THE STORIES OF THE RED COAT

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling comes naturally to the *Nyishis*[1] of Arunachal Pradesh. Stories are the common thread which, in the absence of written records, stitches together the events of the past and the present. They are tools of celebrating, rejoicing, recalling, mourning, cautioning and memory-keeping. Wearing colourful garbs of songs, lore, chants, poems, monologues – these stories are our history. Our history reminds me that I am of the thirteenth generation of my lineage,[2] and my brother, Kalo is christened after a warrior from the fifth generation. There is a fourteenth-generation cousin now named the same, and who just turned two. Thus, the tale continues. But how does one even begin telling a story that will remain unfinished?

As parts,

Without an ending.

PART ONE

In the Nyishi community, the strongest teller of these stories is the red coat-wearing Gaon Burhas (village men) and Gaon Burhis (village women). A marker of authority, knowledge and wisdom, these red coats were given to the elders of the village. These elders are part of the local governance system in the form of village councils, in all its various forms, and are present across the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with varied names. On one hand, some tribes follow the hereditary rule, with the power transferring from father to son. But amongst the Nyishis of Kamle district[3] (formerly the Hill Miri sub-tribe) in Arunachal Pradesh, the position was based on nomination. While the criteria for such a nomination are not codified, prior research[4] points that age, experience, knowledge of the traditional laws along with sound judgement and economic status are important factors. Less has been discussed about who appoints these elders. However, a strong feature, from listening to the stories in the public domain, is that most of these elders were male. The existing literature[5] categorically mentions, 'No sex distinction is made though there is quite less participation from the females.'

But things changed in the early 1990s, with the changing political atmosphere of the state and the changing social dynamics within the Hill Miri community, as the historically isolated community started assimilating the formal institutions of democracy. There were mass campaigns against child marriage and for women's empowerment. So, the community felt the need to bring women into the local governance structure. And thus, in Kamle district, eight women were nominated and given the red coats, consequently called Gaon Burhis. To understand the weight of these red coats in their lives, the lives of four women who were made Gaon Burhis in the early 1990s in Kamle district, have been foregrounded in this paper within the larger backdrop of the position of women in the society. Collected as stories and represented as anecdotes, these translations of their lived experiences depict their varied yet similar burden of wearing the red coats. Often shorthanded in its meaningful translation from Nyishi to English, this writing is an attempt to present these Gaon Burhis as dynamic women, who are well aware of the contradictions in their own lives, yet making the active choice to rise above these contradictions daily in order to create their own narrative.

HAPPY ACCIDENT?

In the roadside village of Boasimla, amidst the row of unassuming bamboo houses facing the traffic, the one next door to the lone butcher's belongs to Godak Yanyum. With a train-like design, Yanyum's room is in the back of the house – the narrow corridor passes through the common room and then the sleeping quarter of her husband and his younger wife. Her room has a bed, a television, a single east-facing window, a table with folded clothes and six red coats hanging from a tightrope on the walls. I ask if these are all the red coats she owns. She laughs and says, 'They give us one *Lal* [red] coat every

year, along with other things. I had so many more. Some, the rat ate while others I gave away before the rat could eat.'

Yanyum has received a red coat every year since her appointment in 1993 as a Gaon Burhi of Boasimla. That is a total of twenty-five coats. She is amongst the first group of women to be appointed as Gaon Burhi in the region. The 14th of August 1993 marked the entry of women in the position of Gaon Burhas. A role previously occupied by men, as evident by the appointment certificates addressing them as 'he'. Most of Yanyum's contemporaries are still alive. I question whether they are all friends. She smiles, 'When we were younger, we would visit each other's villages but now we are old and have no energy left. We meet, sometimes, during official meetings. But yes, I like to think we are friends.'

Yanyum's closest friend, colleague and neighbour is Yuwa Yarup. They were appointed Gaon Burhi on the same day. They have held infinite conversations through the window in Yanyum's room. As allocating dates to life events was never the norm then nor is it now, a quick triangulation of 'how soon, after their first menstruation, did they get married?', 'how grown-up is their first child?' and 'where were they during the 1950 earthquake?' helped me put Yarup somewhere in her late fifties and Yanyum in her mid-seventies. They have been friends for over four decades and each other's partner in every responsibility.

'Whenever the leaders would ask us to organize a collection drive for Nyokum[6] celebrations or anything else, we would go to every house and collect rice, *temi* (millet) or money,' says Yanyum.

'Then one day, the leaders informed us that they have sent our names for Gaon Burhis,' adds Yarup.

'We said okay; and some days later, during the Independence Day celebrations, they gave us red coats and certificates. Our leader collected it for us.' They were both working in their individual fields at the time.

However, public meetings and celebrations are an important part of their duties as Gaon Burhis. These custodians witness it all and store it for future reference. 'We have to go to every meeting be it political,

cultural or social. If we don't, people notice our absence. Also, others who could not attend but want to know what happened come to us. So, we have to be present for everything', says Godak Toi, a Gaon Burha of Boasimla. Community knowledge is stored and kept safe with the Gaon Burhis/Burhas.

For our second meeting, we are gathered at Yanyum's daughter's house. Godak Toi was invited to the discussion by the two ladies because 'he is educated and can explain things better'. He became a Gaon Burha in the early 2000s after his older brother, who was a Gaon Burha and head of Toi's family, passed away. He left his job in the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), one of India's Central Armed Police Forces, for the position.

There is a regional-level political meeting in Boasimla of the ruling party next week. I ask if they will attend. 'These two will, but I will not. The meeting is on Sunday, so I have church to attend. The last time I skipped church to work on my fields, I had a very poor harvest that year,' says Yarup. All three of them are Christians. Indeed, most of the population in Boasimla are Catholics now – the initial coagulation provided by a handful, which included Yarup and Yanyum.

