

## MITHUN: A MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD AND A CULTURAL SYMBOLIC FOR GALOS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presented how *Mithun* plays an important role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the *Galo* tribal population. *Mithun* is considered as the pride of *Galo* Tribe. The ownership of the *Mithun* is considered to be the sign of prosperity and superiority of an individual in the society. *Mithuns* are considered as a valuable asset for the farmers whom they mainly rear for meat purpose. Besides that, *Mithun* is also used as marriage gift and sacrifice during *Mopin* festival and in different social and cultural ceremonies. The study also focuses on the various problems which are related to the *Mithun* and its rearing. This paper also includes how the support and interference of government can create a sustainable environment for the rearing and breeding of *Mithun*. Also, the policy and programme of government can generate income and self-employment for the unemployed youths and women of *Galo* society.

**Keywords:** Bos Fonatlis, Sacred, Mopin, Sacrifice, Status, Dispute, Barter Trade, Economic Asset, Meat, Problems, Grazing, Government Support, Sustainable.

### I. INTRODUCTION

*Mithun* or *Gayal* is an endemic species mainly found in the geographical areas of North East India. The zoological name of *Mithun* is *Bos Frontalis*. They are also known as 'cattle of hilly region' due to the location of its geographical habitat in hills and mountains. They are mostly found in the hills and mountains of Arunachal Pradesh having Tropical Evergreen and semi-evergreen Forests. They belong to a rare bovine species mostly similar to Indian Gaur. Mainly, they have black or white or black-white speckled fur, but in rare cases, they appear orange-brown in color.

Economically and culturally, *Mithuns* are very important for the tribal in Arunachal Pradesh, mostly, for the *Tani* Groups such as *Adi*, *Apatani*, *Galo*, *Nyishi* and *Tagin*. That's why, the value of *Mithuns* are very high amongst these tribes. They are inseparable part of these tribes. *Mithuns* are regarded as pride and symbol of *Arunachalees*.

In Arunachal Pradesh, *Mithuns* are grazing and live freely in forests areas. *Mithuns* are freely grazing in the hills and mountains without much restriction. They are considered as a wild animal but totally controlled by human beings and owned by individual as an economic asset. Due to its ownership and interaction with human beings they are termed as domesticated cattle. In some cases, they are domesticated in local farms and their breeding and feeding are undertaken by the local farmers.

The *Galos* are one of the 25 major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who are living in the districts of *West Siang*, *Lower Siang*, *Lepa-Rada* and in some parts of *East Siang* and *Upper Subansiri*. They have a close cultural affinity with this animal. Their socio-cultural and economical lives are mainly guided and influenced by the presence of *Mithuns*.

### II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Due to its inherent socio-cultural and economic dynamism, *Mithun* plays a multidimensional role in the *Galo* society. During the days of Barter Trade, the *Mithuns* were traditionally used as a medium of exchange among the people.

#### SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCES:

*Mithun* or *Gayal* is not only regarded as one of the most important socio-cultural resources of *Galo* tribe but also the pride and prestige of this tribe. That's why an individual's wealth is estimate by the number of *Mithuns* he/she possesses. Traditionally, the ownership of *Mithun* is considered to be a sign of prosperity and social status of an individual.

It is an essential part of festivals and in any religious or cultural ceremonies its importance comparatively becomes higher. *Mithun* or *Hobo* (in *Galo* term), is considered as the most valued and sacred animal. *Mopin* is the major festival of *Galo* Tribe. They celebrate *Mopin* in the first week of April. 5<sup>th</sup> April, is designated as the main day to celebrate *Mopin* Festival. In this auspicious day, *Mithun* is sacrificed as offering to the *Mopin Ane* and *Ai Aagam* (blessing). Traditionally, the act of *Mithun* sacrifice is an important part of ritual ceremonies. They believe that it will bring a good harvest and a prosperous new year. They also believed that the blood of the sacrificed *Mithun* would bring good luck and fortune.

