

Mithun in Adi Society: An Anthropological Study of Economy, Rituals and Polity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400109>

Received: 02 April 2026; Accepted: 08 April 2026; Published: 29 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the multidimensional role of Mithun (*Bos frontalis*) in the socio-economic, ritual and political life of the Adi tribe of East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. Drawing on primary data collected through participant observation, household surveys, semi-structured interviews and field observation supplemented by secondary sources, the paper analysis Mithun as a symbol of wealth, prestige and social security as well as a medium of exchange, compensation and political legitimacy. The findings reveal that Mithun occupies a central position in life cycle rituals, dispute settlement, clan conferences and electoral politics, while also functioning as a critical economic asset during health emergencies and household contingencies. In recent years, increasing demand, high liquidity and rising market prices have contributed to the commercialization of Mithun, particularly through the sale of meat. This transition reflects a broader shift for subsistence-oriented and symbolic use toward market-based exchange, with significant implications for cultural values and sustainability. The study highlights the changing dynamics of Mithun rearing and underscores the need to balance cultural preservation with emerging economic pressures.

Keywords: Mithun, Adi tribe, political economy, ritual, commercialization, Arunachal Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

Bos frontalis (Mithun or Gayal) is a semi-domesticated bovine distributed across North-East India- mainly Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and parts of Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh (Chavan *et al.*, 2018; ICAR, 2020). It inhabits mountainous regions (1000-3000 m) and was declared the state animal of Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. Mithun is culturally significant and considered the “cattle of the mountains” but its wild population remains data deficient and it is listed as a vulnerable species in India (IUCN, 2017). Its origin is believed to be near the Assam- Burma border with *Bos gaurus* proposed as its wild ancestor, though domestication history remains uncertain (Gupta *et al.*, 2009).

The Adi domesticate Mithun, pigs, chickens, dogs and recently goats and cattle. Mithun is the most important animal, symbolizing wealth and status and serving as a key item in rituals, trade, fines and treaty settlements, though not for bride price. It is mainly sacrificed during ceremonies rather than for meat, but the meat is eaten afterward. Unlike most NEFA groups, adi priests do not eat sacrificial meat, though they receive a portion as payment, the use of which remains undocumented (Simoons and Simoons, 1968).

Table.1. Distribution of Mithun in India

State	2003	2007	2012	2019
Arunachal Pradesh	1,84,343	2,18,931	2,55,555	3,50,154
Nagaland	40,452	33,385	35,028	23,123
Manipur	19,737	10,024	10,131	9,059
Mizoram	1,783	1,939	3,362	3957
Himachal Pradesh	-	-	919	-
Jammu and Kashmir	-	-	57	-
Total	2,46,270	2,64,279	2,98,264	3,86,293

Source: Livestock Census of India, 2019

The table shows state-wise changes from 2003 to 2019, with Arunachal Pradesh recording a strong and consistent increase, making it the major contributor to the total. Nagaland and Manipur exhibit an overall declining trend, while Mizoram shows gradual growth. The total value increases steadily over time, indicating overall growth despite regional variations.

Area of study

The study was conducted in the Pasighat circle of East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh, located at 28.07°N and 95.33° E in the Middle Himalayan and Siwalik ranges. East Siang district covers an area of 4005 sq.km with a population of 99,214 of which 72.15% reside in rural areas (Census, 2011). The district has a literacy rate of 73.54%. Pasighat, established in 1911 A.D. is the oldest town in Arunachal Pradesh and served as the district headquarters. The area was selected purposively due to the predominate and ethnic diversity of the Adi tribe. Villages within the Pasighat circle were also selected purposively based on consultations with key informants from Pasighat town and nearby villages.



Map of Pasighat (Study Area)

Method of Study

The study followed a systematic methodology comprising two parts: data collection and data analysis. Primary data were collected using conventional anthropological methods such as interviews, household surveys and field surveys through questionnaires. A stratified random sampling method was adopted with locality and community as strata and simple random sampling within each stratum, Participant observation, semi-structured interviews and visual documentation formed the core database, supported by the use of a camera and voice recorder. Secondary data were collected from state government records including the veterinary department, deputy commissioner’s office, museums and livestock census reports.