'The two of us would lead the daily prayers in the village. We had no clue what we were doing but neither did anyone else, so we got away with it. We often talk about what we did and laugh at our own mistakes,' says Yarup. 'One time, we stood right on top of a burial place and prayed three days continuously for the departed soul. I don't know what we were thinking. We were mad like that. Dedicated, but mad,' adds Yanyum.

As we proceed northwards to Yach Tap village, we see a Catholic Church that is built on the land donated by Tap Yutu. As we look around, we spot a bamboo gate through which we begin our descent to the church. A further sharp slope from the church takes us to Yutu's house.

'Having the church next to my home gives me so much peace. I had nothing but conflict in my life before. Peace did not exist for me even

in my dreams, but now that I have tasted it, thinking of the past only makes me cry,' says Yutu.

The church was completed in 2006 along with Yutu's house below it. This is her fourth house. She left her previous ones due to fights with her relatives over land and money. The testament to which can be seen from the cut marks she sports on her left arm, ear and head. In the aforementioned political meeting, I met the two Gaon Burhas from Yutu's village. They told me that Yutu was chosen as a Gaon Burhi in 1993 so that she would stop being difficult and end her fights with other people – the classic 'making the naughty child, the class monitor' move. I quiz Yutu to see if it worked.

She laughs for a good solid minute. 'They like to say that, but the truth is I am a much better Gaon Burha than they are. They hardly settle any cases while I dispose all my cases within two to three days. Also, the deputy commissioner told me once – I am the only Gaon Burha in the entire region who could sign their own name.'

LALIN, YULUK, SOPIN AND YAPAR

The erstwhile deputy commissioner known as the political officer is the administrative head of the district and the sole functionary who appoints the Gaon Burha(s)/Burhis(s). The Rule 5 (1) of the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945 states:

> The [Deputy Commissioner] shall appoint such persons as he considers to be the members of a village authority for such village or villages as he may specify and may modify or cancel any such order of appointment and may dismiss any person so appointed.

This regulation of constituting village authorities was translated into the appointment of Gaon Burhas in 1945 as local emissaries of the administration. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf was the assistant political officer and a special officer for the then Subansiri Frontier

Division[7], under the NEFA administration, in 1944–45. The first batch of Gaon Burhas were supposedly appointed under him. Haimendorf, as an officer of the British government, along with his wife Betty and two other companions – a male and a female – studied these tribes: observing, recording and interacting with the villagers. The villagers simply remember them as Lalin, Yuluk, Sopin and Yapar.

In 1945, Rakhe Teri's grandfather was one of the appointed Gaon Burhas. Teri, nearing ninety years himself, is hard of hearing and instructs me to 'come closer' or 'shout louder' when I ask him if he remembers his grandfather.

'Yes,' he says. 'There were thirteen Gaon Burhas in our region, who were given red coats by Lalin, Yuluk, Sopin and Yapar.'

'Do you remember the day?'

'Yes, we were all gathered in the general field when Lalin gave the coats to them, but we dispersed quickly because there was fishing to be done.'

Rakhe Teri was the head Gaon Burha of Bogra Pada village, under whom existed two–three Gaon Burhas depending on the size of the village. He has since given up the position to make way for his nephew Rakhe Nyipak while retaining the post of a Gaon Burha under his nephew.

'Many people think it was the Congress government who appointed the Gaon Burhas, but I have heard it from all my uncles that it was Lalin who gave the *Lal* coats,' says Rakhe Nyipak, the present-day head Gaon Burha of Bogra Pada.

In Lalin's 1962 book titled *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours*[8], he notes:

'[The villages] I visited in 1944 and 1945 had never been entered by any outsider – neither Europeans, nor Indian, nor Tibetan – and the conditions of life which I observed represented the traditional pattern undisturbed by the effects of an administration centred outside the tribal territory. The circumstances of my work in the Subansiri region,

which was only partly anthropological, have been described in my book *Himalayan Barbary.'*

His paternalistic concerns, though, did not prevent him from choosing a favourite child as he goes on to write: '[the *Apa Tanis'*] attachment to their homeland set them apart from the restless tribes of the surrounding hills.' Perhaps, he ought to have taken a leaf out of his Indian counterparts' manual on parenting, and worried about what the neighbours would think.

BRIDGES AND LINKS

However, in all fairness to Haimendorf, he was greatly limited by the language and narratives of his time. Greater men have sunk in the circumstances of their times. Living in a time when mankind raced towards every prized egg with the burden of then 'discovering' it must have been no easy feat. But I digress, as this story is not about them.

Prior to being titled Gaon Burha, a man of repute in the region was generally called *Nyub-Nyigom.* While *Nyub* (pronounced Ni-yub) refers to the priest, who was believed to have social and supernatural sanctions to call upon the *Uii* (pronounced Oui), meaning the spirits, to heal the sick and community epidemics. On the other hand, *Nyigom* (pronounced Ni-gom) was anyone who was trusted, well-spoken and reputed to be fair during disputes. So, becoming a Nyub took years of training as an apprentice, termed *Bo,* learning the chants and performing the rituals; while a Nyigom was someone who had a good standing in the community. The finger-thumb distinction can be helpful wherein – all thumbs are fingers but not all fingers are thumbs. All Nyubs could be Nyigoms but not all Nyigoms are Nyubs.

Additionally, the position of priests was solely occupied by men with women facing strict restrictions against entering sacred spaces during menstruation. But in any instance when a woman solved a

dispute between two parties, mostly other women, she could also be called a Nyigom. Of the appointed thirteen, some were Nyubs and the others were Nyigoms – a confluence of customary power and diplomatic prowess.

