

**Grounds for democratic hope in Arunachal Pradesh:  
Emerging civic geographies and the reinvention of gender and tribal identities**

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# **Grounds for Democratic Hope in Arunachal Pradesh: Emerging Civic Geographies and the Reinvention of Gender and Tribal Identities**

BETSY TAYLOR

Democratic prospects for Arunachal Pradesh are perilous but not fragile.<sup>1</sup> Potential perils are real, if too often exaggerated in outsider's views of the Northeast. Intractable identity politics could emerge from Arunachal Pradesh's astonishing cultural diversity—among the several dozen tribal groups, or between immigrants and indigenous populations. Rich natural resources of forest and hydropower could create the usual moral and political traps of extractive industry—steep inequalities, cultural marginalization and disempowerment of many sectors; political corruption, lack of economic diversity and entrepreneurial creativity; environmental devastation, structural regional underdevelopment, outflow of capital and profits and demographic displacements.

However, contrary to these stereotypes, there are creative reinventions of tribal and gender identities in Arunachal Pradesh, which open spaces of hope for an alternative path to development. This hope, while hedged by dangers, has solid grounds—able to build from self-sufficient local economies, new freedoms for women, new spaces of imagination rooted

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<sup>1</sup>I wish to acknowledge the insights and inspiration I have received from the hundreds of activists, scholars and leaders with whom I have worked in Arunachal Pradesh. Much of the focus of this paper is on the NGO Future Generations (Arunachal). For more information on their excellent programs, readers can contact: Dr Tage Kanno (Executive Director), Future Generations Arunachal, Vivek Vihar, H-Sector, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. E-mail: [kanno@future.org](mailto:kanno@future.org) and at [www.future.org](http://www.future.org)

in reappropriated cultural pasts and new civic networks. Emerging forms of grass-roots civil society can gain strength from factors that early 'developmentalist' models would portray as weakening. This essay suggests that subsistence tribal economies provide resilience, safety nets and psychocultural security that strengthen social bases for economic and civic experimentation. Some would see only infrastructure problems in the fiercely precipitous terrain of the eastern Himalayas. But, this terrain harbors ecological mega-diversity which could provide a uniquely intact material basis for decentralized, post-industrial 'green' economies based on small-scale industries which create high value products with sustainable use of forests and forest products (Agarwal 1999). Ecologically embedded and resilient economies, under the right political conditions, have the capacity to diffuse economic prosperity through dispersed rural populations in ways that nurture cultural and political security, creativity and equity. Scaled up, democratic political will could structure the emerging, possibly vast hydropower industries in ways that do not lock the region into the political instability, capital flight and economic inequality often associated with extractive or energy industries.

#### **CIVIC SPACE, CIVIL SOCIETY, PUBLIC SPACE AND THE GROUNDS OF DEMOCRACY**

This article attempts to understand the possibilities for democratization, sustainable prosperity, equity and multiculturalism in Arunachal Pradesh. It grapples with these wider questions through an analysis of ten years of community mobilization in three tribal areas of the state, from 1997 to 2006. The goal is to understand how democratic public space can be nurtured, expanded and deepened. I get at this question by asking about what *surrounds, enables and buffers public space*. I am interested in the social spaces and pathways through which individuals and groups get access to public legitimacy and public action (or do not). These intermediate spaces are crucial to a vibrant democracy because these are the arenas in which people groom themselves for public action, build self-confidence, clarify thinking and strategies, reflect on individual and collective needs and values, build alliances and political will, help each other heal from collective tragedies and nourish their capacity for hope. A diversity of such sub-public spaces is essential to inclusive and pluralistic democratic public space, and, is particularly important for those who have been excluded from public life. Almost by definition, the powerful have garnered such resources

already—like movie stars with the best coaches, dressing rooms and retinues of backstage support crews.

This article attempts to look at the micro politics *behind* democratizing public spaces in Arunachal Pradesh, in order to understand those social and psychological forces which might provide durable foundations for democratic public life at the local level and beyond. If public space is defined as the social arena in which the common good is defined or celebrated, and in which collective actions are debated, legitimated and authorized, this paper, then, is concerned with those spaces through which people travel in order to get to a public space. I call these spaces ‘civic space’. By ‘civic’ I mean that which is transitional between social life and public life—those webs of cultural meanings, social skills, identities, discourses, practices, and labours which can translate the social into the public, and the public into the social. ‘Civic space’ is different from ‘civil society’. Baruah, drawing on Bayart and others, defines ‘civil society’ as those forms of civic life which are sufficiently well organized to be able to confront, critique, and engage the state (Baruah 2005; Bayart 1993). This is an important distinction, and, crucial to my analysis.<sup>2</sup>

## KEY QUESTIONS

This article grapples with these questions primarily through an in-depth case study of the work of an Indian non-governmental organization (NGO), Future Generations (Arunachal) or FGA.<sup>3</sup> It

