

**The Christian Brothers
SANGRAM,
Arunachal Pradesh,
India**

*In the face of suffering, one has no right to turn away, not to see.
In the face of injustice, one may not look the other way,
When someone suffers, and it is not you, he comes first.
His very suffering gives him priority.*

- Ellie Wiesel

SANGRAM

A battle of dignity

INTRODUCTION

2002, the close of a century, the dawn of a new millennium! So what difference would that make to the inhabitants of Sangram, a remote village in Arunachal Pradesh, some 125 kms away from any decent black-topped road and too far removed from mainland India's consciousness.

In response to our congregational 'call to the marginalised', the Christian Brothers decided to set up a community in Sangram. Not so much to dispel all darkness here or to herald in a new dawn, but rather, to participate in the interplay of sunshine and cloud, in this 'land of the dawn-lit mountains'....to illuminate and to be enlightened in turn.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Arunachal lies perched on the north-eastern most tip of India, part of the mighty Himalayas. Cradled between Bhutan, Burma and China, it stands tall (with an average altitude of 3000 ft.above sea level) and defiant like a sentinel to its motherland - India.

These 83,743 sq. kms. of picturesque hilly terrain are criss-crossed by numerous cascading rivers and gushing rivulets, with lavish splashes of waterfall, all set in a rich background of fresh green - the dream of the concrete forest dwellers.

THE NISHIS

Some twenty odd tribal groups, belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid race inhabit these unfriendly ranges. One of these, namely the 'Nishis' (meaning man in their language), eke out a precarious living from the unyielding mountain slopes of West Arunachal Pradesh. We work primarily among them.

The Daflas (meaning 'hard-headed') as they were originally known, traditionally lived scattered along these rugged slopes and not as village communities - a pattern which is now slowly changing. However, a number of related families often live together in unusually long houses (some 200 ft. long) high in the air on bamboo stilts.

Each family (or each wife) of the householder occupies a separate compartment with its own hearth in the middle. Over this 'central heating system', suspended from the roof, lies a shelf containing all the measly family belongings and their food and firewood reserves.

A PLETHORA OF HURDLES

Debe Kasange Kau aleden.

Yapa mangada nge mangupu aleden.

*From a distance, our hills look heavenly.
But within them, your miseries know no end.*

A Nishi proverb

In order to present the uphill task at hand, it is necessary to give some information regarding the local culture and customs, the living conditions, the belief and the plight of the inhabitants, particularly that of women and the girl-child.

HEALTH

To begin with, Sangram has no proper health-care center worth its name. The absence of doctors or nurses, immunization programmes, subsidized essential medicines or any ambulance service, results in the high death rates, particularly among infants.

A survey conducted by the local women, revealed the fact that 425 out of every 1000 children born in Sangram do not survive, most of who succumb to common cold, fever, diaorrhea, T.B. and even worms. (In comparison the infant mortality rate of India is 75:1000.) There have been cases where a woman had given birth to as many as 15 children and none of them survived.

TRANSPORT

The absence of a proper transport system accentuates the people's plight. Sangram is claimed to be a township (a `C.O.` post to be exact) for administrative purposes. People from miles around (some a two-day walk away) brave the hills, the weather and the treacherous journey, to avail of our scanty medical, food and transport facilities. Sangram is connected to the outside world and to the nearest hospital, by a single `kacha` mud road, cut along precipitous ridges, which takes normally 10 hours to reach by public transport. The frequency of these buses is so poor that the sheer sight of a single bus once a week draws people out of their houses. Deep trenches on the roads, dilapidated bridges and blocked culverts resulting in streams and waterfalls flowing over the roads, would deter any motorist, leave alone the villagers who would find the fare exorbitant. For most of the torrential monsoon season, frequent landslides resulting from the incessant rains cut-off our only lifeline. Since little can be cultivated along these steep slopes, people are entirely dependent on the road for rice and salt transportation, making essential commodities thrice as costly.

