

Women's Contribution Towards Humankind; An Inside view of Apatani Folklore

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Abstract: Limitation and invisibility of women's contribution are truly visible in our society. In any patriarchic society, men's voices are heard louder than women's, no matter how big their contribution be, this has been in practice since ages. Every society has its own stories to justify that women have always played an important role and shared equal responsibility in perpetuating human being and its society. Folklore plays an important role in any society, especially in the tribal society where there is no written records. So Folklore or oral literature is the only source that enlightens people about the past and sometime it works as a pedagogic that becomes source of knowledge; it can be used for teaching and learning as well by citing examples from folklores. Three significant women in the Apatani Folklore viz. Ayo Diilyang Diibu, Doilyang Chanjang and Khalang Rudu have been studied and presented here. In this study an attempt has been made to locate a place of women and their contribution towards humankind in existing folklores of Apatanis, in other words, do oral literature or for that matter in folklore women share any space?

Keywords- Apatani, Contribution, Folklore, Supernatural, Women

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I. INTRODUCTION

Marginalization and invisibility of women's contributions are truly visible in our society. No matter in what extent women may contribute; the effort is rarely appreciated. In actuality women are inseparable part of the society; because from time immemorial women had been sharing equal responsibility in all walks of life, be it a household, economy or other ceremonial responsibility, in fact, humanity itself is the combination of men and women biologically, socially and culturally. The existence of human is the greatest testimony that women are equally responsible for perpetuating men on this earth because human being are the joint enterprises of both men and women. But cheers to all those endeavourer who have understood the value and importance of women. Their effort can be seen as many anthropologist, sociologist, philosophers, thinkers, reformers are aware of injustice done towards women, and hence their ideas and actions are directed at improving the condition of women. They started putting in their efforts to promote a better understanding of women, even government did not lag behind, and so various funds from centre as well as state could be seen for the overall development of women and laws had been enacted to protect the rights of women. But whether these efforts are successful or not is a different story or other side of the coin.

As Thakur (1995) said "the tribal women have, particularly played a dominant role not only in agricultural operations, but also in the field of crafts and economy. In this way, in the socio-economic sphere, the tribal women have an important position more or less equal to that of men" According to Xaxa (2008:475), the economic burden and workload of tribal women as well as their access to education, food and nutrition, modern occupation and political participation, especially in the modern context, have not been the kind of attention they deserve. Coming to the *Apatani* tribe, inhabitant of Lower Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh, India, on whom this study has been done. *Apatanis* are considered as one of the advanced tribes who are known to the outside world through the works of Haimendorf (1962, 1980). Of course, later on many *Apatani* scholars also worked extensively and described about various issues where women voices are marginal or rarely found. Haimendorf (1962) describes *Apatani* wives to be very hard working as most of the agricultural work is done by women and little energy is left for interests outside their home. In 1953, Ursula Graham mentioned briefly about *Apatani* women's role in economic activities and also reflected on their physical features. Kani (1993), an *Apatani* scholar, mentioned that, men folk is higher in status than women folks in the society but responsibility of duties to be shared by both in the field, home, and family affairs are same.

Every society has its own stories to justify that women have always played an important role and shared equal responsibility in perpetuating human being and its society. In this study on women's contribution towards mankind through existing *Apatani* folklores, a sincere effort has been made to locate the stand of

women and their contribution towards mankind, in other words, do oral literature or for that matter in folklore, women share any space? Folklore is the traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community, passed on through generations by word of mouth. Folklore includes oral traditions such as tales, proverbs and jokes. Needless to say that folklores play a vital role in a community lives. Folklorist have identified different roles and functions of folklore for instance, Bhatti (1998) viewed folklore as “popular means of entertainment” Boro (2003) viewed folklore as means for preservation of cultural heritage for group/racial identity, “folklore items are being consciously used for assertion of identity, particularly by those who are suffering from identity crisis.” Folklore has also been looked as art objects in the changing socio economic scenario and practiced by artists and to showcase for one's aseptic satisfaction. Aier (2003) said the social context of folklore focus on the role of folklore in defining gender specific role. Bascom suggested four primary functions of folklore in a culture:

- (1) Folklore lets people escape from repression imposed upon them by society eg. tall tales
- (2) Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them.
- (3) Folklore is pedagogic device which reinforces morals and values and builds wit. eg. scary stories/ moral lessons
- (4) Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control. eg. The boy who cried wolf.