<sup>2</sup>For an extended discussion of this definition of ‘public’ and ‘civic’, see Reid and Taylor, 2010. My usage is similar to what Baruah (p. 135) calls ‘social space’ except that he contrasts society to the state (Baruah 2005). The contrast I would draw is between society and a notion of ‘public space’ which includes both official government structure and the extra-governmental spaces of collective citizen action, debate and celebration which is the shadowy but vital co-presence of the ‘people’ as the ultimate source, guarantor and protector of a legitimate democratic republic. I also include *pre-state public authorities*, as is importantly the case in Arunachal Pradesh where there are complex and shifting interactions between the unfortunately labeled ‘traditional tribal’ political structures, established state, and the emerging Panchayati structures.

<sup>3</sup>This article is written from a philosophy of engaged and participatory scholarship. I first went to Arunachal Pradesh in 1995, as Senior Social Scientist with a small NGO, Future Generations (International) based in USA. From this process, the Indian NGO FGA emerged in 1997. From 1997 through 1998, I was a liaison between the two organizations, spending three to four months in Arunachali villages over the course of a year. In addition to this grass-roots fieldwork, I spent many weeks with Arunachali academics and social activists at the state level—including extensive collegial interactions at Rajiv Gandhi University (formerly Arunachal University), in regular visits and several workshops and seminars. In February 2006, I spent two weeks revisiting the three programme sites where I had earlier

attempts to answer three questions. First, it asks how new civic spaces are emerging from the diversity of prior public spaces in the different tribal groups—forms of polities which have historical contexts that are both unique and interrelated. Second, it examines how FGA grass-roots activists are creating new webs of mutual empowerment by working hard to open new civic spaces. It suggests that there are different ‘trajectories of empowerment’ within different groups but that these intra-tribal dynamics would not be possible without the inter-tribal civic infrastructure that the FGA has built up. Third, I ask what lessons can be learned from this experience that can contribute to global efforts to create new forms of democracy—forms more appropriate to twenty-first century problems and global cultural diversity than those that came from the eighteenth-century West. Many are struggling to find models for democratic participation that strike a healthy balance between local and trans-local—between citizen-driven local action and trans-local support systems (technical expertise, government, etc.) that create the necessary enabling conditions for long-term local democracy (Bell et al. 1990; Cavanagh 2002; Fischer 2000; Korten 1995; Shutkin 2000; Taylor-Ide and Taylor 2002). At their best, emerging Arunachali civic life is articulating civic practices that *arise from, and are embedded in*, tribal identities, with pan-tribal, national, and transnational forms of imagination and action. Herbert Reid and I describe this as a process of *tranversalizing* of particular into collective identity rather than the *universalizing* of collective identities that are so basic to liberal Western political traditions (Reid and Taylor 2010).

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earlier, and did a 10-year evaluation report at the request of the FGA. For this we visited 20 villages and had long meetings with members of 36 *Mahila Mandals* and four Farmer's Clubs, as well as many other civic leaders, officials and interested citizens. These community meetings lasted from one to four hours, giving us the opportunity for in-depth conversations with well over 700 villagers by the end of the trip. I draw my reflections from field journals kept over this 11-year period, in addition to the available scholarly literature.

## **CASE STUDY IN EMPOWERMENT: FUTURE GENERATIONS (ARUNACHAL)**

The FGA was formally incorporated as an Arunachali voluntary society in March 1997. This followed two months of community meetings in many villages in the Adi, Apatani, and Tangsa tribal areas, to identify felt needs and interested communities. Due to security concerns in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, it was not possible to implement projects in the Tangsa area. Within a few months, however, work did begin in the *Nyishi* tribal area in western Arunachal Pradesh. The FGA is based on three action principles:

- Base action on locally-specific data;
- build three-way partnerships between community, officials, experts;
- develop a community work plan to change collective behaviour.

There were six criteria for evaluating outcomes: equity, sustainability, interdependence (building healthy linkages between partners), holism, collaboration, and iteration (circular movement between action and reflection).<sup>4</sup> The FGA model nurtures and supports volunteer community action groups for holistic community change. As these groups identify needs, the FGA helps to facilitate training and partnerships with appropriate experts and government agencies. Highly motivated volunteers can become Village Welfare Workers (VWW) trained in public health, infant and maternal health, and leadership and organization development, by the FGA in collaboration with the Comprehensive Rural Health Project (CRHP) in Jamkhed, Maharashtra (Arole and Arole 2002). Each VWW has a certain number of households to care for and monitor and plays a key leadership role. Support for grass-roots voluntary work is provided by Learning and Doing Centres, which are accessibly situated in the web of villages they support. Each site is managed by a voluntary Local Coordinating Committee (LCC) which sends representatives to a statewide Master Coordinating Committee which meets regularly to set policy guidelines for the NGO. The centres and the community groups are supported

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<sup>4</sup>This model for community-based empowerment and sustainable development is described in detail in Taylor-Ide and Taylor (2002).

by one or more paid staff who live on site and report to the Executive Director of the FGA. The Executive Director is a professional staff person responsible for statewide administration of the FGA within the policy guidelines formulated by the voluntary members of the Master Coordinating Committee.