RELIGION

The local religion `Donyi Polo` (Sun-Moon) centers around the constant appeasement of the evil spirits. The benevolent creator `Anyi Donyi` [Sister Sun] is believed to be, by and large, silent and hence the malevolent spirits rule the roost. There are continuous animal sacrifices invoking prosperity, health and justice. The oblation could include a mithun (Himalayan cow), which is locally priced at approximately Rs. 15,000/-, a price too high for the average Nishi living in a village.

Another related affliction is their strong belief in the 'power of dreams'. They feel ever haunted in their sleep...nightmarish fears that magnify with crippling intensity right into broad daylight. Bad dreams also induce sacrifices to please the gods. The local religion therefore appears to be yet another oppressive social structure that robs the poorest of their last morsel.

LIQUOR

A major social evil is the people's (men and women alike) addiction to the home-brewed beer 'apung'. Inebriated parents often share the intoxicant with their pre-school going children. Each libation and celebration, each working day and family reunion, in fact, everyday is an occasion for guzzling beer. The universal resultants of such an addiction, namely child and wife battering, arguments leading to violence as well as irrational vandalism, are evident all around. What a cup of tea is in the average Indian home, `apung` is to the Nishis, including to all

their visitors. While it does serve as a great energiser to do work and carry loads up hill slopes that would otherwise seem humanly impossible, like any addiction, the damage it does appears to far outweigh its productive purpose. Every home brews their own barrel and when it is as cheap as Rs 20 a bottle, even the poorest can wish their woes away in a bottle for half their days earnings. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there.....

HYGIENE

Coupled with the ever lacking medical and transport facility, is the deplorable standard of hygiene. Spit in and around the house, defecate in a partially enclosed area within the four walls, breed swine's below the toilet-cum-kitchen-cum-dining-room-cum-bedroom, share a common drinking vessel (without the intermediary wash), suck out your babies snort, have your babies bottom licked by dogs, eat with your fingers with nails caked in mud from the fields, eat meat of animals found dead and rotten in jungles are some of the major reasons contributing to the deplorable health scenario of our people, where the average human life span is less than 30 years. Absolute ignorance of the basics of health and hygiene consciousness breeds a fear, which attributes sickness and death to the occult and spirit world. Sickness, hence, has been a curse that demands costly animal sacrifices which further enslaves the 'anawim' under the yoke of poverty.

ILLITERACY

Illiteracy in Sangram is quiet widespread. Many young adults and children are seen idling or absorbed in a pack of cards or over a carrom-board, converting the narrow streets into gambling alleys. Many children of school-going age are seen baby-sitting even during the school hours. In a survey conducted in the year 2000, on the mothers of Sangram, only 16% could sign their names. One can't even conclude that these 16% are all literate.

The local government school admits a sizeable number of children, yet it's one-teacher primary school, inadequate classrooms, inconvenient staff quarters and over crowded hostels, give only half the picture of the quality of the education one can expect there.

AGRICULTURE

The predominant agricultural pattern is 'jhuming' (slash and burn). Earlier these hills would have been fallow for at least fifteen years before they were tilled again. However, an increase in population, along with a change in the demographic map towards nodal villages, the frequency has greatly diminished. More and more land appears barren and uncultivated. Secondly, living in their own village, one had access to one's own inherited land (which passes through male members only); but with greater movement to villages along the road, the forest on these areas is getting wiped out. A few terraced -farms, of late are visible, though these are only located near springs and streams and are used strictly for fallow cultivation of rice. The chief produce here includes rice, millet, maize, local pulses and mustard. The produce never feeds a family for more than a few months, but for want of alternatives, everyone returns to the traditional role of farmer during the monsoon months.

NATURE

Such agricultural practices coupled with the incorrigible government policies like the 'big dam gimmick' are bound to take their toll on nature. Already one notices the increase in frequency of flashfloods and landslides. Every other village-elder recounts with remorse the changing pattern of climate and seasons. Anything here that lives and moves is hunted and devoured. Beaks, feathers, furs, bones and teeth all add to the local ornamentation. A common sight here, is a child with a stuffed rare bird or animal in its hand, given to it by its father, as a pacifier or as a toy. Mother nature hardly seems to object to the greed of those higher up in the food chain. Muted, she has no spokespersons either.