These functions suggested by different author signify the importance of folklore in our society, and as Bascom said, folklore can be a pedagogic device which reinforces morals and values and build intelligence. So through this study one may able to reinforce the values and contributions made by women folks in building culture and a society in the existing folklore of *Apatanis*.

As per many folklore tellers in *Apatani*, narration goes back to *Abotani*, whom the *Apatanis* believed to be the forefather. Here it is important to mention that *Abotani* is also regarded as the common ancestor of “Tani group” comprised of different communities viz. *Adi, Apatani, Galo, Nyishi, Hill Miri* and *Tagin* of Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from *Apatani* other tribes too have similar kind of folklore but in different version and not to be surprised, within *Apatanis* too these folklores slightly differ from one village to another and also from one folklorist to another folklorist. So, in such cases, those versions have been selected which appeared to be very convincing and agreed by the majority of the folklore tellers.

The oral literature of the *Apatani* reveals that *Abotani* was born on earth as the seed of mankind and he was the ruler on the universe. He wanted to multiply millions of posterity in the world (kani 1997). He, therefore, married several wives one after another. That includes human, goddesses and mere creature of the universe. Out of his many wives only two wives and his sister will come under purview of this study and these three women were very important in *Abotani's* life. The first wife of *Abotani*, *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* was always projected as ideal women. She is the epitome of hard work and remembered by everyone. Her name itself suggests love and fond memory for her, where ‘*Ayo*’ means grandmother and *Diilyang Diibu* was her name. *Bamin Yaliyo*, 80 years old woman from *Bamin* village would say “women, who follow the foot step of *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* would never be in starvation.” This means, hard-working people will never die of hunger. But *Abotani* left *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*. It has been well noted that not much information could be gathered while searching for this *Ayo* (grandmother) in oral literature, particularly to know what had happened to *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* after *Abotani* deserted her. As the folklore of *Abotani* progresses *Doilyang Chanjang* sister of *Abotani* draws the attention, this sister of *Abotani* protected him throughout her life. Another woman that fascinated was *Khalang Rudu* whom *Abotani* married after *Diilyang Diibu*, who again contributed equally as *Abotani* in perpetuating human being on the earth.

The sources of these oral narratives were priests (shaman), village elders and the voices of women had also been incorporated and all of them were above 50 years of age. All the respondents were interviewed at their respective residence. Women folklorist narrated the folklore with equal enthusiasm as any of the male folklorist. For instance it was astonished to see *Yachang Yapii* and *Duyu Otung* having vast knowledge about *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*, *Doilyang Chanjang* and *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)*. It has been noticed that their narration contain even that information which Priest or any of the male elder respondents did not mentioned. While narrating the story of these three great women, there was a radiant and joyful faces that signify the contentment over the role played by women.

II. AYO DIILYANG DIIBU

The first wife of *Abotani* was *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*, daughter of *Diilyang Pilya* and sister of *Diilyang Tamang*, who was believed to be very rich and had surplus of food. When *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* married to *Abotani*, she brought with her a lot of wealth from her parent's house as a wedding gift along with rice and millet. She was best known for her hardworking and well skilled in cultivation which gave her bountiful harvest of whatever she grows. Her crop was so fertile that single stem of paddy (*emo yange*) was big enough that even dog could sit over it in the same way rooster could sit over the millet (*sarse bange*). She had all the qualities that an ideal woman was suppose and expected to have. After their marriage they lived a life of contentment. But *Tiinii Rungya* (devil) interfered between *Abotani* and *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*. *Tiinii Rungya* insists *Abotani* to leave

