

### 3. Understanding Hygiene in Apatani Society

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#### **Abstract**

*Hygiene as a holistic concept is understood as a multidimensional process involving the well being of a person in the context of his or her environment. This implies that every aspect of society has a great effect on health. Public or personal hygiene can be subjective and can vary across cultures. Thus, there are variations in perceptions with regard to the definition and perception of 'hygiene'. Regardless of differences in culture, customs, or beliefs, every culture values hygiene which in manifested in varying ways through the maintenance of personal and public hygiene. In Apatani society, the meticulous care of the paddy fields and bamboo grooves that is undertaken throughout the year exhibits the values of hygiene. The idea of being 'kiirañ' (hard working), a quality that is highly valued in the traditionally intensive agricultural Apatani society is tied to the component of 'moral' value. Being a hard worker is a quality that is highly extolled in the Apatani culture. Thus, the paper is an attempt to understand the perception of hygiene in Apatani society and also highlight the subjective differences and aspects of hygiene in Apatani society before and after the introduction of education and the collective understanding of hygiene that prevails today.*

**Keywords:** *Hygiene, Apatani, Culture, Agriculture*

#### **Introduction**

Every culture has their understanding of hygiene. Culture shapes human behaviour in a myriad of ways and consequently, it influences how people interpret and evaluate their surrounding environment and practices in their day to day life. Traditional communities may lack the knowledge of 'hygiene' as implied in modern understanding, but, they often have their own unique culture specific ways of conceiving what constitutes hygiene or cleanliness and the value that is given to a practice(s). Hence, it becomes essential to understand the traditional perception of hygiene through the the subjective

views of the people of a culture regarding their perception of hygiene and hygiene practices. This study is an attempt to understand and analyze the cultural aspects that affect the reactions and attitudes towards hygiene in Apatani society. Also, it seeks to examine the impact of education and the changes in the perception of personal hygiene as a consequence of modernity.

### **Concept of hygiene**

Hygiene as a concept, in the simplest sense can be understood as conditions and practices that help to maintain cleanliness in order to prevent the spread of diseases. Thus, the cleaning process is a means to achieve hygiene. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that while the early usage of the term relates entirely to the practice of medicine, the modern usage tends to refer specifically to the everyday habits of cleanliness where it relates to maintaining good health. However, hygiene is rarely explicitly defined. Nevertheless, it can be understood as a broad term which may refer to different aspects of hygiene such as personal hygiene, public hygiene, environmental hygiene etc. Environmental hygiene is the control of all the factors in a person's physical environment that have or can have a damaging effect on their physical, mental or social well being. Markedly, all conceptions of hygiene are culturally determined. The focus in this paper is primarily on environmental hygiene and how it relates to the conception of personal and public hygiene in Apatani society.

The conceptualisation of hygiene has evolved through various historical periods and civilisations. Hygiene is embedded in a wide and complex set of social values and sentiments. It is linked with concerns about privacy and intimacy, neatness, social prestige, convenience, respect and being civilized. Unhygienic, in contrast, refers to poverty, shame, disgust and invaded intimacy (van der Geest, 2015). The same thing or act can be clean as well as dirty. There are variations that is apparent in practices as well as surroundings and the importance of cleanliness in any given society and culture. Giuseppina and Stefano (2014) examined the notion of contamination and the way it is found to be strictly connected to the clean/dirty antinomy and as being shaped by every cultural and religious belief and popular knowledge and also the common sense prevailing in any culture and society . Also, the cultural influence concerns not only the frequency and quality of hygienic habits but also, their private or collective practice. For instance, in contemporary Western culture, for instance, washing is a private, individual practice, whereas in the ancient Greece and Rome and in contemporary Turkey, Syria, Jordan, or Japan, it may even be considered a collective ritual

(Ashenburg, 2007).