Mapping the people

East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh is a predominantly hilly region shaped by the Siang river and inhabited mainly by the Adi tribe. The district exhibits rich ethnic diversity, strong clan-based social organization and distinct cultural traditions. The study focuses on selected villages of the Pasighat circle- Boying, Mongku, Balek,

Rasam, Tigra and Mirku- representing varying population sizes, literacy levels and socio-cultural characteristics as per census 2011.

Observations and Findings

The economic and political life of the Adi tribes such as the Pasi, Padam, Minyong, Komkar, Karko, Simong, Milang, Panggi and Tangam of Arunachal Pradesh is deeply shaped by the rearing of Mithun.

Political Utility of Mithun

Mithun plays a significant role in the political life of the Adi society. During headman election, candidates customarily host feasts of Mithun meat and rice beer as part of their campaign. Both the inter-village councils and the apex council, Bogum Bokong, must be formally entertained with rice beer and the flesh of a sacrificed Mithun during their sessions. Similarly, village councils are traditionally hosted with rice beer.

Beyond its ceremonial role, Mithun is a powerful symbol of wealth, prosperity and social prestige, instilling pride and status within the community. The use of Mithun as a penalty signifies the seriousness of an offense, it is imposed only in grave cases such as murder, attempted murder or fatal accidents. In such instances the offender is required to compensate the victim's family by giving a Mithun, underscoring its importance in maintaining social and political order.



Fig: 1. Cooked rice wrap in *Phrynium pubinerve* leaves and raw meat of mithun are ready for political feast

Penalty, Crime and Punishment

Fines play a crucial role in maintaining peace and social order within the village community. These penalties are most often assessed in terms of Mithun, although pigs, beer and food items are commonly imposed for minor offences. The primary objective of imposing fines is not punitive but compensatory, aimed at redressing the harm suffered by the victim rather than punishing the offender. In cases of assault and crime, the amount of compensation depends on the part of the body injured and the extent of damage caused. For permanent impairment of a limb, such as an arm or a leg, the maximum compensation is equivalent to the prevailing value of a Mithun, though it may be reduced depending on the degree of disability. In instances of culpable homicide, the maximum fine is fixed at ten Mithun, payable to the heir of the deceased. For theft, the maximum penalty includes payment equivalent to the current market value of a pig, in addition to the restitution of the stolen property or compensation if restitution is not feasible (Roy, 1960).

Theft is punished through fines assessed in mithun, proportional to the number of animals stolen. While divorce is relatively uncomplicated when both partners mutually consent, adultery is treated as a serious offence. Fines imposed on the adulterous man are substantial and vary according to circumstances. If the man is solely at fault, the fine ranges from six to eight Mithun. When the woman is equally culpable, the man is still required to pay a reduced fine of four Mithun, while the woman is subjected to public humiliation (Elwin, 1959). Traditionally, if the offender was unable to pay the imposed fine, he could be sold into slavery.

Failure to assist in the burial of a clansman attracts a fine equivalent to the current market value of a Mithun. In cases of refusal to pay, a Mithun or pig may be forcibly confiscated if necessary. Similarly, infringement of hunting rights is punished by a fine equal to the prevailing market value of a Mithun. When a Mithun trespasses into a cultivated field, the affected field owner independently assesses the extent of damage and compensates himself by taking an equivalent amount of produce from the granary of the offending mithun's owner (Dalton, 1855).

Taboo, oat and ordeal

The term taboo denotes prohibition and refers to activities or behaviours that are forbidden, socially unacceptable or contrary to the approved norms of a given society. Taboos may be defined as restrictions established to protect individuals and communities from supernatural danger and evil influences associated with certain plants, animals, objects or even persons, particularly those believed to be possessed by malevolent spirits.

An oath is regarded as a severe and solemn declaration of truth or falsehood. In such affirmations, supernatural powers are invoked as witnesses and are believed to pronounce judgement. The person taking the oath calls upon these powers to bring harm or calamity upon themselves if they are guilty of falsehood.