*Mithuns* are also use to settle disputes among the people in *Galo* society. The *Mithun* is a symbol of “peace and communal harmony” and its sacrifice is said to usher in the prosperity and well-being of those for whom the act is intend cattle. According to the *Galo* Customary laws, after finding out the guilt, a convict or criminal have to pay compensation to acquit. Mostly, in lieu of the compensation they paid *Mithuns*. It is the *Gaon* Buras and *Kotokis* who have to decide the number of *Mithuns* for the compensation and sometimes also depend on the satisfaction of acquits family.

In *Galo* tradition, *Mithuns* are also used as gift which the groom (and his family members) gives to the bride’s family on the basis of dowry. The dowry is given in the form of *Mithun* is given in lieu of the bride. Such activities are considered as very respectable in society and from this the status of the groom’s family is known.

In *Galo* tradition, a new trait is overwhelming, i.e. the celebration of Death Anniversary of any family member after the death of one year. Particularly in this day, to give tribute to the decease, the belongings are organizing a feasting programme in which they slaughter a *Mithun*, which is considered as auspicious. The sacrifice of *Mithun* in such programme is becoming a popular trait.

A part from the above, *Mithuns* are also slaughtered in many auspicious programs such as in birthday party, house construction in villages, victory parties (especially election victory), anniversaries, other religious ceremonies and ritual activities, etc.

#### **ECONOMICAL SIGNIFICANCES:**

*Mithuns* are the life line of many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and they have a very significant impact on the economic life of *Galo* People. They are the most valuable resources whom they preserve as the most valuable economic asset. *Mithuns* are the source of income for many *Galo* people who completely rely on their cattle only. In villages, the importance of *Mithun* is touching the sky. They are considered as a saving whom they can sell during their worst or emergency situation.

Normally, selling of *Mithuns* is considered as an unfortunate one in *Galo* society but sometime during the compelling situation make the villagers to sell their valuable assets to others. The price of *Mithuns* is very high in compare to other cattle in Arunachal Pradesh. The price of a *Mithun* range between Rs 45,000 to Rs 1,10, 000. Such good amount can be again use by the villager in other profitable activity and in needy works. That’s why it is believe that, “the more *Mithun* you keep, wealthier you will be”.

In old days, in the absence of monetary system, *Mithun* was one of the main medium of exchange and trade. Even now, in many remote areas and villages, where banks are not available, people are exchanging *Mithun* with other commodities without any involvement of money. Even to purchase valuable assets like lands or other properties they are using *Mithuns* for medium of exchange. To develop any area, institute, national aid, etc. the villagers are giving their *Mithun* as a part of donation.

*Mithun* meats are very popular among *Arunachalee* Tribes and the *Galo* people are very fond of *Mithun* meat and eat them here with great gusto. The *Galo* people are eating *Mithun* beef in several local ways, such as by roasting, smoke drying, preparing in bamboo tubes, fermentation, etc. The *Mithun* meat is tender, tasty and delicious as compared to other cattle. The rate of *Mithun* Beef is Rs 400- Rs 600 per kg. Single *Mithun* when sacrificed and dressed (removal of non-edible visceral organs and body contents) yields about 45-60% meat of its 450-600kg total body weight that goes to 200-400kg beef and other tissues in edible bone marrow, liver, brain, kidneys etc. (S. Chavan, 2016).

Presently, the consumption of *Mithun* milk is not an accepted practice among its rearers. *Mithun* produces around 1 to 1.5 kg milk per day. However, *Mithun* milk is nutritionally superior to any other domesticated species as it contains high fat (8 to 13%), solid-not-fat (18 to 24%) and protein (5 to 7%). Hence, *Mithun* has a scope to be promoted as moderately good milk animal for home consumption in these hilly areas. Due to high

fat and protein content in *Mithun* milk, it may be used for the preparation of different value added milk products such as *paneer*, various sweet products, ghee, cream, curd and cheese. The National Research Center on *Mithun*, the premier Institute of Indian Council of Agricultural Research, has successfully standardized the process of making *paneer*, *barfi*, *rasgulla*, curd and *lassi* from *Mithun* milk (M.Mondal, 2014).