Additionally, history reveals that cleanliness was also often utilised as an assertion of moral superiority or respectability. Thus, cleanliness also meant establishing cultural values in relation to social class, humanitarianism and cultural imperialism (Utkarsh et.al, 2016). The era of colonialism saw the use of the notion of cleanliness as a classifying and stratifying cultures wherein non-western countries and non-white races were seen as dirty and hence, occupying a lower standing in the supposed hierarchy of the civilizations. Ashenburg (2007) underlined that the body negligence and the lack of precepts concerning physical cleanliness differentiate the Christianity from the Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu religions. Giuseppina and Stefano (2014) notes that changes in the perception of personal hygiene is linked to the explicit religious prescriptions on purification especially in Islam and Hinduism. Hence, it is becomes clear that the concept of hygiene is contextually bound and is amenable to change due to a variety of factors across time and space. Shove (2003) makes the case for an approach that concentrates on the construction and transformation of collective conventions on normality. Hence, hygiene is a social construct that is informed by changing beliefs and value systems. When studying hygiene and its value in a society, it becomes important to look at the cultural attitudes towards beauty, vanity, child-rearing to get a nuanced understanding of how hygiene is conceived in the particular culture. And it is within this subjective understanding of hygiene and hygiene practices that the paper is situated.

### Context

Arunachal Pradesh located in the eastern part of India is a predominantly tribal population. The sex ratio stands at 938 (2011 census) with a literacy rate of 57.70 % for women and 72.55 % for men. The Apatani or *Tanii* tribe inhabits Ziro, the headquarter of Lower Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh. They are primarily known for their age-old practise of wet rice cultivation and their ingenuity in having managed to use every inch of cultivable land. Exhaustive work has been done on the agricultural practices and its sustainability (Deori 2020, Sikdar 2014, Rai, 2015, Ramakrishnan 1990, 2008).

UNESCO has included 'Apatani Cultural Landscape' in the tentative list of World Heritage sites in 2014 ( Deori 2020, The Arunachal Times 2018, Farooqy 2017, UNESCO). The Arunachal times

(2018) in its article on the selection of the site reported that it was selected on the basis of the unique settlement system and man-nature relationship of the Apatani tribe settled at Ziro, Lower Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh.

This is a testament of the hardwork and indigenous traditional knowledge which is evident in the rigorous maintenance of the rice fields. This quality of being a *kiirañ* (hard worker), is a much valued quality in the culture, that defines the work ethic of the tribe. As such, the paper proposes that, it is this practise and value that is of significance in understanding the concept of hygiene in *Tanii* society. Furthermore, in order to understand culture and hygiene in the context of the Apatani tribe, it is important to have an insight into *Tanii* culture. *Taniis* are traditionally animists but with the establishment of contact with outsiders and consequent introduction of education, some major changes have come about. Additionally, it is evident that one also needs to look into the cultural attitudes towards other aspects of culture such as beauty, vanity and child rearing values in order to gain a holistic understanding of the values that relate to personal hygiene practices. This shall be discussed in the section on findings.

### **Objectives**

The objectives identified for the study are:

- i) How is hygiene perceived in *Tanii* culture?
- ii) What are the values that correspond to hygiene?
- iii) What are the hygiene practices that are passed on to children in the process of child rearing or socialization of children?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

A qualitative research methodology was adopted for this study as the aim was to understand how the participants derive meaning from their surroundings, and how their meaning influences their behaviour.

#### **Sample and area of study**

The study sample is taken from the Apatani tribe, Reru village in Arunachal Pradesh. A total of 15

participants were chosen through the use of purposive sampling. The age of the participants ranged from 42 to 70 years.

### Data collection and Analysis

Data was collected through in-depth interviews using semi- structured, open ended questions. Since the data was collected using voice recorder the recordings were transcribed and translated accordingly. Then, the data was hand coded to draw out the significant themes that are relevant to the objectives of the study.

Fig.1 Old tanii woman on the way to the rice fields



Apatani woman, Ziro valley (A, 2017).