Among the adi, oaths are commonly taken by swearing upon the earth, the sky and the sun. One form of oath involves eating earth and pointing toward the sun while declaring " May the earth swallow me and the sun burn me if i lie". In another solemn form, the individual holds the horn of a mithun, swears by the earth and the sun and proclaims, " May this animals's pierce me if iam false".



Fig:2. To protect home from evil spirit meat is kept in outdoor



Fig:3. Dried chutney/cuisines/dishes wrapped in ekkam leaves to served guest

Clan conferences/Meetings

The gathering or meeting of clan members, locally known as Opin Giidum Kebang, constitutes an important institution in Adi society. The Adis are a large and diverse tribe comprising numerous sub-tribes and clan groups. Periodic mass gatherings of clan members are organized every two to three years in different villages. Each clan maintains its own organized group or society such as the Puisi Olung. These conferences are generally held during the winter season. The primary agenda of such gatherings includes discussions on clan development in the fields of education, politics and fund raising policies. These occasions are also marked by elaborate feasts, during which several mithuns are sacrificed as part of the customary practices.

Panchayat, Legislative and Parliamentary Elections



Fig:4. Adi women performing folk dance in almost all important occasions

The pursuit of political power is a central objective of politicians. To mobilize public support, mithuns are sacrificed in large numbers across different villages. During various electoral processes including panchayat, legislative assembly and lok sabha elections, community feast involving the slaughter of Mithuns are commonly organized. According to local villagers, at least three mithuns are sacrificed in each Anchal Samity Member segment during election periods.

During the interview, Ogom Yompang (Male, 47) a Mithun seller, explained that Mithun rearing remains central to the economic life of the Adis. He noted that families owning more mithuns enjoy higher social and economic status, as the animal functions as a form of financial security during emergencies. Mithun is regarded as a highly valued asset and is commonly used as a medium of exchange in major transactions. Wealth and prestige, he observed, are often measured by the number of mithuns a household possesses. He further remarked that in recent years the role of Mithun has shifted from primary cultural to increasingly commercial. Mithun meat is now sold in local markets, providing income for household needs such as medical treatment, children's education and other domestic expenses. The meat is especially valued during marriage and community feasts and is considered the most expensive domestic meat among the Adis. According to the respondent, Mithun rearing continues to support livelihoods and strongly determines the economic standing of Adi families.

Economic utility of Mithun

The Adis do not utilize the Mithun to its fullest potential. Apart from being used for meat, mithuns are neither milked nor employed for packing or draft purposes. The meat, obtained mainly after ritual sacrifices, is widely consumed, particularly when boiled with salt and chilli. The blood is not used as a separate item, as the customary method of slaughter involves strangulation. In recent years, however, the use of Mithun among the Adis has increasingly shifted from cultural and ritual significance to commercial purposes. Mithun meat is now readily available in local markets at approximately Rs- 300/ kg and several tribal households depend on its sale for subsistence and for meeting expenses related to education and healthcare. At the same time, excessive slaughter of mithuns during elections and marriage ceremonies has led to a sharp decline in their population. Consequently, the Mithun appears to be losing its traditional mythological and cultural significance, with its status gradually transforming from a reversed cultural symbol to a commercial commodity.

Trade of Mithun

The Bori and Bokar Adi of the far north-western part of the Siang division maintained direct trade relations with the Tibetans across the Tibetan frontier. The Bori primarily bartered war hides and chillies in exchange for Tibetan rock salt, wool and woollen cloth, Tibetan swords, metal bowls and ornaments. The Bokar Adi traded butter in addition to hides, chillies and a plant material used for dyeing. In return, they obtained Dzo-mo (female yak-cattle hybrids), sheep, goats, along with various woollen and metal goods. Both the Bori and Bokar also functioned as middlemen, carrying additional quantities of salt and metal items to the southern Adi areas. Tibetans frequently crossed into the Siang division through the Siang river gorge, initiating trade in the Upper Siang region and occasionally travelling as far south as Pasighat. In exchange for their goods, they received Mithun, deer horns and rice. It is presumed that Mithun were driven all the way back to Tibet (Roy, 1960). Another trade route among the Adi, though less significant than the Siang route, operated from the east through Mishmi territory via the Aborka Pass, extending south-westward to Karko in the middle Siang region. The principal exchange along this route involved Mishmi coats traded for Mithun and rice, with one Adi Mithun typically exchanged for ten Mishmi coats.