### III. EXISTING PROBLEMS

Though the *Mithuns* are an integral part of *Galo* Society, but they are also facing steep hardship in their own home in form of mass slaughtering, shrinkage of natural grazing areas, demarcation of district's boundaries, improper animal husbandry, illegal trafficking, high risk factor, etc. Such problems are not only minimizing the growth and numbers of *Mithuns* but also discouraging the *Mithun* breeders and owners to domesticate such legendary animal.

*Mithuns* are considered as sacred and valued animals that the *Galo* people like to offer sacrifice in their every auspicious event. It may be *Mopin* festival or marriage party or in a ritual ceremony, the *Mithuns* are brutally killed and sacrificed without any mercy. Knowing that sacrificing or slaughtering of a *Mithun* gives an honor to the owner. That's why rich people like ministers, public leaders, businessmen, contractors, etc. slaughters lot of *Mithuns* to show false pride and passion in the society to gain public respect. There are many cases in which a single person slaughtered more than 30 *Mithuns* in his son marriage party. This kind of brutality on state pride is not less than a murder.

*Mithuns* are domesticated animals but they are left for grazing freely in forests, hills and mountains for fodders and pastures. They are totally dependent on the forest plants and trees for fodders. Like other *Tani* tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the *Galo* customs also do not believe in herding of *Mithuns*. It is the *Mithun* who itself roams in the jungles searching for food & fodders. But, in recent days, their natural grazing areas are shrinking due to the anthropogenic activities like clearing of forest and hilly areas for *Jhum* Cultivation, road cutting, settlement & institutional sites, etc. The shrinking of grazing areas created a limited fodder area for the *Mithuns* and hence, a competition for fodders becomes inevitable among the *Mithuns*. Sometimes, even for food they entered in cultivated field and destroyed the whole crops. In such cases, the owner of the *Mithun* has to pay compensation to the sufferer. So that's why there is a gradual decrease in the *Mithun* owners in number of *Galo* Villages.

Due to creation of new district and change in inter-district boundaries of *Galo* dwelling areas, now the *Mithun* Grazing areas are also shifted from one to other. For example, the area of *Kaying-Rumgong* Constituency has been ceded to *Siang District*. The ceded portion was marked as a major *Mithun* grazing area in which most of the *Mithuns* belongs to *Galo* community has not permitted to graze. The demarcation of district boundaries also created the restriction of *Mithun* movement in other areas and limited the scope of fodder areas.

For the rearing and breeding of *Mithuns* in *Galo* society, there is a negligible contribution from the state government. The government hasn't set any definite rule for the domestication of this sacred animal. There is no sufficient fund for animal husbandry in the *Galo* areas, especially for the *Mithun* rearing. The farmers and *Mithun* breeders are not getting any adequate support from government as a subsidy to run an animal husbandry farm. That's why the owners are practicing the same old customs. Moreover, from government side, no departments come forward to impart knowledge or training related to animal husbandry and cattle rearing upon the villagers and farmers.

There are few cases of illegal trafficking of *Mithun* and other cattle in Arunachal Pradesh. The miscreants lift them from jungles during night hour and selling them to other districts for a handsome buck. In rare cases, by mistake, hunters shoot them while they are on hunting. In such a situation, to avoid giving away penalty or fine, they killed the *Mithun* and wipe it out in the same. Sometimes, mistakenly, some people sells other's *Mithun* thinking as their own. But all this happens unconsciously because the complexion of *Mithun* is very similar to each other. Though some incidents are misfortunately happened but ultimately the *Mithun* owners have to suffer for this outcome.

It is not easy to raise a *Mithun*, it takes a lot of patience and hard work to raise them. *Galo* people understand that having a *Mithun* as cattle is a very risk factor. Many times, it happens that the owner of *Mithun* has to pay a fine which he doesn't commit rather it is the handiwork of the *Mithun*. Sometimes *Mithun* enters others agriculture fields and destroys their crops and harvest. Even fencing and walls are tormented due to their forceful entrance. Not only is this, searching *Mithun* in forest area more or less likes "finding a needle in

haystack". It is because the *Galo* dwelling areas has very dense mountainous forest and spread over a big geographical area. Even their identification is very tough despite having inscribed signs in their body parts (especially in ears).