The FGA's first goal was to cultivate community action groups in each of the three sites. Although more men than women attended the initial community meetings, almost all the men dropped out after several sessions. The result was the development of about a half-dozen *Mahila Mandals* (women's organizations) in each of the three sites by the end of 1997. By 2006, the number grew to 72 *Mahila Mandals* (and 57 Self-Help Groups), 16 Farmers' Clubs (men's voluntary organizations) spread across six sites. The outpouring of creative voluntary action from these *Mahila Mandals* has galvanized FGA projects ever since, following a pattern found elsewhere in India of strong grass-roots leadership by women in social movements (Ray 1999). Health has been the primary focus of FGA activities and in responding to the grass-roots initiative, many issues have been tackled. These include sanitation, microcredit, agricultural improvement and experimentation, income generation (especially weaving and other cottage industries), problems of alcohol and addiction, violence against women, child marriage and non-consensual marriage, forestry, environmental awareness, Panchayati raj training, and civic leadership training. Although geographically uneven the outcomes have been excellent and have included plummeting rates of infant and maternal mortality and violence against women, increased literacy, thriving microcredit schemes, transformation of village landscapes, and diverse programmes of local economic development. But, on my recent trip to visit FGA work, it is empowerment of women and cultivation of grass-roots civic leadership that community volunteers spoke most about, repeatedly, with passion and thoughtfulness.

## **THE QUESTION OF 'TRIBAL' IDENTITY: ARUNACHAL PRADESH IN (SUB)NATIONAL CULTURAL POLITICS**

Years spent in India had habituated me to the cultural diversity that often astonishes Americans. However, just as I have watched Americans in India rethink their understanding of, and pride in, the different multiculturalism of the USA, I watched myself on my first trip to the Northeast in 1995 reweaving my understanding of India's

multicultural nationalism. It was only after I had been in the Northeast that I understood how invisible it is in the Indian mainstream. And, Arunachal Pradesh has been an occlusion within an occlusion—because of its internal complexity, its lack of salience in mainstream national and sub-national popular awareness, and the paucity of scholarly research. The staggering density of ethnic diversity of the Northeast, rises, as it were, exponentially in Arunachal Pradesh. With just over one million people spread over the precipitous easternmost Himalayas at the lowest population density in India, the state currently recognizes 20 major tribal groups, with 80 sub-tribal groupings (Indian Census 2001).

The term ‘tribe’ is always problematic as it carries many stereotypes. Recent scholarship in India notes the ambiguities and contradictions of ‘tribal’ or ‘adivasi’ identities, including the tendency to romanticize tribal communities as pure cultures, living in harmony close to nature, but disjunct from surrounding society (Baviskar 1996; Sivaramakrishnan 2000). Sophisticated recent scholarship deconstructs tribal identities showing that tribal economies and identities are less isolated than often portrayed, and are profoundly shaped by, and embedded in, the complex histories of wider interaction. The distinctive cultural and political economic features of Arunachal's many tribes arose not simply from isolation, but *from the kinds of interrelationships* they had with the plains. Baruah is right to describe a kind of articulation as well as a historic two-way continuum between the hills and the plains, driven by raids to capture slaves, shifting trade and labour markets, and environmental changes (Baruah 2005). Sikdar provides detailed historical evidence of the strong impacts on hill tribal economies and societies of British imperial attempts to establish and control trade routes between the Indian plains and China in the nineteenth century (Sikdar 1982). Borooah provides a fascinating and in-depth ethnographic picture of the impact of regional trade on Wancho society (in eastern Arunachal Pradesh) from the 1960s to the present, as *internal* gender and class power structures were structured and restructured in response to waves of *external* restructuring in regional and transnational flows of consumer goods, non-timber forest products and opium (Borooah 2000). Analysing the relationship of Sulung foragers and Nyishi horticulturalists, Taylor-Ide argues that the flow of trade and warfare among hill tribes creates their differences as well as their interdependencies as different tribes specialize in different ecological niches (Taylor-Ide 2006).