Fig. 2 Ziro agricultural landscape



Ziro in the month of June (Joseph,2021)

### Findings and Discussion

This section highlights the findings through the presentation of themes that emerged from a thematic analysis of the data.

#### Personal hygiene in traditional culture and current context

A majority of the respondents shared that their childhood was vastly different from that to their own children in terms of the priority given to personal hygiene practices such as bathing, washing hands before eating, wearing clean clothing etc. One of the reasons shared by many of the respondents shared that their parents were too busy in their agricultural work to be properly concerned with such

personal hygiene practices. In fact, many of the respondents mentioned that hand washing after agriculture work was not a priority. This can be attributed to the fact that traditionally soil is not necessarily perceived as being dirty. It is only in contemporary times that we have come to associate soil as being dirty and the obsession with hygiene, cleanliness and germs. Secondly, because of the extreme climate of bitter cold winters and cool summers, bathing was occasional and many a times, they would not bathe for months altogether. But interestingly, none of the respondents talked about body odour in this context. This may be due to the reason that the diet was simple and body odour, if any, was negligible and even acceptable and not abhorred as today.

Whereas, when they recounted their own efforts at child rearing and hygiene practices, majority affirmed that, it has become a priority. From brushing ones teeth every day to bathing at least twice a week or every single day, the respondents opined that it is now a part of their everyday reality, something you don't think twice about. This may be attributed to a number of reasons. Above all, the impact of schools which have served as an important site for personal hygiene lessons. In addition, the efforts of the local government encouraging hygiene practices as well as exposure to media all have contributed to the current understanding and perception of personal hygiene.

### ***Kiirañ* as an attribute**

This is a recurrent theme in the narratives of the respondents cutting across social class and gender. The term '*kiirañ*' which literally translates to a a person who may be described as hard working is used to express positive appreciation. It connotes that a person who is *kiirañ* is admirable and respected. This personal quality may be translated to the cleanliness of the rice field which is a reflection of the persons hardworking nature in keeping his rice fields clean and tidy through constant weeding and maintenance throughout the year. For this reason, the quality of *kiirañ* may be considered as being representative of their culture and belief systems that serves as a guiding principle of all their activities and which translates to the practice of hygiene that is maintained in the rice fields and tending of bamboo grooves involving a lot of hard physical labour.

A 62 year old woman says,

( So, be hardworking in everything you do. That was the thing that they (parents)  
stressed a lot on. That is all they said....)



The high emphasis on the value of being hardworking and the disdain for laziness and concern about being judged by society in this context also suggests that Apatani's are very conscious of their reputation especially when it comes to their work ethics in everyday life. And understandably so as , traditional society revolved around intensive agricultural work and the community takes great pride in the maintenance of its agricultural fields and the maintenance of the bamboo grooves. This ethic has, in a way also translated to other areas of life in Apatani culture which has translated to a high degree of literacy among the tribesmen. Today, the Apatani are considered as one of the most advanced when it comes to education and it is exemplified by the huge number of apatani's who are employed in various capacities at different governmental departments.

#### **Women as key actors in agriculture and hygiene**

Apatani women play a central role in agricultural operations and in conserving the indigenous biodiversity of the plateau. Agriculture is a community activity in Apatani society as evidenced by the *patañ* system. Earlier, the *patañ*<sup>1</sup> was earlier common to both sexes but in the present reality, there is only existence of female *patañs* as evident from the narrative of the respondents. Consequently, the responsibility of the maintenance of the rice fields falls solely on the women folk and as a result bound to uphold the value of being *kiirañ*. Although, tending to the bamboo grooves is still a shared labour but considered to be a labour assigned mostly to men.

Hygiene, personal or public is often considered as a woman's responsibility. And in the context of the Apatani, connecting the notion of hygiene to that of *kiirañ* burdens the womenfolk with the added responsibility of the maintenance of the paddy fields.