Rakhe Teri's grandfather was a Nyigom. I check to see if he knows why his grandfather was chosen. 'My grandfather was very generous and often helped people out, in their difficulties, with rice and meat. So, people listened to his suggestions and would call upon him whenever there were fights,' he said. Till date, the major duty of the Gaon Burhas remains solving conflicts in the community.

The Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation 1945 states their duties as '["maintaining peace and order within their jurisdiction" by "watching and reporting"] on any vagrant or any bad suspicious character.'

'Did you grandfather ever report anybody?' I ask.

He laughs. 'We did not even speak the same language. There was no point going to the officers as it would only take longer to translate the case. All the cases were solved within the community.'

In 1951, attempts to close this communication gap came with the appointment of political interpreters. They were gazetted government officers to assist the political officers of the region. Fresh off Independence, in the aftermath of the Partition, the Indian government continued with the regulatory policies of the British with Verrier Elwin as the Advisor on Tribal Affairs for the northeast region.

Political interpreters or *Kotokis,* as the name sensibly suggests, interpreted the words of the officers to the common public. The *Kotokis* were local people who could speak their indigenous language and Assamese, the language of the abutting plain people.

All the government officials[9], at the time, either spoke Assamese or took with them political interpreters from Assam who could speak Assamese and Hindi/English. As a bridge between the public and the state, the *Kotokis* became powerful gatekeepers, basing their authority on their linguistic abilities.

This tripod of translation from local language to Assamese to Hindi or English resulted in Assamese emerging as the link language for all official purposes in the region.

Accordingly, a calculated and, dare I say, educated guess would be that it was post-independence, after 1951, when the moniker 'Gaon Burha', the literal translation being 'village man' in Assamese, stuck for all practical purposes. Although the terms for priests and officers remained Nyub and Nyigom, the 'village authorities' naturally came to be referred to as Gaon Burha, as that was a relatively more popular term. A subsequent transgression for its female counterpart in 1993 is Gaon Burhi[10].

As far as the colour of the eponymous coat is concerned, having seen an heir to the British throne don a red military coat on his wedding in 2011 has made me come to yet another conclusion – the colonial rulers had a soft spot for red. What's not to love about red, though?

Bold, powerful and bloody.

Going back to the people wearing the coat, by 1993, Rakhe Teri had been a Gaon Burha for a little over seven years. He belongs to the third 'generation' of Gaon Burhas in the region, his being the one that shortlisted the names of the women to be Gaon Burhis. All the Gaon Burhis, of which Teri says there were six or seven, and his nephew Rakhe Nyipak belong to the fourth 'generation' of Gaon Burhas in the area. The position is not hereditary in nature like in a chieftainship system where power is passed on from father to son. Much like varsities and even administration, who employ phrases like 'Batch of 1993' and so on, the term 'generation' is casually used to denote the batches of Gaon Burhas who are appointed. Then again, if you are the holding place for all the lived stories, and you retire only on your death; maybe it is the end of a generation.

THE NEW GIRL

The fourth generation of Gaon Burhas included women in its rank for the first time. This recruitment came about to appease the Congress-led government, echoing the sentiments of women empowerment at the time. Supposedly, there were reservation policies made for women in the position of Gaon Burhas. However, this policy was not replicated in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh, like the districts of West Kameng and Tawang, where no Gaon Burhi exists so far. In comparison, the district of Kamle has 334 Gaon Burhas, of which thirty are women at the present time.

With the increase in public awareness about child marriage, sexual violence against women and an increase of education within the population; the existing model of male governance flowed out of its cracks when cases related to women rushed to their laps. 'We chose the names of women who were *chokob* (smart), and could talk during case-solving,' Rakhe Teri said. 'Especially for the numerous women-related cases, it was best if women solved these cases because they understood the issue better,' he adds. And boy! were there women related cases at the time with regards to the attached bride price.

Most of the cases at the time were related to the price of a bride, a practice often hailed as a more empowering cultural configuration as compared to the dowry system. It has been a topic of contention for local scholars. The accompanying transaction of *mithun*s, an animal of extreme social, cultural and ritual significance, in exchange for the bride, legitimates the idea of 'buying' the girl for a price – of her body, spirit and agency. Recent shifts in narratives have campaigned for 'bridal exchange'[11] in place of a 'bride price', as there is an equal exchange of movable property like ornaments and garments from the bride's side, in lieu of mithuns from the groom's. There is even a mediator assigned to ascertain the value proportion of the exchange from both ends.

But how did this practice even come about? There is only informal lore that offers an explanation.

Once there lived two sisters – Biinye (pronounced Ba-ñ) and Siinye (Sa-ñ). The two sisters were competitive in all aspects of their work, trying to be more *chokob* than the other. Be it planting rice in the fields, harvesting the crop, brewing alcohol or cooking up dishes. While the younger sister Biinye shone by using the best ingredients, the older sister charmed the judges by making use of the poor ingredients equally well. This infuriated Biinye, and she poisoned the alcohol brewed by Siinye. The alcohol killed some of the judges. As a punishment Siinye was slaughtered, and her spirit turned into a mithun. This unparalleled sibling rivalry is what initiated the exchange of mithuns for a woman, as the two sisters could never stay together – thus precipitating the practice of bride price.

However, in all this give and take, it is the men who are left feeling unsatisfied and file cases. 'Even during the case hearing, the women concerned don't usually say much. It is usually their fathers and fathers-in-law who speak, as most transactions happen between them,' says Nido Soo (pronounced So), a Gaon Burhi of village Tamen.