Ayo Diilyang Diibu and take her instead as his wife. She exaggerated the things and claimed to be more sincere and hard working than *Ayo Diilyan Diibu*. She enticed *Abotani* by claiming that she works harder and faster in agricultural work than *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* and tells that she could finish a five days' work (agricultural work) of *Ayo Diilyan Diibu* in one single day and work that takes whole day for *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* and for her it takes only few hours in the morning. This is how *Tiinii Rungya* duped *Abotani* into ditching *Ayo Diilyan Diibu* and marrying her. When *Abotani* divorced *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*, she took back all the wealth that she brought with her in marriage. *Abotani* then got married to *Tiinii Rungya*, after marriage the true character of *Tiinii Rungya* was revealed; she was neither hardworking nor well mannered. *Tiinii Rungya* used to pretend as if she was working hard in paddy field. One day she demanded *Abotani* ten bundles of *Palii* and five bundles of *Kele* (both are agricultural tools made of bamboo that was used for removing weeds.) so that she could work hard in paddy field without any problem. Accordingly *Abotani* made her ten bundles of *palii* and five bundles of *kele* for her. On contrary *Tiinii Rungya* did not use these tools in paddy field, no doubt she goes to paddy field every day from her house but instead of going to paddy field she would go to a place called *Supung Lanta*; *supung lanta* is a huge stone/rock that was standing in the jungle nearby *Abotani's* paddy field. She would spend her whole day in *supung lanta* playing with the agricultural tools on the rock till it gets blunt and threw them away. This continued until all paddy fields turned into mere grass land and was not much different from surrounding jungles; covered with weeds. At last the agricultural land became barren; subsequently *Abotani* started losing all his food grain and could not save even for seeds. *Tiinii Rungya* also left *Abotani*, now *Abotani's* life started deteriorating day by day and was living a life of starvation and for few years he survived by eating 'niising niimang' grasses and wild leaves. After few years *Abotani* saw *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* from a distance, she was drying a paddy on the mate, seeing this *Abotani* wanted to ask *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* for some paddy grain but could not gather the courage to face her, therefore he sent his dog to *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* and asks dog to bring some paddy. Dog obeyed the master and ran to *Ayo Diilyang Diibu's* place and started to roll its hairy body on the paddy, when *Ayo Diilyang Diibu* saw this she got furious and scolded and beat the dog and moped up all the paddy that was over dog's body and chased away the dog. When the dog returned to *Abotani*, he noticed that only two grains of paddy was left in dog's ear which was perhaps overlooked by *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*. *Abotani* was happy to have those two grains, he sent the dog again for second time and same thing happened, dog came back with only two paddy grains and now *Abotani* had four paddy grains with him. So, he thought of multiplying his food grains. In the first year he sow his four grains of paddy in Ugu panchang (corner of the fire hearth) that yielded a good quantity and next year he decided to sow those paddy grains in Si Sita (urinal place) of the house and this time he got more quantity of paddy than previous year. And latter he sowed it in a nursery nearby his house and started terrace and wet rice cultivation, thereby he became rich and prosperous. It is said that, the surplus food that people enjoying in this present generation is landed down by *Abotani* to his decendent.