**GENDER IN  
'TRADITIONAL'  
ARUNACHAL PRADESH  
POLITIES AND  
ECONOMIES**

Many traditional tribal societies in the Northeast accord women considerable authority and power. This is most notable among the Khasis. All Arunachali tribes, however, show a distinctive combination of male political authority and female economic



**Illustration 1: Photograph 14:1: Apatani girls at work, repairing rice paddies**

power, which a senior IAS officer aptly described to me as 'woman-centred but male dominant'. There is a glaring lack of comparative scholarship on gender in Arunachal Pradesh, but it seems evident to me that endemic warfare is the primary structural cause of male dominance in traditional tribal societies. This is a typical gender pattern in horticultural societies with chronic warfare such as New Guinea and the Amazon (Sanday 1981). Male dominance is predominant in traditional Arunachali kinship and marriage systems, but with much inter-tribal variation.

Traditionally, women were the primary farmers and foragers in all Arunachali subsistence economies. Men clear the land, help maintain

fields, manage forests, hunt, help with fieldwork, and do much of the construction of buildings. The great bulk of the labour—feeding and maintaining the family—is done by the women. Women are also active traders.

### **‘TRADITIONAL’ TRIBAL PUBLIC SPACES AS GROUNDS FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CIVIC EXPERIMENTATION**

There are fascinating differences between tribal groups in the kinds of public and civic spaces that have been created by community groups active in the FGA. One of the necessary paradoxes of public space is that it must create the appearance of both certainty and openness (Lefort 1988). This sense of public authority comes from the ability of a public space to represent collective social order and common good as self-evident. However, to make a compelling demonstration that this collective order is legitimate, it must create at least the appearance of freedom by including dramas in which individuals and groups appear to voluntarily assent to, and participate in, this order (Rappaport 1999). On one hand, the social geography of initial community meetings exemplified constitutive local power structures. On the other hand, all of them had structured spaces of openness, *built into their ‘traditional’ form*, which created room to maneuver, reinvent and transform received forms of power and prestige. It is my argument that different forms of local tribal publics have distinctive modalities for their self-undoing and self-transformation. The conclusion of this article is that this leads to different ‘trajectories’ of empowerment, for example, forms of emergent civic space that were distinctively ‘Nyishi’, ‘Apatani’, or ‘Adi’.

### **ETHNOSCAPES OF DEVELOPMENT**

It is striking to compare the actual trajectories of empowerment, with what was predicted by senior officials and state-level leaders at the beginning of the project. These were knowledgeable and concerned leaders, so I consider this unpredictability to be not a sign of their ignorance, but of the necessarily emergent and open-ended nature of empowerment. From the beginning, I and other FGA team members had extensive conversations with high-level administrative, legislative, and scholarly leaders.<sup>5</sup> Uniformly, they counselled that we could expect

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<sup>5</sup>The fact that it was extremely difficult for foreigners to get government permits to work in Arunachal Pradesh necessitated that we have strong support from the state government. In the past, my approach has been more ‘bottom up’, but the necessity in Arunachal Pradesh to also work from the ‘top down’ taught me valuable lessons. It led me to more nuanced, and actor-centred understandings of how bureaucracies and

the greatest successes among the Apatani because they were renowned for their hard work, civic solidarity, and follow through. The Adi, they predicted, would be the second most successful. Closest to the plains and enjoying the earliest political contacts with the outside world during the colonial and post-independence period, the Adi dominated much of politics, with (I was told) a gift for rhetoric, a progressive ‘can-do’ attitude as well as education and wealth from early modernization. The Nyishi were described as needing the programmes the most, but, it was with them that the programmes of self-help and empowerment would be the most difficult to implement. They were described as most ‘backwards’, isolated, warlike, intensely individualistic, and less oriented towards collective goals.<sup>6</sup>

What actually happened was the opposite. By 2006, everyone agreed that the programmes were more creative and dynamic in Nyishi areas. Apatani work had grown in fits and starts but seemed solid. Grass-roots, holistic empowerment in Adi areas was not as vibrant, although there were successful and interesting issue-targeted programmes. To understand these outcomes, this article argues that one needs to analyse the differing ‘trajectories of empowerment’ discussed earlier. My central argument is that the ‘top down’ predictions made sense if you analysed the differences between tribal groups in the forms of collective action and the public spaces available at the grass-roots level. As I argue in the following sections, there were dramatic differences in levels and kinds of democratic access, and the forms of public deliberation. However, at the end of the article, I argue that, contrary to appearances, these *public spaces* contained surprising potentials for new *civic spaces*. What

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governments work. It also led me into warm personal friendships with members of the new elite of the state which helped me understand the perspectives of emerging, highly educated youth trying to build a pan-Arunachali, pan-tribal identity in the context of sophisticated experience and understanding of global cosmopolitan culture. This cosmopolitanism includes what Tsing (2005) describes as the traveling ‘packages’ of ideas in transnational discourses of global civil society such as ‘environmentalism’, ‘sustainability’.