This is especially relevant today as the Apatani cultural landscape has been included in the tentative list of World heritage sites which consequently has resulted in an added responsibility on the community to keep up the traditional customs and practices which are crucial to maintain the sustainable system. And with women at the forefront of the traditional agricultural practices, the onus, is placed on them.

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<sup>1</sup>*Patañ* - The *Patañ* is a group comprising of a fixed number of individuals along a gendered division of labour. A fixed number persons constitute the *Patañ*. It is the same group of people who voluntarily form the *Patañ* work in rotation on the paddy fields at the request of the owners of the fields. The members of the *patañ* receive a wage for rendering their labour for agricultural activities (Mamu, 2010).

### **Education vs Sustainable agriculture**

Additionally, data reveals that the women engaged in agricultural work is an ageing population. With educated youths, irrespective of being employed or unemployed, reluctant to engage in agricultural work, the traditional knowledge systems with regard to rice fields are dying out. People have realised that education and the paddy field are incompatible. This is evidenced by all the participants between the age group of 42-70 who expressed the importance of education and the decline of the centrality of tending rice fields today. Some of the quotes taken from the interview illustrate the point:

(No one thinks of working in the rice field or collecting firewood from the forest anymore. In our time, that was our parents only concern. Today, we only think about education. But now, they don't know how to do any kind of (physical) work.)

(Everybody knows the value of education now. There might be (financial) difficulties at home but parents are determined to not let their children feel it. Now, every parent emphasizes on education. I know of families who have sold off all their agricultural land to fund the education of their children....)

There seems to be a tacit understanding that education and the age old labour intensive agriculture are placed at opposing ends. And many seem resigned to the fact that it is education which will help them in the race for survival today.

One need only look at the centrality of the rice fields in the culture of the tribe. Festivals and rituals are organised around agricultural practices. The oral narratives of the tribe in the form of folk tales, proverbs, folk songs all point to the centrality of agriculture in their culture. Although, unfortunately, one needs to add that the present social reality does not reflect the romanticised accounts in many academic writings or otherwise today.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, it has been demonstrated that hygiene or more precisely, personal hygiene as we understand today was not a priority in the everyday lives of the traditional Apatani society . Rather, as evidenced through the value transmission in the process of child rearing, there is a greater emphasis



on the maintenance of the rice fields. Agriculture assumes centrality in apatani society. Everyday routines was organised around managing time in such a manner so as to make maximum use of daylight in the fields and forests, tending to the maintenance work according to the season. Hence, looking at the notion of hygiene in traditional apatani society, it was lacking, if one is to look at it through the prism of understanding we have, of hygiene today. But, if one were to understand hygiene beyond the personal self, the importance of the quality of being *kiirañ* or hardworking assumes importance as it translates to keeping the surrounding environment clean or hygienic. A quality which has been recognised by its inclusion in the tentative list of the world heritage site.

Education though initially slow to be taken up, came to be wholly embraced by the community which is evident by the common perception that the Apatani community is one of the most literate today in the state. And it is with the coming and spread of education that has largely contributed to a change in the perception and practices of hygiene that is understood today.

The changes that have occurred due to education is also evidenced through the changes that one is able to discern in terms of religious orientation, syncretic practices, language etc. Apatani society is at a cross road. Changes are apparent in terms of its cultural belief and value systems. The value system is changing as the society negotiates its existence against the onslaught modernisation and globalisation. Although, the society seems to have demonstrated its ability to adapt, both apparent and subtle changes are taking place that is changing the very fabric of Apatani culture. More specifically there is a marked change in the perception and practice of personal hygiene on the one hand and the dissipation of the concern for the rice fields in their quest for survival in an increasingly globalising world. This has resulted in the transformation of the notion of 'kiirañ' to one that is more easily adoptable, but a different kind of *kiirañ*, that which has distanced itself from physical labour.

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