III. DOLYANG CHANJANG

Doilyang Chanjang sister of *Abotani* was not an ordinary woman but was super woman, with a supernatural powerful and full of wisdom, *Assang Dotu* and *Aha Penji* were the first priest for the mankind from male line and *Doilyang Chanjang* the sister of *Abotani* was from the female line. She was very powerful magical character and could foresee and forehear the man, the God and evil spirits. Thus, she issued behests for these two male priests. Therefore these two male priests could not tolerate her command and they deprived her of powerful characters of magic. Since then women could not become a priest in the society (kani 1997) and another version of the folklore tells that earlier there was no male priest, *Doilyang Chanjang* was the first priest of human kind, and latter on *Doilyang Chanjang* handed over the priesthood to a male, while justifying this version of folk talks a story has been narrated; "once omen was sought and the omen indicated that *Doilyang Chanjang* should perform a ritual called *Tumu Hedopa* in *Dotu Lapang*, *tumu* is a ritual commonly known as *subu taning*, this ritual is perform by a particular family for the well being of the family and *dotu lapang* is a raised platform constructed with wooden planks; it is worth mentioning that customary law of *Apatani* do not allow women to enter or climb on the *Lapang*. Because *Lapang* are consider as sacred in *Apatani* and many of the rituals are perform there. When *Doilyang Chanjang* heard that omen has been sought in her favor and she had to perform as a priest in *Tumu* at *Dotu Lapang*, she called *Abotani* and told that if she enter *Lapang* and perform the rituals with all those ceremonial costume at *Dotu Lapang*, it would be a disgrace for him (*Abotani*). Therefore *Doilyang Chanjang* insisted *Abotani* to perform the ritual in her place but *Abotani* did not agree and said he does not have the costume to wear, priest or *nyibu* in *Apatani* has a separate costume, some of the costume are; *Abyo* (piece of woven cloth covering the head of the priest), *Jikhe Tarii* (Jacket), *Jilan Pulye* (shawl). On this *Doilyang Chanjang* assured him that she will bring it for her. Accordingly *Doilyang Chanjang* approached a lady who had beautiful *Zilang* and *Abiyo* both worn by a priest and asked the lady to lend her so that she could give it to her brother *Abotani*, but the lady refused to give it to her on pretext that she will be taking along with her when she gets married. Then *Doilyang Chanjang* uses her wisdom and decided to propose

this lady to marry her brother *Abotani*, which the lady gladly agreed. In this way she could manage ceremonial costume for *Abotani* and convinced him to perform the ritual in *Lapang* as a priest. Since then it is believed that there are male priest in the society and *Doilyang Chanjang* was the one who handed over the priesthood to a male (*Abotani*) otherwise today there would have been a female or women priest”

Apart from this *Doilyang chanjang* is also believed to be the savior of *Abotani*. In many instances *Doilyang Chanjang* helped and saved *Abotani* as she could even prophesize or could foretell the future, having this power she always knew the danger that was ahead of *Abotani* and according to that she would prepare and plan to rescue her brother *Abotani*, and always succeed in saving his life. Here it is important to mention that during *Abotani's* life, demons and devils wanted to rule the universe, but *Abotani* did not allow them to do and throughout his life, he had to struggle against them for his very survival on this earth. It is believed that *Abotani* would have died in the hands of demons and devils if his sister (*Doilyang Chanjang*) did not helped him; she is attributed as the rescuer of *Abotani's* life. “He was virtually on the verge of being killed and obliterated from this world when, to his exceeding heave of reliefs his brilliant sister, *Dolyang Chanjang* came to his rescue and saved his dear life” (Takhe 1997:7).