<sup>6</sup>Such state-level construction of typologies of ‘tribal personalities’ is an interesting part of what Baruah (2005: 6) calls ethnoscaping of development in which different groups essentialize each other in ways that are complexly over-determined, but which help establish the horizons of expectation for different groups in competition with each other sub-nationally.

I describe earlier as ‘structured spaces of openness’ within ‘traditional’ tribal publics could be opened to transformation by new civic networks. *The un-structuring of public structures, follows the immanent logics of its structures.* Most dramatically, the Nyishi women surged into these gaps, widened them, transformed them, and, working with various partners, did difficult civic labour to create new forms and spaces of imagination and action thus winning over many of the initially fiercely antagonistic men, after years of hard work. The FGA created an *inter-tribal civic infrastructure* that was a crucial force in enabling the transformative work *within* the different tribal communities.

### TANGSA PUBLIC SPACE

More than any other area, the first Tangsa community meeting was explicitly hierarchical in its social microgeographies. It was hosted by a prominent chief in the open air of his large compound. His three wives were busy orchestrating preparations for a large feast, overseeing many people behind the scenes in his large home of many rooms and outbuildings. The seating was oval in shape with large, store-bought chairs and couches for special guests at one end, facing two circular rows of seats, which graduated from smaller chairs to backless benches. The chief managed the event most hospitably, welcoming people graciously into their seats. It seemed to me that this garnered him cultural capital in two ways—winning credit for generosity and managing events through poetics of tact, without incurring the costs of overt dominance. He initiated the topics and no one spoke out of turn.

Like other societies in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, traditional Tangsa society was stratified within structured villages with the chiefs holding formal political power and exercising considerable economic control over land and trade. This was true even though the Tangsa seem to have migrated to the eastern lower lands from the related cluster of more egalitarian tribes in the central and western parts of the state, which practiced semi-nomadic swidden horticulture—for example, the Adis, Akas, Apatanis, Bangnis, Nyishis, Mishmis, and Mijis.

Despite the clarity in the overt choreographies of power, I was struck by the way in which the unfolding of this event over many hours opened up more covert, alternative geographies. For one thing, periodically, a visible absence of enthusiasm from the crowd to certain ideas seemed to speak volumes. Also, at different points, the chief’s oldest and youngest wife drew me aside, down hallways and into more private rooms, to give me gifts and to talk about issues. The emotional

and cultural texture of this happening felt similar to my childhood experiences in the rambling, extended family compounds of Punjab's villages. Despite official acquiescence to male control over space and speech, and the burden of overwork, women and girls were able to open alternative, subaltern theatres of action and communication. In fact, some would argue that some of the remarkable vibrancy of grass-roots women's organizations in India springs from the social microgeographies of oppression. Exclusion from authoritative public space, paradoxically, constitutes homosocial social spaces for women that can be protected and invisible to power because of men's lack of interest, until the women have been able to use these women's spaces as a springboard for new collective action.

### **ADI PUBLIC SPACE**

Traditionally, the Adi's were renowned for having what Elwin describes as the 'most highly developed tribal councils' in Arunachal Pradesh (Elvin 1988: 157). He says, each village had a chief and a council, called the *kebang*, which was held in the village hall, traditionally called a *morung*.<sup>7</sup> These councils were large affairs with elaborate debates in which all the villagers could participate. They controlled such decisions as when and where to clear the forest, to sow, hunt, and fish, as well as when and how to celebrate festivals and sacrifices. Our first meetings were held in the village of Sille, in the village hall, which is in an open space in the middle of the village and is a collectively owned and managed structure. Like Adi homes, the building itself, was oblong in shape and raised on stilts. At one end was a raised platform where I and other people who were being treated as 'VIP' guests were seated (these included government officials and wealthy or influential notables). In the usual 'durbar' mode, featured speakers were given a chance to speak in what seemed some sort of order of rank precedence. But, the event quickly opened up into a mode of rapid-fire give and take, with questions and comments coming from all sides. The discussion seemed to epitomize 'democratic deliberation' in the sense of open-ended give and take, in which people pose arguments, express interests, state their demands, and make counter claims—some critical, much humorous. No women originally sat at the central floor. They were vocally clustered on the periphery along with many children. The press of people, their

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<sup>7</sup>However, in my experience, village people also called the building the *kebang*.

mobility, their glances at each other, the sub-conversations, and the unpredictability as to who was to speak next—all this as a performance of collective public voice(s) conveyed a different tone of collective will formation from our experiences in Tangsa villages.