DISABILITY

Another alarming feature here are the innumerable cases of mental and physical disabilities. Improper medical facilities, seeking recourse in witchcraft and sacrifice (leading to delayed medical treatment, if any at all) and sheer lack of basic hygiene could be cited as possible reasons. Persons with impairment in sight, speech, hearing and mobility are seen all around. What begins as an ordinary infection leads to loss of an organ or even life, due to sheer neglect.

With regards to the mentally challenged, consumption of alcohol by pregnant women, endogamy and forced child marriage, resulting in births much before the mother is physically mature, are seen as contributing factors.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

MARRIAGE

In the Nishi society, marriage is only a civil contract. After rounds of hard bargaining on either side, the bride price consisting of mithuns, pork, daos, salts and lots of beer is arrived at. Most often brides are bought as girls as young as 8 - 9 years of age. Sickness and poverty in the family invariably leads to the selling of daughters in exchange for animals.

BRIDE PRICE

Bride price, however, reduces the girl/woman to a mere commodity. The man who 'purchases' her now has almost absolute right over her person. In by-gone days, the 'owner' could even forfeit her life, were she to be found guilty of infidelity. One might willingly consent to a divorce, if compensation for the bride price given is repaid. A not so rare sight is unwilling young girls being hand-cuffed or chained and dragged by their new owners/husbands who could sometimes be in their 50s/60s.

LEVIRATE

A bride-price marriage often implies levirate. Thus brothers-in-law and even sons can officially inherit a woman (save one's own mother). The Nishis are a polygamous society. A rise in one's social status, an increase in workforce, as well as sexual variety itself, are attributed as reasons for such a practice. In fact, it is not uncommon for a father to barter his juvenile daughter so that he can now buy for his son or even for himself, a young bride.

THE STOCKS

If a woman dares to defy a barter, she would be beaten and insulted, tied to the stocks and starved for days or weeks, until she submits. The ultimate punishment (for her who demands her legitimate right to choose her life partner) is the 'legal husband' raping her till she is with child, leaving her with no option but to live with him. Primary school girls often go missing mid-term, investigation of the said cases inevitably leading to the discovery that they have been sold.

HYSTERIA

Within such unjust structures, women both get indoctrinated by these practices and become perpetuators of such crime or they would give vent to these bottled up frustrations by breaking out into fits. This phenomenon they attribute to 'evil spirits' possessing them or the souls of some deceased persons holding power over them.

VIOLENCE

Impulsiveness is seemingly a cultural characteristic (wrapped up with stubbornness and ingratitude). It doesn't take much provocation for one to brandish one's **oriyo** (the local sword). Faces and bodies of children, wives and friends, dogs and cows, bear the scars of spates of anger (coupled with the influence of alcohol and an easily accessible weapon, slung around each male's shoulder). Violent expressions of anger, even among husbands and wives, brothers and sisters is condoned. It is traditionally accepted that an angry man may slaughter one of his adversary's pigs/mithuns. The avenged kills two, until the vicious cycle takes human life. Naturally it doesn't stop there and the victim's

clan takes revenge, until sometimes entire families are wiped out, for something that began as a petty insult.

SLAVES

In bygone days a revenge death actually consisted of a ceremonial dance around bamboo scaffolding, on which was hung the amputated left palm of the victim. Often, family members of the vanquished were taken as slaves and servants. Even to date the practice of slaves and servants continues. These persons are 'purchased' from other local tribes or from of the plains of Assam. A slave would normally be a girl child who begins by being a baby-sitter and invariable ends up bearing the owners' children. The poorer people of Assam sell their daughters for as little as Rs 2000, in times of distress.

LEGAL SYSTEM

Administratively, the Deputy Commissioner (seated in Ziro the District Head Quarters) or the local Circle Officer (who spends more time in Ziro or beyond) are where legal disputes may be addressed. However, in their bid to maintain the local customs and culture, the government of yesteryears established a system of village elders ('Gau budas') to solve trivial matters locally. Often such elders are uneducated, enchained by ancestral superstitions or are perpetrators of the very social evils they sit in judgment upon. Would it then be surprising that even in this third millennium, a heart of a fowl is examined or the first of the accused put into boiling water, to discern or affirm the truth?