Nido Soo is a grandmother to me in kinship, and lovingly calls me *Aamp*, while directing me to start the fire before the rain starts pouring. Aamp refers to the chaff of unhusked rice which separates from the grain with the wind during winnowing. Much like a woman and her fate of separation upon marriage. So, in other words, Aamp, is the kinder cousin of 'borrowed goods.'

'It was an extremely common practice, in our times, that struggling parents would sell their unborn daughter to anyone who was looking for a wife or a daughter-in-law. I was lucky, as my parents were doing well, so I was sold when I was two or three maybe,' says Nido Soo. 'If the child turned out to be a boy, then the parents kept the boy with the assurance of giving their daughter whenever she would be born.'

All such dialogues occurred in front of witnesses. The truth of the matter being, making payments in mithuns, unlike cash, is not easy to conceal. It would be tough to overlook a man bringing mithuns, a large animal by nature, and tying it to the front porch of the recipient as a sign of payment. Also, mithuns have a loud cry.

'Two years after my first menstruation, my parents dropped me off at my husband's village, and I started my life there. But many girls grow up and fall in love with some other man. That is when the problem starts, as the initial buyer wants her, but she refuses to go and often runs away,' says Nido Soo.

'Do you remember much from your first day at your in-laws?'

'Not much. I remember arriving and then going with my mother-in-law to collect water, which was quite far. Later though, at night, I was afraid because I had no notice of what would happen next. I only remember freezing out of my senses when my husband entered the room.'

REASONABLE CREATURES[12]

Often times, if the chosen girl ran away with another guy, the convenient replacement would be her sister. 'A girl for a girl: a mithun for a mithun' seems to be the motto of the times. It was not an uncommon sight to see sisters married to the same man in a polygamous marriage. In the event of the parents having no other daughter to replace the runaway bride, the punishment was fairly standard. Double the amount of mithuns as was initially paid. And if that is a high price to pay, a *kebang* is called under the authority of the Gaon Burhas. The case required the participation of all three parties – the initial buyer (the first party), the girl's family (the second party) and the other man's family (the third party) – and their presence in front of the Gaon Burhas was witnessed by the community. If the third party belonged to a different village, a Gaon Burha from his village would be required to be present too.

In the public trial that follows, each side makes their case and presents witnesses towards their own claims. The first party claiming the payment made for the promise of a bride; the second claiming the third's guilt in luring their girl to run away; the third claiming it to be

a mutual decision between the boy and the girl, seeking to share the penalty with the second party. But in a structure simmering with the debasement of women, 'mutual decisions' are no match for the loss of mithuns. And thus, the third party always loses. The public trial being only a means of giving legitimacy to the punishment in front of witnesses.

In cases when the third party could not pay the penalty, the second would be asked to step in with conditions that the third eventually pay them back, with cumulated interests. However, the inability of the second party to pay the cost, either by circumstance or by choice, leads to the fate of the girl being put in the hands of the Gaon Burha. As the head of the governing body, the Gaon Burhas held the only and all 'veto' in the community. A less benevolent Gaon Burha could order for the girl to be taken as a servant by the first party and a fine of one or two mithuns from the third party – as payback for the inconvenience caused and as a lesson in deterrence.

But a rich and generous Gaon Burha would agree to pay the price, on 'personal risk', and dispose of the case without pushing the girl into a future of servitude and stripping her of her freedom. Slightly on par with the bail on personal recognizance, this personal risk would only entail a promise from the third party to pay back the price. Gaon Burhas were usually rich men with social clout, where rich meant having a huge number of mithuns, but one could never be certain of their generosity.

Another factor indicative of a rich man is the number of wives he possesses wrapped around the underlying murmurs of the number of mithuns he could spare to buy multiple wives. For all that has erupted out of the rivalry between Biinye and Siinye, the fate of the two sisters seems far less divergent from each other – as forever serving the purpose of man.

PART TWO

On the engagement of Gaon Burhis, these 'petty cases' were thrown into their courts, the punishment for all such cases being payment of mithuns as reparation. But in the hierarchy of non-heinous and heinous crimes, it is only the latter category which demands the presence and patronage of all the Gaon Burha(s)/Burhi(s) along with the head Gaon Burha. There are four such heinous crimes that require the presiding over of the so-called 'highest bench'.

First, cutting someone's house by a machete, which was interpreted as an attempt to murder the owner of the house. Second, murdering someone. Third, giving a bribe to kill someone, like contract killing. And fourth, misappropriating facts, on being a witness to any transaction, for personal benefits. The principle of punishment for this category of crime, historically, can be termed as disproportionate retribution.

Rakhe Nyipak, the head Gaon Burha of Bogra Pada illustrates this with an example:

A man from the Rakhe community was married to a girl from the Boni community. He had gone to visit his in-laws when a fight

broke out, and he was killed by a man from the Bogom community. In retaliation, the men from the Rakhe community went on a killing spree of the Bogom community. The Bogom and Boni communities belong to the same clan, and yet the Boni community did not come to the aid of Bogom, as the shame of losing their son-in-law in their own land won the moral debate.

After all, public reasoning or the common lack of it, is the central force behind any participatory governance.

Women and children of the Bogom community, who had fled to safety in the nearby jungles, have since returned to the region, raising the Bogom population to about five or six families presently. These families carry with them the price of male pride and the task of keeping their dead alive in them.

The choice of what memories to keep, what to obliterate, and how to remember it all – in other words the burden of surviving.

ALL OF US

Where in this pecking order of governance do the Gaon Burhis find themselves placed? Faced with the systemic constraints of their own gender, there are all too few cases where their industry and competence played in their favour. But the few that exist are noteworthy.

'A common taunt the Gaon Burhas would make was in asking us to stay home and not come to hearings if we could not take 'personal risks' to dispose the case,' says Yanyum. 'But any mithun that we have is our husbands too, so taking 'risks' was not an individual decision for us unlike the Gaon Burhas.'