**Figure 1: an Adi home**

After this, the FGA team was lead on a sort of yatra around neighbouring houses and villages. Periodically, we were stopped at homes where meetings or hospitality had been planned for us. Held on large porches or around hearths, these civic spaces mirrored the social geography of the *morung* because of the socio-spatial layout and the architecture and how people used it. The host and special guests were at one end, on the most substantial seating, with mostly men in the centre, shading into a periphery that was more (but not exclusively) female and younger. While initial presentations and prestations were structured, formalized and conducted among those who seemed highest in status (*goanbura*, male home owner, professionals, and officials) and spatially central, the peripheries were lively, vocal, and often pressing close. Most notably, the ‘centre stage’ seemed to be mobile; when someone on the peripheries made a statement, it was as if the funnel of attentiveness realigned itself, allowing them the time and the social space to speak their mind. Once, when I asked a question about the health of young children, a young woman, with a child on her back, began to talk from the far periphery. She said the men did not know enough to answer the question. One of the centrally-placed men called her to stand in the middle where she spoke with confidence and at length.

### **APATANI PUBLIC SPACE**

Flowing from common cultural roots, the Adi, Tangsa, Nyishi, and Apatani have created very different social geographies as they migrated into distinct ecological-economic niches. For some hundreds of

years, the Apatani have been settled in the deeply rumpled western mountains, in a valley that is uniquely, flat and circular for Arunachal Pradesh. In Ziro Valley, the Apatani have created one of the most intensively cultivated and ecologically sustainable economies ever achieved anywhere in the world. From the lush soils they have built a densely variegated, highly structured and mutually interdependent web of economic activities: laboriously hand-crafted terraces with a unique system for integrating wet rice and fish cultivation; cleverly constructed and collectively managed irrigation systems; gardens and orchards; and a patchwork of forestry plantations (including bamboo, firewood, hardwood). In the last four decades, the Apatani have been at the forefront in seizing the possibilities of modernization—attaining high levels of education, professional achievement, government employment, and linkages with external markets. About half of all Apatanis are employed elsewhere, but most return regularly to Ziro Valley for annual religious festivals and other collective cultural events. The small valley had a population of about 30,000 (12, 289 in the town of Ziro) in 2001. Agriculture thrives and diversifies, but the towns resemble any Indian town in dense and busy clusters of businesses, vehicles, shops, and government offices.

The 2001 Indian Census shows the following literacy rates as % of population:

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
India	65%	76	54
Arunachal Pradesh	55	64	44
Ziro Valley	66	72	60

Over the centuries, Apatani socio-cultural forms have grown in intricacy, structure and mutual interdependence, as population density, prosperity and intensity of land utilization has grown (Furer-Haimendorf 1980). The clan is the unit of government which seems to be the primary site, traditionally, for democratic deliberation. Each village can have several clans and clans work collectively to manage common village issues. The clans were run by all-male councils called *bulyangs*. There are three kinds of *bulyangs*—those are graded by age, with the most powerful being the one for men who are past active economic roles. These councils regulate the elaborate ritual cycle and

resolve disputes. There were three types of land ownership: individual ownership of land, groves of bamboo, pines, fruit trees, and of homes and granaries; clan ownership of

assembly  
platforms,  
pasturage,  
burial  
grounds and  
hunting  
grounds;  
and  
common  
village  
ownership



**Illustration 2: Photograph 14:3: Apatani clan platform with a young boy playing**

and forests. Other social groups which fostered a sense of collectivism were the important work groups called *patang*.

Like the Adi, traditional Apatani society had clearly demarcated and formal public spaces, highly visible in the social geography of every village. But, Apatani public space was adapted to their far more corporately bounded, structured and self-consciously codified lifeways. Each clan has a platform on which the clan council meets. These platforms are the most formal, sacred, and official public spaces in traditional Apatani society. They represent the essence of the democratic deliberation at the heart of the polity. But, women and girls were prohibited from these platforms by strong religious taboos. Unlike the Adi *morung*, the peripheries of these deliberative spaces are not constructed as socially fluid, expandable, or permeable.

Our initial community meetings were held in a public school on the edge of a large village. Organized by local school teachers, they were primarily for exchanging information about possible programmes, and ceremonial gifts, leading to long, in-depth discussions with interested individuals afterwards. It was my impression that the real decisions as



to whether anybody wanted to become involved with the FGA would be made elsewhere. This was followed by walks to show our team the large village during which we gathered amused and friendly crowds. Land scarcity creates an extraordinarily closely packed landscape with strongly marked social demarcations and meanings. Walking along the densely packed and twisting lanes, I quickly realized from the commentary that the social landscape of the village was an intricate jigsaw of clans, working closely, cooperatively, and competitively together.

### NYISHI PUBLIC SPACE



**Photograph 14:4: The first class of Village Welfare Workers in Nyishi area (with Betsy Taylor)**

Traditionally, shifting horticulturalists such as the Nyishi, the Adi, and the Miri, tended to have the least corporate notions of political structure. Being semi-nomadic and needing to keep reapportioning access to land as they move their holdings, they had flexible decision-making networks. Ultimately, all land was understood to be communally held by clans which apportion specific plots at specific times according to informal decision-making within clans and lineages. The boundaries to these holdings were loosely defined.