CONVERSIONS

The last straw on our backs is the fact that we are looked upon as 'traditional missionaries', with an eye on 'conversions' (an accusation one can expect when one dares to challenge the existing oppressive systems). We, therefore, are 'suspect' in the eyes of the people that matter. With the result, to get the official support and nod for whatever we undertake, is time consuming and needs a lot of convincing, persuasion and patience. Already threatened, certain vested interests have, over the last year, intensified the antagonism against us. We are being constantly cautioned and warned of threat to our person and property. Those associating with us are marginalised. While we are not cowed in by the threats, we are not being naive about them either.

THE WORK DONE SO FAR

It would be disastrous if we began to renew our entire system of social relations by acting like a bull in china shop.

-Mikhail Gorbachov

The year since we first set up camp at Sangram, has been spent primarily as explorers. It had us shift from the avatar of bookworms in libraries to that of interviewers of personalities and NGOs intimately linked with these hills. It drew us like fireflies around the hearth of homes, into gossip mongering, legends, song and local beer. Be it as curious spectators at local festivals and sacrifices or as 'miracle workers' in times of fear, sickness and crises - the discernment goes on.....

However, too much 'analysis leads to paralysis'. And so over the past 2 years, we have also involved ourselves in some temporary low profile projects, so as not to impose any of our learnt paradigms and structures on this society.

INTEGRATED EDUCATION

a) BASIC PRIMARY EDUCATION

Education being the Christian Brother's forte and with a view towards a long-term investment into the lives of local people, a concerted effort at "basic education for all children" was made from the very beginning. A 'special class' every year ensures that older children who have missed out on the education bus for one reason or another, are given a fair chance. They are made literate and absorbed into the mainstream if they so desire to continue studying. With no intention of competing with the local government secondary school, our primary school aims at laying a good foundation.

b) EVENING SCHOOL FOR WOMEN

*There will never be a generation of great men,
Until there has been a generation of free women-of free mothers.*

- Henrik Ibsen.

A major ingredient in this cauldron of miseries in Sangram is the gender issue. We believe that with women as our prime focus, entire families, if not the entire local society would begin to develop - culturally, socially, politically, spiritually, economically, demographically and democratically. We hope to make inroads into this aspect of gender discrimination by having started literacy sessions for the Nishi Women. In fact, it was they themselves that sought it. Encouragingly around 70 enthusiasts enrolled themselves on day one (1st March 2000).

At these evening classes we teach them Nishi (reading and writing), basic computations. Some have now begun learning English (the official language of the State) and Hindi. Using the awareness approach, we discuss and diagnose aspects of self-development, empowerment and environment. It is through this group that we hope to address and tackle issues related to health-care, transport, water and in time, the other deep-rooted structural issues.

c) AWARENESS PROGRAMMES

Monthly programs revolving around celebrations of commemorative days such as 'Women's Day' and 'Environment Day' have been organised. These programs help in imparting awareness on related and significant issues, besides developing leadership and organisational skill among the women and building in them a collective identity. The local government system as well as NGOs like NECHA (North Eastern Community Health Association) and AIDA (Agency for Integrated Development Action) were tapped for their expertise.

CREDIT SOCIETIES

Being aware of the fact that economic independence is a necessary (though not the only) ingredient on the road to development, we have begun the process of organising the women into small credit societies with the help of AIDA. Three women's Self Help Groups have been operating successfully over the last year. Much is still desired to be done.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The said women are presently also being trained in various crafts like knitting, stitching and weaving. While these would seem to reinforce gender stereotypes, training sessions in basket weaving (here seen as a man's job), motor driving, orchard farming, animals husbandry and fisheries, money management, health leadership are already being researched and arranged. Other than forest produce, little else is available in terms of raw material. Basic infrastructure too is not very encouraging to set up a local home industry. However various small-scale need-based entrepreneurship projects are under consideration by the women's group.