But a case where the 'risk' got extremely personal for Yanyum is in the story of how she brought a younger second wife for her husband.

A young girl, aged fifteen, was caught stealing hundred rupees from her classmate in school. On discovering it, the classmate's family

beat up the girl and filed a case of theft with the village Gaon Burha. The girl was under the guardianship of her grandparents as her mother had remarried and relocated, leaving the girl behind. The grandparents were landless and were working as sharecroppers in the village. The Gaon Burha imposed a fine of one mithun for stealing, to be paid within one month. A month passed, but the grandparents could not pay. The classmate's family reported to the Gaon Burha. For defaulting on the payment, the Gaon Burha then asked them to pay two mithuns by the end of the following month.

'Can you imagine, an old couple who could not even pay one mithun is now asked to pay two? Isn't that crazy?' says Yanyum. 'So, I told the Gaon Burha that he is being partial to the family of the classmate. He got angry with me, and increased the fine to three mithuns. You should have seen me then, I started shouting all sorts of obscenities at him. Everyone thought I had gone mad, but I was just so angry.'

The grandparents knew they would have to pay the fine or be forced to leave the village. The thought of uprooting themselves, yet again, did not appeal to the old couple. So, they started selling the young girl, their granddaughter, to anyone who was willing. Some people rejected the girl on the grounds that she had stolen money and was a thief, while others tried to bargain the price on the same grounds. But the objective was not to sell the girl but instead to get three mithuns to clear their dues; so the old couple persisted until they found the right buyer.

Having visited every house in the village and failed, they visited Yanyum's house with the hopes of finding a friend in her. Having heard her dissenting remarks on the Gaon Burha's judgement, the grandparents saw her as their support.

'On their fourth visit, I felt really guilty because no one had yet bought the child, and the month's end was around the corner,' Yanyum said. 'So, I swallowed my ego and went to the Gaon Burha. I said: "If a mother, who carries her child for nine months in her womb,

can have fights with that child, then who are we to not succumb to a small misunderstanding? I only hope you can forgive me, and in that forgiving grace reduce their penalty to whatever I can offer you."'

The Gaon Burha agreed. Yanyum then paid a pregnant mithun and two pigs to the classmate's family. In return, she received the young girl.

'Initially, the girl helped me in household chores and in the farm work, but some months later my husband decided "to keep her as his wife"; and soon she became pregnant. I cut another pig to honour the union and feed the community,' says Yanyum. It has been nine years since the marital feast. The younger wife has two children aged eight and five. Yanyum is called *Ama,* mother, by the younger wife. Their husband's monthly pension goes towards the education of the two younger children, leaving Yanyum to take care of the household expenses pertaining to water and electricity usage from her Gaon Burhi's honorarium.

In Yanyum's daughter's house, where we meet for our meeting, she has a room to rest in during the day, to avoid the noise made by her playing younger stepchildren. Her daughter insists on her moving in, but she refuses because 'people will make fun of me for staying at my daughter's house despite having a house of my own, with my husband in it.'

That a woman is doomed if she does and doomed if she doesn't is the common theme around which most stories of violence begin and end. So, I ask Yanyum whether she has heard of the #MeToo movement on the news. She asks me to explain.

#MeToo, translates to *Ngo Chin* in Nyishi, and I explain that it is a way for women who have survived sexual abuse to tell their stories.

'Like rape and kidnapping?' Yanyum asks.

I tread carefully. 'Yes, and also in some cases child marriages where young girls are forced into marrying older men by their parents or guardians.'

'Well, then it should not be *Ngo Chin* but instead *Ngul Miile* as who amongst my generation can say they were not sold by their parents?'

Ngul Miile, loosely translates to 'all of us'.

THE TINA CEILING

Having taken my chances in explaining the #MeToo movement to Yanyum, I felt confident enough to ask Yarup in our discussions if she had heard about feminism.

'What is that?' Yarup said.

'Well, it is the movement which believes that men and women are equal in every way.'

'But aren't we already equal?'

'Yes, we are. But sometimes we are not treated equally, you know, like how no woman has ever become head Gaon Burha.'

'So, you are telling me that in the next public meeting, I can assert that women and men are equal these days, so make women head Gaon Burhas too.'

'Absolutely.'

'I am definitely going to say that, maybe you should come to the next meeting.'

'Yes, it will be like a date.'

'What "date?"'

The above snippet of conversation is reflective of Yarup's campaign to become the head Gaon Burha of her village. As the women's secretary of the All Kamle District Gaon Burha and Gaon Burhi Association (AKDGBGBA), Yarup has proven her competency time and again. The association is crucial to the appointment of new Gaon Burhas in the region. The due process is a public meeting of the association on the selected list, which is documented as official

minutes and then signed by each attendee. The signed document is then sent to the office of the deputy commissioner who remains the final approving authority.

About twelve to thirteen Gaon Burhas are appointed every year, but these nominations are not without political gains. In the ossature of self-governance and representative governance, the latter has taken the upper hand by yielding their powers towards the appointment of the former.

What began as the public leaders seeking out generous, fair and *chokob* personalities has now evolved into our own form of bartering votes for Gaon Burhas. In a constituency where the direction of its voters is determined based on kinship ties and affinity, the power move is to give a job to the head of a large family in order to secure his family's vote. Usually the heads of the family are older men. So, a natural consequence is to make them Gaon Burhas.

However, such politically motivated nominations come with their own punctuations. Even at the average rate of ten Gaon Burhas per year, it would result in thousands of Gaon Burhas, a number unsustainable by the administration. A solution has been found in funding these appointments under the MLA (Members of Legislative Assembly) fund.