The Nyishi had no stable socio-political units larger than the lineages which traditionally live together in longhouses with as many as 60 to 70 people. Viewed as warlike and unruly by their neighbours, there are some signs that they did have some traditional bodies for dispute resolution. Robinson, in 1851, describes them as ordered by

a 'sort of tacit commonsense law' and Elwin describes intermediaries called *gingdungs*, who arranged for ransom and could call councils called *nele* to which all concerned people could come for debate (Elwin 1988: 154).

The combination of mobility, warfare and male control of marriage systems led to some of the strongest gender inequality in Arunachal Pradesh. Bride prices required many *mithuns* (a unique Arunachali type of forest-living cattle) and other expensive wealth, and were a major factor in cementing what structured social relations there were in this mobile, highly dispersed population. Child marriage and forced marriage were common, and isolated polygynous households encouraged strong concentration of power in older men. Wealth exchanges in marriage negotiations were central to the prestige system. In these circumstances, women and girls traditionally lacked countervailing sources of power such as publicly authoritative inter-household or women-controlled social webs. But, if they lacked authority, they had the informal power that could come from their crucially important labour power.

We selected Palin, one of the largest Nyishi towns, to begin meetings. The six hours plus on a very jolting, bad road to Palin highlighted the relative isolation. On the way, traditional Nyishi longhouses could be seen widely scattered over distant mountains. But many little settlements strung along the road evinced the demographic trends towards smaller houses, as people move to get access to schools and markets, and away from large, polygamous householding patterns and self-subsistent *jhumming* ('slash and burn' shifting cultivation). Unlike the other sites, the social geography of Palin did not provide any obvious or easy public meetings places. There was no established, traditional architecture for public meetings, and, objections were raised to the few existing government buildings. After some negotiation, a largish room was rather grudgingly found in the government Inspection Bungalow. The lack of facilities in Palin meant that this bungalow was frequently the only option to lodge travelling government officials, but our use of it as a place for a public gathering seemed unusual. Our first meeting, like the Apatani, seemed more informational and ceremonial. Virtually all were men; the meeting seemed to attract established older leaders, such as many *gaonbura* and lower level officials, and, focused on questions as to what the FGA had to offer. The atmosphere felt subdued and perfunctory, and I expected a future of much difficulty in grass-roots empowerment and self-activity.

All this changed as soon as we set up the first workshops (on community-based health care). The first day almost no men appeared but about 30 women did. After the first day, word spread like wildfire and each day more and more women came crowding in—most of them young and with young children. In the first several years, attendance seemed constantly changing, as we heard reports about women walking for many hours from surrounding mountains and experiencing much suspicion and hostility from men. The half dozen, earliest and very dynamic *Mahila Mandals* rapidly replicated themselves into far-flung communities. They enthusiastically sent out their own representatives, over often arduous footpaths, to found new groups as requests flowed in through women's informal, inter-village networks.

From 1997–8, I vividly remember the distinctive tone of these first meetings. While extremely attentive, the women in Palin, unlike the Apatani and Adi women, were reticent. They were often tongue-tied or collapsed in giggles, and required a lot of encouragement. On my return in 2006, I found a remarkable transformation. In many vibrant meetings across the Nyishi area, women I knew as afraid even to look up, now stood to speak with great eloquence, clarity and self-confidence about their own empowerment.

### **CIVIC SPACE, PUBLIC SPACE AND THE POETICS OF SUBNATIONALISM**

Baruah makes the following very important point:

Actual civil society, it is now widely recognized, does not just include associations that might conform to a liberal democratic vision of the world. But many liberal analysts seem reluctant to separate their vision of a good society from their definitions of civil society... actually existing civil society includes organizations that liberal democrats might despise, e.g. illiberal cultural and social organizations and closely knit ethnic solidarity network. (Baruah 2005: 9).

As Reid and I argue elsewhere (Reid and Taylor 2010) that this is partly because of the provincialism (Chatterjee 1993) of Western traditions of democracy which over-emphasize voluntarism, reason, disembodied and universalized identities and individualism, for reasons having to do with its unique historical origins. Civil society, in this tradition, is in those zones of freedom in which individuals can act, associate, and deliberate on collective issues, disembedded (by reason and



**Photograph 14:5: Mahila Mandal singing welcom song in Adi area**

dispassionateness) from material necessity, state coercion, and private responsibilities. In a fascinating discussion of the permeability of the public and the private in Indian lifeways, Baruah (2005: Chapter 6) points out that the sharpness of the public/private distinction in Western democracies (such as USA) is historically specific, carries its own threats to democracy, and hinders an understanding of the contradictions and trajectories of actual political imaginations and civic labours in Northeast India.