THE LOCAL CULTURE

One of our pleasant tasks is our attempt to encourage the local culture. We are in the process of formulating and hopefully releasing a literacy workbook in Nishi. Negotiations with members of local societies like the Nishi Elite society to support and encourage local literature, language and culture have been set in motion. One small step in this direction is teaching the Nishi language in school, despite the protests of parents, ours being the only school doing so. A great effort is also made at translating songs and stories into the local language.

THE PROJECTS PLANNED

We are aware, that what we are presently involved in may not be considered by any standards as revolutionary. Our endeavors have been largely unrewarding so far (and may continue to be so in the coming year). We may be likened to our native bamboo plants which spend months underground, establishing their 'grassroots' firm and wide before they break ground and send up their shoots.

Some of the activities planned for this coming year are listed below:

PRIMARY HEALTH CENTRE

While much is being done in the area of education, a far more urgent necessity that needs addressing is that of basic health care. The government doctor and nurse assigned to Sangram, do not visit this outpost for weeks without end. Reported complaints and requests to the DMO (District Medical Officer) have only got shelved in bureaucratic red tape. Last year a pre - monsoon health camp organised by us and funded partially by the government saved hundreds of lives, especially those of infants. This year our application for the same was turned down. We now dispense basic medicine (though without any professional qualification for the same) and an average 30 poor people avail of our meager supplies daily, unable to spend Rs 500 to commute to and fro the nearest doctor in an emergency.

RICE, Sangram Desk, had decided that the setting up of a primary health care centre for the rural poor of Sangram will be its priority area this year and shall leave no stone unturned in its effort to network with health related funding. The Land Revenue Minister has sanctioned an adjoining piece of land while the local community has pledged to build a Nishi style bamboo hut to house the health center, all free of cost, considering that it is for their benefit. This cause now lies in the hands of a funding agency, who we pray will find it noble and worthwhile enough to support.

CRECHE

Baby-sitting is often a reason for siblings abstaining from school. A crèche may help address if not solve the problem. Nutrition, hygiene and other healthy practices would be encouraged among both, the parents and the infants. This may also provide mothers (who get no break from successive childbirth's and child-bearing) spare time for studies, creative activities and recreation. 'Slave-girls' could also avail the opportunity of the special classes to provide some variety in their otherwise drab lives

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SCHOOL

Negotiations towards marking in-roads into the local government school have already been set in motion. We sought to assist the government school staff in transforming it into an educational institution of decent standard. We had acquired official permission from the local government to assist voluntarily in all the schools of our Sangram circle.

There is a distinct advantage in doing this even if we have to close down our own school. This way, we will be more available to the government school, which is anyway a govt. funded institution and would spare us precious time, money and effort not to undo. However, all previous efforts at co-operation have been seen as 'take-over' bids. While it was a blessing not being known for our 'educators' reputation in this remote countryside upto now, this once we wished we were. Hopefully, patient endurance will earn some trust in the long run.

R.I.C.E. SOCIETY

The Sangram Desk of RICE Society - a Registered Society for developmental works - has been established.

RICE was initially set up in the Khasi Hills in 1998 as the rural developmental wing of the Christian Brothers network in, the North-East. It functions on the concept of a 'model village' with local empowerment being the key to its development module. During the last 5 years RICE has done yeomen service in this field in the Mawjrong water-shed area of the Khasi Hills. The name RICE had been chosen because of its significance to the Christian Brothers whose founder is Edmund Rice. Secondly, rice is the staple food of Indians and food is the basis of all development.

RICE is the abbreviated form of Rural (and urban) Integrated Community Empowerment.

We are aware that such a mammoth task calls for little more than just enthusiasm. It cannot either be one devoid of God. We, therefore, seek your prayers and support in our endeavours.

Those wishing to know more about RICE or desire to offer intellectual, financial or any other support, could write to us at:

R.I.C.E Society,
Christian Brothers,
Sangram
Kurung Kume District,
Arunanchal Pradesh, 791120.

We end with a quote from a recent speech of Dr. K.R. Narayanan, President of India:

***"Let us not get tired of what we provide for our weaker sections,
For otherwise, the edifice of our democracy
Will be like a palace built on dung heap"***

- Brother Ralph Sequiera, cfc