But a constant characteristic about MLAs and other public leaders demands that they change every five years. Thus, leaving behind a slew of powerless and temporary Gaon Burhas and Gaon Burhis (in some instances).

As the thought of being on the losing side hits very close to home, the people, then, go to extreme lengths to ensure their candidates win.

'Every election season, it is impossible to go outside as there are fights after fights. We have stopped interfering because the fights won't stop unless the election is over, and the winning party has been declared. It starts from the panchayat election and then goes up till the general elections. The panchayat leaders are more powerful than us, and we are asked not to interfere in their business,' Yarup said.

In a strange turn of events, in the May of 2018, the five-year term of the last PRI members expired, and the government delayed the re-election process despite judiciary intervention.

In this scenario of missing public leaders, the Gaon Burhas and Burhis find themselves enjoying an unprecedented surge in their powers. Further adding to their weight is the public's loss of trust in their leaders. The Trans-Arunachal Highway, which was supposed to connect their villages and bring prosperity, was caught riddled in a web of corruption; and the public is waking up to the price they have to pay for this blatant abuse of power.

It is in this context that the Gaon Burhas and Burhis have been given a new charter of duties for the past few months – verification of the Trans-Arunachal highway compensation schemes, verification of the Inner Line Permit and verification of Schedule Tribes' Permanent Resident Certificate, along with their previous duties of maintaining peace. They are at a position to investigate, report and punish, all at the same time.

'People may think it looks great, but it is not so. We received a one-time annual honorarium. Our condition gets worse afterwards. The government says we are not supposed to be involved in politics, and yet for every political work, they call us. Resources are given to us only as an afterthought. People often accuse us of corruption as they say we reap political benefits and do not share them with the people,' says Yarup.

Such accusations exist because more often than not, Gaon Burhas pass favourable judgements towards members of their own kin. Further, a head Gaon Burha can squash the collective judgements of other Gaon Burhas without explanation which, if unfair, paints all of them in a negative light. 'We know that the losing party, in any case, will never be happy. So, we take the criticisms in our stride,' Yarup said. Luckily for the community, there is no 'contempt of court'.

Further, existing with a formal judiciary system too has contributed towards the Gaon Burhas losing their original hues. A strict order

from the government requires them to submit all non-cognizable offences that occur under their jurisdiction to the magistrate's court. Contradicting such orders leads to the authorities pulling out the big guns. And a coat is no match for guns, in spite of the colour.

Regardless, being in a leadership position as the women's secretary makes Yarup confident of her own competencies to be a head Gaon Burha. The process only requires her to submit a letter of intention to the office of the deputy commissioner and her candidature being supported by two other Gaon Burhas of the village. The two Gaon Burhas supporting her include Yanyum and Godak Toi.

Yarup, like all women of her times, was sold as a toddler; but she ran away when she grew up and fell in love. She regrets this as she 'gave [her] parents so much pain. They had to pay double the mithuns as [she] never went back.' She has come a long way since, in claiming what she is owed. After we discuss her plans to be head Gaon Burah, I tell her to 'go break the glass ceiling'. She asks me what it means.

I tell her, and she responds, 'Only the rich would make ceilings out of glasses. I am very contented with the *tina*[13] ceiling that I have.'

'But won't it be tougher to break the *tina* ceiling? Glass is easier to break, you know.'

'No. A few hits at the right places, and the nail that holds it comes off. Glass is expensive and gives a sense of loss when it breaks; but *tina*, even a torn one, can be used again and again as fence in our fields, as tray for feeding the pigs, as a roof for the chicken coop and even to divert water through drains at times.'

'And because of its value in repurposing, it will be easier to break it?'

'Yes. Broken glass, even the expensive ones, don't have much use around here.'

I make a mental note to keep my vacillating urban metaphorical concepts to myself.

LEFT BEHIND

Nido Soo, a Gaon Burhi of Tamen village, is one of the people to be impacted by the Trans-Arunachal Highway scam. The compensatory amount for her land was halved in her case, which is a better result than most in the community. Being a widow, her annual Gaon Burhi honorarium of 12,000 rupees is what feeds her family consisting of her younger son and her husband's other wife.

'I am old now and will probably die when the next sickness hits me, but I worry about my youngest son – he is the only reason I am alive – because I am afraid that he will die of hunger the moment I am gone,' she says. She understands that the land is no longer hers but her children's to lose. There is an old-age pension scheme available in her village. She has not signed up for it as the amount of 300 rupees per month, under the pension scheme, does not hold a candle to her honorarium as Gaon Burhi.

Nido Soo lost her husband in the late 1980s to what one may now diagnose, in hindsight, as pneumonia. Left with five children and her husband's younger wife to look after, she worked incessantly in her field to make ends meet. 'Educating five children is no joke. It was overwhelming to feed them and educate them, and that is the reason why none could progress in their studies,' she says. The furthest any of her children have studied is a daughter who passed Class X. The older four are now married with only the youngest one still in the nest.

She converted to Christianity in the early 2000s for the sole benefit of her younger son around whom her domestic scene now orbits.

'My son was drinking a lot, so I joined the church with the hopes of taking him with me and stopping his drinking based on the counsel of the pastors. Sometimes I think about how my life would look if my husband were still alive.'

'What was your husband like?'

'He was a good man. It's been so long but I do remember almost everything. We stayed behind in our ancestral village because my

mother-in-law had gone blind by the end of her life and could not make the journey down the cliff. Most of the village had migrated by then. We stayed until she died and buried her in the ancestral land, and then we made our way here.'

'Oh, so you lived in a different village before?'