IV. KHALANG RUDU (BINYI)

After *Tiini Rungya*, *Abotani* married lots of wives one after another that include living and nonliving creatures, but was never satisfied. Though he had regained his food security he was still lonely without family. He was in the verge of losing his legacy, as there was nobody whom he could hand over the legacy. Seeing this, his sister *Doilyang Chanjang* who was much wiser and powerful than *Abotani* and had enormous supernatural powers, wanted to help him out of this situation. While searching wife for her brother *Abotani*, soon she found *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)* an excellent lady from the kingdom of *Danyi (sun)*, who was sister of *Danyi Yantii Tamang*, she was beautiful and hardworking. Therefore, *Doilyang Chanjang* felt that *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)* is the right companion for her brother *Abotani*. So she proposed *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)* for her brother, *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)* agreed and they got married. *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)* too brought domesticated animals from her parent, such as- cow, mithun, fowl, dog etc. Here too oral tradition says that, since then a domestication of animal started in a real sense and following their footsteps now their descendant are domesticating animals, and used it for performing various rituals. Here it is worth mentioning that in certain rituals, sacrifices of animal such as mithun, cow, goat, dog, hen etc. were must. Therefore without these animals especially domesticated one ritual or religious life of Apatanis was incomplete. Oral account also reveals that, *Ato Neha* was born to them (*Khalang Rudu* and *Abotani*) and from *Ato Neha* all human races came into being and from him different tribes bifurcated viz. Apatani, Adi, Galo, Nyishi, Tagin and Hill Miri of Arunachal Pradesh.

V. ANALYSIS OF THE FOLKLORES

In the above folklore the central theme is *Abotani*, his marriages and his sister, *Abotani* who is believed to be the first human being and so the forefather of all human race. Careful analyze of this folklore reveals the fact that women are no less important in perpetuating human race, but *Ayo Diilyan Diibu*, *Doyan Chanjang* and *Khalang Rudu* who happened to be women do not get their share of appreciation as they deserved. For instance there is no oral record about the life long history of *Ayo Diilyan Diibu* that would tell us about the girlhood or the life after *Abotani* deserted her. When asked Nending Diming, a women Priest of Hari village, whether *Ayo Diilyan Diibu* got married after she was separated from *Abotani*, her reply was ‘*Melo endii ma, hiimi chinku ma, Diilyang Diibu ka Myolo giining nya ho haliang ganda si daru dorii hender mapa diido nii*’ means “perhaps no, we don’t know. It is because of *Diilyang Diibu* that *Hailing Ganda* has surplus food grain and they don’t lack food both in summer and in winter.” (here she was referring to that point of time when *Diilyang Diibu* was separated from *Abotani* and took back all the wealth that she had brought with her when she got married to *abotani* and *Haliang Ganda* are believe to be a plain land situated far away from Apatani valley) She added “if today we human are surviving, it is only because of *Ayo Diilyang Diibu*, for if *Abotani* had not taken seeds from *Diilyang Diibu* with the help of dog, we would have died of hunger. In spite of her enormous contribution towards mankind, only that part of her life is known to the people that were in connection with *Abotani*. Folklore also tells us that *Doilyang Chanjang* played an important role in *Abotani's* life in fact she is attributed as the life savior of *Abotani*. So if *Doilyang Chanjang* did not rescue *Abotani* the great ancestor of Tani group would have died. Third woman was *Khalang Rudu (Binyi)* who was also equally important as other two women. According to folktales she was the one who brought domestic animals and domesticating animals is important aspect of any tribal group, not only for ritual purpose but also for economic purpose and in early days the wealth and status of a man was measured by the number of domesticate animals he possess. These three women played very important roles and of worth praising. In the documented account of folklore now a days *Abotani* is more prominent and visible ancestor than any other women around him, an essence of patriarchal. Here the point of enquiry is not that *Abotani* is less important but what it has been observed in the folklores of Apatani is that women also played an equally important role.

VI. CONCLUSION

While listening to these folklores constantly, women with great potential around *Abotani* has been located. Woman might be interested to know more about these three women, old lady, *Duyu Otung*, too was happy to narrate the story of these three women, and shared more information than other male narrator. Where as Priests being male, might be unconsciously more interested to glorify *Abotani* the great ancestor of the *Apatanis*. However though both men and women ancestor may be accepted as stereotype, even at present scenario women do contribute a lot in every aspect of life and are walking hand in hand with men, and it is just that we need to recognize their contributions. Therefore, appreciation of both the contributor men as well as women is necessary. Perhaps, this study supplements the existing notion that folklore reflects the underlying principle or values of a society or social structure.

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