To help develop analytic categories that allow us to both compare democratic struggles globally and be less ethnocentric, I propose sharper analytic distinctions between civic space, civil society and public space. Civic spaces are *those spaces that are emergent from people's everyday life practices in which they reflect with each other on how everyday lifeways translate into collective questions, and how collective and public issues translate into everyday life*. This is the basis for what Dallmayr calls 'transformative democracy' which is rooted in concrete experiences of suffering, exploitation, and domination. It takes hard labour (of thought, social caring, often political or economic courage, and shrewdness) to open up these spaces in the thick of ordinary, highly sedimented, contentious, and contradictory everyday lives—hence Dallmayr speaks of 'achieving our world' in common (Dallmayr 2001). These civic spaces, by definition, have to emerge from the particularities of local places and local social geographies. Therefore, one cannot predict exactly when and how empowerment will happen. As Arendt repeatedly emphasized, this movement towards a world in common depends on the unimaginable natality of unique human creativity—which generates new forms which cannot be predicted. As Tinker says,

empowerment when it happens, is often something that ‘just happens’, despite or outside of what ‘development programmes’ intended or planned (Tinker 2006).

In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, the FGA has been able to support grass-roots women (and increasingly, men) in building remarkable new civic spaces that are responsive to local realities, but link local groups pan-tribally. These civic spaces have been primarily within and between their households. The emotional engine of the work is the regularity of meetings of the *Mahila Mandals* and Farmer's Clubs which are often hosted by members within their homes. The heart of these meetings are the sharing of personal experiences and mutual support and analysis. When these spaces—intermediate between private and public life—have been vital and creative, they have worked with FGA staff to open up new forms of public space, or reclaim and transform old ones. Each site has built, and helped maintain, various buildings for the Learning and Doing Centres where they conduct workshops, host guests, and stage public events. In each site, but particularly in the Palin area, FGA women took pride in describing to me their collective performances in big political and religious gatherings—singing and dancing, wearing their FGA regalia, winning prizes. Celebratory civic culture—in song, dance and storytelling—has been pervasive in meetings and public events. This cultivation of expressive arts and the ability to listen to and to tell their unique stories has been crucial to developing what Boyte would call ‘civic skills’ for ‘public work’, demonstrating, as Young says, that the fabric of public space is storytelling (Young 1996).

Increasingly, this decade of building up civic capacity, rooted in highly local civic spaces, is leading to public action. In February 2006, I was astonished to be excitedly told by the Palin women that they (and the male supporters who are growing in number and status) were going to lead a march through Palin on International Women's Day, in March carrying signs saying ‘No Child Marriage!’, ‘No Forced Marriage!’, ‘Give education for your girl child!’, etc.. This would have been unthinkable and physically dangerous for them in 1997. I do not yet have quantitative data, but in all three sites in my 2006 fieldwork, I was repeatedly told that many FGA VWWs were running for Panchayati Raj office, with unusual success because they were known across many households. The FGA is one of two NGOs in Arunachal Pradesh conducting training for Panchayat representatives, concentrating on the lowest levels who have received no training from governmental or non-governmental agencies.

## ANALYTIC DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC SPACE

The definition of civil society as ‘voluntary association’ has tended to confuse two types of questions, which are analytically very different. One cluster has to do with questions of how *civic life emerges from everyday local practices* that I have addressed earlier. The second cluster has to do with daunting *organizational questions* about how one keeps durable, effective organizations alive and able to express and defend that civic life, and to engage authoritative structures of public power. If I had addressed the second cluster of questions in this article, I would have focused on the organization of the FGA; how it manages to keep itself alive and how it relates to other civic organizations (statewide, nationally, internationally), and, to the state and to the remnants of pre-state public authority (which are unhelpfully called ‘traditional’ and ‘tribal’). These are important questions. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, challenges have been faced and defeats and successes experienced. It is not easy to build statewide civic organization in an intensely multicultural context. Civic organizations are essential to provide what I call *multiscalar civic infrastructure* (Reid and Taylor 2010) that facilitates extra-local resources for grass-roots actors and assists local groups in the *processes* of mutual empowerment, without managing the *content* of the programmes that emerge. For this, the FGA model is a particularly good one.

However, to nurture democratic hope and the forms of civic life that create the basis for it, the primary focus should be on what Sivaramakrishnan aptly calls the ‘craft’ of creating, sustaining and transforming the public sphere (Sivaramakrishnan 2000). This can only be done from the self-activity of grass-roots actors, working creatively within the constraining and enabling structures of local publics. If we go looking for ‘civil society’ with the idea that we are going out to find worthy and efficacious *voluntary organizations*, we will go with pre-set (and deeply Western biased) understandings of what civic life is. If we go out looking for openings for civic space within existing local publics as they actually are, we might find fascinating new experiments in, and possibilities for, democracy.

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