'Yes. That village was Digi-Lelen. Funnily, I remember it very clearly that I was giving birth to our second son in this village; I kept calling for my husband, but he was drinking in the local *oppo-naam* [alcohol house]. Someone finally delivered the message that I was giving birth, but there was an eclipse that day. So, he stayed put in fear of going blind. I gave birth to the child all by myself, and later the neighbours came on hearing the screams of the child. I was so angry. It seems silly now, but I remember it like it happened yesterday. My son is almost thirty now. I could sing you a *nitin* [poetic monologue] about it, but it would a sad one, and I refuse to be sad today. I am alive and you have come to talk to me. What more could I want?'

After all, *qui cantat bis orat*, singing is doubly intense prayer.

***

Echi Dulli Piima Dobe
Diire Yare Rema Dobe

Diire Diike Piire Leppe
Gutte Gamte Irre Leppe

Boori Bootem Molaju
Lubu Sikom Jolaju
Lubu Jolaju

Celebrate the protection from epidemics.
Celebrate the lack of famines.

Hear what the [seasonal] birds tell us
As the sun changes its position into spring.

It is time to celebrate the *Boori Boot* Spirit again,
To celebrate peace
Together, we celebrate.

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LIFE AFTER DEATH

Tap Yutu, the Gaon Burhi of Yach Tap village has a reputation as an odd fish. People identify her as the first woman in their region to ditch the *galle* for pants. Usually seen smoking a *bidi*, Yutu had a notorious reputation as a gambler, a habit she has done away with, and that seems to have made all the difference.

'Even growing up I was never like the other girls. I could never knit and weave. I actually thought I will never marry, but that did not go according to plan. My parents had sold me when I was a little girl. And in Class III, my buyers kidnapped me from my school. I don't remember my age, but I had my periods the year before. I fought hard, but the men were stronger and subdued me enough to tie my legs and hands. I fainted in that moment and woke up in their village.'

'How long were you there?'

'I was there for three nights before I found my chance to run. Some of their relatives were visiting, and there was a feast; people were drinking and playing cards. I found my moment the second they went to sleep.'

'How did you run?'

'I stole one of their machetes and just cut through the fences and jungle, trying to get as far as I could. I did not look back once. The dogs were barking, and I was so scared. I remember thinking very clearly, "If they catch me, I am going to kill those dogs the first chance I get."'

It took her another night before she reached a road she recognized and made her way to the circle officer's (CO) office in Daporijo.

The officer summoned her older brother, as her parents had died by this time, and the kidnapping party. The *Kotokis* were present when the case was heard for two days straight. The Gaon Burhas decided that her brother would pay back double the mithuns. Her brother refused to pay, and the *Kotokis* put him in jail after which he agreed, and she went back to her school's hostels. But during her vacation, while working at a road construction site, she met her present husband.

Due to her strained relationship with her brother, Yutu eloped with her husband. A fact neither she nor her brother regrets as 'he did not pay any more mithuns.' While her hometown had accepted Yutu and her many quirks, she was an anomaly at her in-laws' place. 'People would argue with me over my drinking and gambling. Also, I would steal from my family to gamble non-stop. Once I got the taste of money, it was impossible to stop,' Yutu said.

With such self-destruction, Yutu's career as a Gaon Burhi suffered, and her relations with her husband's family and the community became strained. It took a sudden encounter with death to awaken her. In 2006, she met with a fatal bike accident which made her revisit her faith, and she came out of it as a reformed Christian, leaving behind her gambling and drinking days.

Yutu attributes her renewed faith be the reason behind her present prosperity. Like two peas in a pod, her husband and her rattle inside their big house overlooking their entire land on the mountain slope. All the surplus from their garden, which accounts to 90 per cent of the harvest, goes towards feeding their two pigs aptly named Sir and Madam. Their only daughter is married, and they have three grandchildren.

'God really helped me out because with the little savings that I had, I bought a female mithun which, in turn, gave birth to another female mithun; and these two female mithuns gave birth to more female mithuns. I suddenly had more mithuns than I could care for, so I started selling them,' Yutu said.

Mithuns are a mobile version of saving deposits, and a female mithun costs upwards of 50,000 Indian rupees while a male costs

between 30,000 to 50,000 Indian rupees depending on the size of its horns (an indicator of body size). For all the disparity that exists between the genders, on accounts of mithuns, women surely have received the shorter end of the stick.

'Since I had enough mithuns, I started taking more 'risks' in cases, and my reputation grew as a Gaon Burhi. People would approach me to hear their cases because they knew I would solve it for them. And if I ever found another Gaon Burha insulting others for their inability to take "risks", I would tell them to let their mithuns give their judgement instead of them. But I must admit, I never had the confidence to retort before I became rich myself,' Yutu said.

Yutu chose to build her fourth home some distance away from the village and the whispering voices, hoping the distance would help in cutting through the noise. In 1997, she fought with her sister-in-law over land. The entire family sided against her, and hurtful words were exchanged. In early 2000, she moved out with three resolutions: first, to build another house for herself; second, a house for her only daughter; and third, a burial place for herself and her husband.

Burial places hold utmost significance in the community as markers of ownership. After all, can you sleep better anywhere else than in your own bed? The *nyiblu,* memorial of a person, is the final stamp of that person's authority over that land.

Yutu suited action to words and finished building the burial place, complete with a tombstone for herself and her husband in 2016. To celebrate their eventual death, she cut five mithuns in honour of her newly built memorial and had a community feast. With that final move, the address of her resting place is community knowledge stored in all their collective memories now.

'I had a whole speech written for my family to hear on the day of the feast, but my daughter stopped me from reading it. She said, "We should not insult our guests after inviting them to our house." I was angry, but I knew she was right; so I agreed,' Yutu said.