Medium of exchange in money value

Among domestic animals, the Mithun holds the highest value in Adi society and is used primarily for major transactions. Roy (1960) reported that in 1948 the value of a Mithun ranged between Rs. 100/- and Rs. 300/- depending on its rank within the Adi system of Mithun grading. Grade I Mithun, regarded as auspicious, are characterized by a forehead that is partly black and partly red, or by a muzzle that is consistently wet. Grade II Mithun are relatively smaller in size but possess either a good coat of hair or are completely black with distinct spots on both flanks and the forehead. Grade III Mithun are considered inauspicious and are identified by scanty chest hair, an entirely white coat or an unusually thin body. Among metal utensils, the most valuable is a large Tibetan bell-metal bowl known as Danki, the value of which is considered equivalent to one Mithun. The sale of Mithun also serves as an important financial resource for Adi communities, enabling them to meet expenses related to medical treatment, children's education, business activities and other household needs. Survey findings indicate that in East Siang district, the market price of Mithun aged 2-3 years ranges from Rs. 35,000/- to Rs. 45,000/- While those aged 4-5 years command higher prices, ranging from Rs. 45,000/- to Rs. 55,000/-. In traditional equivalence, one bukting is equal to one Mithun and five lubling are also considered equivalent to

one Mithun (Tapak, 2000).The sale of Mithun meat is found to be highly profitable. During the course of the study, the market price of Mithun meat was observed to be approximately Rs.300 /kg in the study area.

Table. 2. Age wise price of Mithuns

Age of Mithun in months	Price of Mithuns
2 to 3 yr	35,000 rs/-
3 to 4 yr	45,000 rs/-
4 to 5 yr	55,000 rs/-
6 yr and above	70,000+ rs/-

Source: Field study

Economic dynamism

Mithun occupies a central and multidimensional position in Adi social life. Ownership of Mithun functions as a key indicator of wealth and serves to define an individual’s social standing within the community. Beyond its economic value, Mithun embodies prestige and social legitimacy, playing a crucial role in the settlement of disputes and in marriage transactions, where it is offered as bridewealth or ceremonial gift. Mithun also acts as a culturally embedded form of social security, mobilized during periods of illness, crisis or other household exigencies. In recent times, however, the growing economic significance of Mithun has intensified its demand, gradually transforming it from a primarily socio-cultural institution into a commercial asset within Adi society.

From subsistence to commercial exchange /Liquidity

Owing to the high demand for Mithun, its liquidity is considerably greater than that of other domestic animals and a positive relationship between liquidity and commercialization is evident. This trend is particularly pronounced during health emergencies and other household contingencies. Field observations reveal a strong preference for Mithun meat among the Adi, however, unlike other meats, it is not readily available in local markets. In recent years, this scarcity has contributed to the increasing commercialization of Mithun meat. Villagers frequently sell Mithun to meet expenses related to children’s education and essential household needs. The sale of Mithun meat is highly profitable, with market prices ranging from Rs. 300 to 450 /kg during the study period.



Fig :5. Mithun meat ready for sale in market

CONCLUSION

Mithun occupies a central place in the social, economic and political life of the Adi tribe, symbolizing prestige, wealth and social security while serving as a medium of exchange in ritual, dispute settlement and political practices. Rooted in clan solidarity and ceremonial life, ownership of Mithun confers social status and legitimacy. In recent years, rising demand, high liquidity and expanding market opportunities, particularly for Mithun meat have driven its commercialization. While this shift has supported household needs such as healthcare and education, it has also led to increased slaughter, population decline and the erosion of mithun's traditional cultural significance. The findings suggest a transition of Mithun from a reversed cultural institution to a commodified economic asset, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive policies that balance conservation, regulated commercialization and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.

Limitations of the study

The study was constrained by the lack of previous research and limited availability of reliable data in the study area. Due to time limitations, the research was restricted to selected villages of Pasighat, East Siang District, though a wider coverage across tribes and districts would have provided broader insights. Additionally, transportation, communication and accommodation challenges in remote villages posed difficulties during fieldwork.

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