All the above problems are really creating miserable conditions to this legendary animal. Apart from the mentioned problems, they are also suffering from deadly diseases, attack from predators (Tiger, wolf, leopard, python, bears and wild dogs), natural calamities, etc. which are very common in the wilderness of Arunachal Pradesh. Such pathetic conditions are always discouraging the *Mithun* rearers.

#### IV. SOLUTIONS

To mitigate all those problems which discourage a *Mithun* owner from rearing *Mithun* can be resolve by the interference of government.

"The government will give all possible help for conservation of *Mithun*, the only animal that is recognized as the state animal of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland," the Ministry of Agriculture said in a statement (*The IndianEXPRESS*, 2016).

The government can improve the *Mithun* breeding and rearing in Arunachal Pradesh and particularly, in *Galo* belts by involving the *Mithun* owners and village community in the decision-making process and creating awareness about the benefit of modern *Mithun* rearing and farming. There should be an enough support from government to the *Mithun* rearers by giving them incentives for rearing healthy *Mithun* calves, free health check up, supply of mineral mix, salt licks. Also, there should be insurance coverage for the owners below the poverty line for each *Mithun*.

Strategies for Integrating *Mithun* with livestock Production can improve the condition of *Mithun* owner and improve the breeding processes of *Mithuns* in *Galo* areas. For a successful integration of *Mithun* with livestock system there should be establishment of *Mithun* farms with availability of feeds, programmes of selection, having breeding, reproductive technologies and other input services at the farmers door.

To improve the *Mithun* farming, efforts should be made to enhance availability of fodder and feed by expanding the grazing areas and also supplying sufficient fodders from government stocks. This should not only improve the conditions of *Mithun* farming but also boosted the productions.

With the collaboration, government agencies and NGOs together can organize fruitful programmes such as different awareness camp, farmers training, workshop, etc. for the *Mithun* owners, unemployed youths and women farmers in time to time. This will increase the efficiency and active participation of villagers and also engage the unemployed youths and women to earn some money.

There should be an intensive animal health care centre or veterinary centre for immediate check up of cattle in every administrative circle. To prevent and control infectious diseases government should provide free veterinary services.

Proper commercialization in *Mithun* products like meat, milk and leather will improve the life of *Mithun* Farmers and as well as give a job opportunity to the unemployed youths. For this, government has to fix a better marketing option and strategy. Involvement of government in such activities will create less risk to the *Mithun* farmers.

#### V. CONCLUSION

*Mithun* or *Gayal* is very important bovine animal of Arunachal Pradesh and very popular among the *Tani* Group. In *Galo* society, they are considered as sacred and valuable animal. *Mithun* is an essential part of *Galo* society and culture. That's why they have immense impact on socio-culture system of *Galo* community. They offer *Mithun* sacrifice during religious ceremonies and ritual rites. They also use *Mithun* as a medium to settle disputes by giving *Mithun* as a compensation to the sufferer. The social status of a man can also be estimate by the number of *Mithuns* he/she possessed. Economically, *Mithun* is considered as an asset for the *Galo* people. They were use as medium of exchange in barter trade. There meat are tasty and has a high marketing price. Despite having cultural and economical significances among *Galo* people, *Mithun* and the owner of *Mithun* are facing lots of problems in form of mass slaughtering, shrinkage of natural grazing areas, demarcation of district's boundaries, improper animal husbandry, illegal trafficking, high risk factor, etc. But all these problems can be resolve in sustainable and profitable way through government interference and assists. This would

require involvement of *Mithun* owners and villagers in decision making processes. Establishment of a sustainable *Mithun* farming will generate wealth and self employment for the local people. Government support and active participation of local people will create a suitable environment in which *Mithun* owners will increase investment to improve productivity and this will also good for the survival of *Mithuns* in the hill and forest of Arunachal Pradesh.

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