Parts of Yutu's written but unspoken speech read thus:

'Do you remember the words you said? Because I do. You said, "Who will bury you in this land you call yours when you die as you have no son? I will throw your body in the nearest forest I can find." I did not cry then. But look at me shed tears of joy now. I tilled this land until rice grew in it, the rice you are eating now. I raised the mithuns whose meat you are enjoying now. I have a church on my land and a community of devotees who will bury me when my time comes, of that I am certain. And here you all are, celebrating my life on the very land you fought me for: in which I forever rest my claim.'

WHO TELLS YOUR STORY?[14]

I reach very early for my final meeting with Yutu, to say my goodbyes. I wait as Yutu makes her morning walk around the village. On arriving, she tells me that she went around collecting money she had lent previously to others. Her husband sits nearby as she counts the money and writes notes in her ledger. I tell her that I can wait outside until she finishes her work. She tells me to stay and says, 'If either one of us dies, you can be our witness as to who returned the money and who did not.'

It hits me, I am part of her story now.

Is that truly all it takes to be part of the narrative? To be a mere witness?

By association, I also have a personal stake in all their lives now.

So, what is my standing in representing these stories and these communities? Why are these narratives important? And am I the only one asking these questions?

What *is* a narrative anyway? A tool of research, a paradigm of study, a recollection of life's events, a presentation of experiences, an assertion of one's voice or mere words of meaning.

If so, then what is the narrative of the red coat? While the initial understanding was that of power, authority, trust and knowledge,

there is more to it. Because the narrative changes with who wears the red coat.

With the Gaon Burhis, the red coat is a marker of survival, of compromises, of acceptance, of resilience and of things-in-progress (and which will forever remain in progress). And so here comes the question, making me lose sleep: Will writing their narratives be enough? And if so, how to then do so?

Because stories of the Gaon Burhis are those of women functioning in and negotiating the dynamics of violence, conflict and power in a community space. A space where lines of work, family and society are blurred to the extent that they no longer exist. And yet each sphere contributes to the identity of the Gaon Burhi – Yanyum is a first wife, Yarup is in a leadership position in the workplace, Soo is a dedicated mother and Yutu is a son-less woman. While all the while fulfilling their roles as witnesses to the community history and, in turn, helping shape the narrative of their communities. All, so far, at the price of their own narratives.

And yet if one looks closely, the very foundation of these communities are the stories of each of their members. Because, come tomorrow, the red coats may change bodies, colour or power; but the stories remain and will be transferred as always – from member to member. So, the challenge ahead lies in creating a space where these individual stories can exist and become an equal plotline in the fabric of the bigger community.

There is a word amongst the *Nyishis* called *Hiirchi,* which refers to the joy underneath what is evidently a messy picture. Like a house completely in disarray by a child's growing adventures, like the noisy sound of a family eating together and like a big stack of dirty plates proclaiming filled tummies.

In *Hiirchi* is the acceptance of the messiness of life. The recognition of the joyous undertones in the normalcy of life. A reverence of the studied routine often dismissed as uninteresting. A celebration of the careful nurturing it takes to live the every day. An understanding

of endings as fleeting beginnings. And at least in this case, and in this particular time, the lives of these marvellous women will end just like it all began – in storytelling.

NOTES

1. Pronounced Nee-shi, it is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and the most populous tribe in the state, spread over eight districts.
2. My lineage is Nido, of the clan Peri, of the tribe Nyishi, located in the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. All the participants and the villages are located in Kamle district.
3. The Nyishis living in Kamle district were previously known as the Hill Miri tribe, often categorized as a sub-tribe of the Nyishi. However, since 2008, all the sub-tribes have been merged into the single term Nyishi.
4. See *Tribal Village Councils of Arunachal Pradesh* by Dr B.B. Pandey, Dr D.K. Baruah and N. Sarkar (Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1999).
5. Ibid.
6. Nyokum is an agricultural festival celebrated by the Nyishi tribe from 20 February to 26 February .
7. Under the NEFA administration, the Subansiri district was the region along the banks of the Subansiri river. The district was divided into two – Lower and Upper Subansiri – in 1980. On 15 December 2017, the present-day Kamle district was inaugurated after being carved out of the eastern and western parts of Lower and Upper Subansiri districts respectively. The district Kamle is named after the river Kamle, which flows through the valley to meet the Subansiri river further south.
8. von Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph. 1962. *The Apa Tanis and Their Neighbours*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
9. It is important to note here that from 1947 to 1972, the present Arunachal Pradesh was still known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and administered under the Governor of Assam – a contributing factor towards many officers speaking Assamese.
10. An uncle who often criticizes me for my 'impure' Nyishi-speaking abilities (Nyishi diluted with Assamese, English and Hindi), recently confessed

that he was part of the student group which led the agitation against the government in the 1960s. They pelted stones at the government offices demanding English to be made the first language in the otherwise Assamese-medium schools. 'We wanted English to be the first language, Assamese to be the second and our local language the third,' he said. Apparently, my terrible Nyishi is his penance for making those demands. Perhaps, this phenomenon of link languages is the first chapter in the crowded arena of present-day linguistic identities and crisis, but that is a story for another time.

11. On this see N.T. Rikam's, 'Contentions over the term "Bride Price" in Nyishi Marriage Systems, Laws and Property Rights of Women and Girl Child', *Nyishi Nyem Acham*, Itanagar, 2013.
12. Borrowed from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the line in its entirety is: 'So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.'
13. *Tina* refers to corrugated aluminium sheets often used on the roof of a bamboo house.
14. To borrow a line from yet another founding fathers story – In this case from the 2015 musical, Hamilton: An American Musical, the sentence in its entirety is: 'You have no control –who lives, who dies and who tells your story?'