way to the preservation and assertion of cultural identity. Narratives concerning ancestors, historical events, customary practice, territorial relationships, and encounters with external forces give communities a shared understanding of their past — memories that can take on political significance when communities face challenges over land, natural resources, cultural practice, or indigenous rights (Delley, 2016; Mene & Chaudhuri, 2019).

This contribution to protest works along several interconnected lines. Oral narratives preserve cultural identity by transmitting knowledge of customary institutions, beliefs, practices, and relationships to land; they preserve collective memory by recalling past struggles and forms of resistance; and they offer a means of voicing grievance and mobilising community support around issues seen as threats to collective interest. Oral tradition, in other words, is not simply a record of the past — it can be reinterpreted and adapted to speak to present concerns (Goody, 1987).

Oral Traditions and Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution in indigenous societies often works through institutions and practices embedded in a community's social and cultural framework — negotiation, mediation, consensus-building, customary law, and the participation of respected elders or community representatives. In Arunachal Pradesh, such traditional mechanisms have historically played a part in managing disputes and sustaining social relationships within and between communities (Kashyap & Raj, 2023).

Conflict resolution, more broadly, involves managing disputes, reducing hostility, restoring communication, and reaching settlements that both parties can accept (Dana, 2001; Ramsbotham, Miall, & Woodhouse, 2011). In indigenous settings, however, this process is rarely separable from customary values and shared understandings of social order. The goal often extends beyond determining who was right or wrong to restoring relationships and preventing conflict from recurring.

Oral tradition supports these processes by preserving the norms, values, precedents, and customary knowledge that guide community-based dispute settlement. Elders and traditional mediators draw on remembered cases, customary principle, and established social norms when facilitating negotiation between disputing parties, so that oral narrative supplies both the substantive knowledge and the moral framework within which disputes are discussed and resolved (Delley, 2016).

Preservation of Customary Norms

Oral tradition also functions as a repository of customary norms and community values — knowledge of acceptable behaviour, social obligation, kinship, property, marriage, and other dimensions of social life, carried across generations. These norms give communities a common reference point when disputes arise and help determine an appropriate response to violation (Mene & Chaudhury, 2019).

Mediation and Consensus-Building

Traditional dispute settlement tends to place weight on dialogue and negotiation. Respected elders or mediators facilitate communication between conflicting parties and draw on customary principle to encourage an acceptable outcome. Oral knowledge matters particularly here because customary rules and precedent are often uncoded, surviving instead through collective memory (Vansina, 1985).

Reconciliation and Social Cohesion

Traditional conflict resolution also places considerable weight on restoring relationships. The aim is not necessarily to punish the person responsible for an offence but may instead involve reconciliation, restitution, forgiveness, and the restoration of social harmony — a distinction that maps onto the broader contrast between retributive and restorative approaches to justice, where retributive justice centres on punishment and restorative approaches emphasise repairing relationships and addressing the harm caused (Zehr, 2002).

Oral tradition supports this by reinforcing shared values and reminding individuals of their obligations to the wider community. Through narrative, customary precedent, community discussion, and mediation, conflict can be addressed within a framework aimed at restoring social relationships rather than simply punishing an offender.

The Idu Mishmi and the Traditional Role of *Abbelah*

The Idu Mishmi offer an important case for understanding the relationship between oral tradition, customary authority, and conflict resolution. Idu society did not historically develop a formally institutionalised political structure comparable to some other tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh; instead, social order and disputes were managed largely through customary mechanisms and community-based practice (Delley, 2016).

One important institution within this system was *Abbelah*, a customary dispute-settlement mechanism through which a mediator facilitated dialogue and negotiation between conflicting parties and sought an acceptable settlement. In the absence of a permanent, centralised political authority, *Abbelah* took on significance beyond the settlement of individual disputes, contributing to the regulation of interpersonal relations, the management of disagreement, reconciliation, and the maintenance of social cohesion within the community.

The functioning of *Abbelah* was closely bound up with the community's oral knowledge and customary norms: mediators and elders drew on knowledge carried across generations to understand the nature of a dispute and determine how best to address it. *Abbelah* thus illustrates how oral tradition could operate not only as a means of preserving cultural knowledge but as a practical resource for governance, mediation, and social regulation.

Changing Dynamics of *Abbelah* in Contemporary Idu Mishmi Society

Today, the role of *Abbelah* as a traditional mechanism of conflict resolution has diminished considerably among the Idu Mishmi. This shift needs to be understood within a broader context of social and institutional change: greater exposure to globalisation, evolving social and cultural values, growing awareness of individual rights, and the expanding presence of modern legal and administrative institutions have together altered how conflict is perceived and resolved. The growth of formal state institutions has provided alternative avenues for handling disputes that were once managed primarily through traditional mechanisms, and individuals increasingly have access to formal legal and administrative channels for addressing grievance. As a result, *Abbelah* is no longer as central to conflict management as it once was. Its declining use points not simply to the disappearance of a traditional practice but to a broader transformation in the relationship between customary institutions and modern forms of governance (Mili & Kaling, 2025).

Oral Tradition and Socio-Political Change

The case of the Idu Mishmi shows that oral tradition should not be treated as a static body of inherited knowledge. It is a dynamic social practice whose relevance shifts with the conditions of the community. Historically, oral tradition supplied knowledge of norms and social relationships and underpinned mechanisms such as *Abbelah* through which disputes could be negotiated and relationships restored. At the same time, the declining role of *Abbelah* shows that customary institutions are not insulated from wider processes of social and political change (Mene & Chaudhuri, 2019). Modern education, greater interaction with external societies, changing aspirations, new understandings of individual rights, and the expansion of state institutions have all altered the context in which customary mechanisms operate (Mili & Kaling, 2025).

None of this should necessarily be read as a wholesale rejection of traditional knowledge. It reflects, rather, a changing balance between customary and formal institutions (Griffiths, 1986). The contemporary relevance of oral tradition may depend, in the end, on its capacity to adapt to changing circumstances while still offering cultural knowledge, collective memory, and community-based approaches to social relationships and conflict (Ibid.).

Conclusion

Oral tradition has historically played a multifaceted role in the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh. Beyond preserving cultural heritage and transmitting collective memory, it has given communities ways of voicing grievance, asserting collective identity, sustaining customary norms, and managing social conflict. Through storytelling, customary knowledge, mediation, negotiation, and community consensus, oral tradition has contributed to social cohesion and peacebuilding.

The experience of the Idu Mishmi illustrates this relationship particularly well. *Abbelah* historically functioned as an important customary mechanism through which disputes were negotiated and social relationships restored, its operation closely tied to orally transmitted customary norms and the authority of community mediators. Its diminishing significance in contemporary Idu society, however, reflects real changes in the surrounding social and institutional environment: reduced violent conflict, changing social values, increased interaction with external institutions, greater awareness of individual rights, and the growing role of modern legal mechanisms have together reduced the centrality of *Abbelah* in everyday conflict management (Mili & Kaling, 2025).

The changing role of *Abbelah* therefore illustrates a broader process of transformation rather than simply the disappearance of a traditional institution. It shows how indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution are shaped by changing patterns of social relations and by the expanding presence of formal state institutions. At the same time, studying such practices remains important for understanding how indigenous communities have historically maintained social order, negotiated difference, and pursued reconciliation through locally embedded knowledge and customary practice.

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