CHAPTER VII

Fairs, Festivals & Entertainments

The various tribes of Arunachal are noted for their easy-going and light-hearted jubilant demeanour. Despite all hardship they face in the difficult terrain where they live the colourful surrounding, as it were, has instilled in them an inherent gaiety which remains unstinted by all external worldly discomfitures and debacles. In a way, theirs is an outlook highly optimistic - no looking back with remorse, but a stride forward in happiness and high hopes; no recounting of past losses but an incessant joy and love of the surroundings and the world around.

We have already discussed various aspects of their colourful tradition in the foregoing chapters. The same tradition reveals itself also through their numerous festivals celebrated round the year. Most of these are associated either with their religious rites or with different phases of agricultural activities which are of supreme importance in their economic life. There are other festivals of mixed nature having both religious and agricultural significance. New year is also celebrated by the various tribes in different times according to their own calculation. Except the Buddhist tribes like Monpas and Sherdukpons who have their own calendar prevalent throughout the world, the tribes of the State do not maintain any written calendar. These non-Buddhist communities determine their period of celebrations on the basis of the stages of agricultural operations and lunar dates.

The Buddhist festivals like the birthday of the Lord Buddha
is celebrated by all the Buddhist tribes. Other religious festivals among them include cremation day of Mera Lama, birthday of Padmasambhava etc. and several other religious ceremonies of local import. Apart from these they also observe agricultural festivals like Mincam-Tim-Mum (Khamti), Danpho chenga (Memba and Khamba) and Sang Divi-Jigieh-Dhumchhwe (Monpa). Soskar festival of the Sherdukpens may be regarded as a religious-agricultural festival. Loser, Pema Jelling or Sang Khen are related with their celebration of new year.

Similarly different festivals are observed by the other non-Buddhist tribes as well. These people may be divided into two groups. The first of these groups include the tribes like the Hrusos, Buguns, Dhammais, Nisis, Bangnis, Sulungs, Apa Tanis, Hill Miris, Adis, Tangsas etc. professing a religion with magico-religious beliefs (Shamanistic, animistic). Their festivals mostly relate to agriculture. The other group includes the tribes once associated with head hunting, viz. the Nootes and Wanchos.

Despite variation in names, characters, and season most of the festivals are aimed at propitiating certain gods on spirits who are believed to exercise a strong influence on their life and fortune.

Apart from the Buddhist festivals almost all the festivals involve sacrifice of animals. Religious ceremonies by the priests, consecration, community feast and dance characterise most of the festivals. The women are not allowed directly to participate in religious performances, but they take part in preparation of food,
drinks, offerings etc., and also in the festivities including singing and dancing. The expenses are defrayed by the community collection from every house in cash or kind. The festivals end with community feasts, processions, and sports. Often taboos are observed after celebrations.

As an instance of a religious festival of the Buddhist tribes may be noted the celebration of the Tonga festival by the Monpas in villages around Thembang Gompa in West Kameng. Thembang is an old village near Dirang having a Gompa. Other villages like Cherong, Sema and Pangma situated around it have no separate Gompa. The Lamas of Thembang Gompa are responsible for their welfare too.

Every year two Lamas and two affluent villagers shoulder the entire responsibility of the celebration which is decided before the commencement of the ceremony. The villagers carry foodstuff to the Gompa in procession.

The festival continues for fifteen days from the middle of December. It starts with chanting of the holy scriptures by the Lamas in the Gompa. Next, on a fixed day, the holy books carried by ladies, boys and girls are taken out in a procession from the Gompa. An image of the Lord Buddha and portraits of religious leaders are placed before this group in the procession which is also accompanied by an orchestra party of the Lamas.

The party first enters the Cherong village and moves from there to other villages and finally return to Thembang. In every
village duration of stay of this party depends on the wish of the villagers. In each village the scriptures and images are preserved in big houses or community halls. The Lamas there perform religious rites for the welfare of the villagers concerned. Ceremonies for eternal peace of departed persons are also performed if required. Finally, in the Thembang village also similar rites are observed. Residents of other villages visit their relatives there and pass time in festivity and drinking maize beer called ohhang. This is the time of sprouting of wheat seedlings and hence no work in the field is necessary. Even shepherds are replaced by sending out different batches by turn. Thus everyone gets opportunity to participate in the merriment.

Eventually the day for the return to Gompa from the village community hall is fixed. A procession carrying foodstuff precedes the last procession to Gompa. The images and scriptures are replaced on the altar and prayers to the Lord Buddha mark the end of the festival.

The Phiha festival celebrated by a few Monpa villages may be referred to in this connection as an example of the survival of an old popular festival of non-Buddhist origin among this Buddhist tribe. It is celebrated in a very limited scale on a single day in villages like Sangdi near Dirang, Khrimu near Lhou, Mukto etc. But in the Lhou village, about 19 kilometres from Tawang, it continues for four days.

The worship of the tree called Chandosing, prayer for progeny
and sowing of seeds during this festival indicates its link with fertility. It is primarily observed to propitiate the Bon deity Tanapa Sherap.

In the Lhou village, where the original form seems to have been retained better the gods are invoked on the first day and they take abode in the Chandosing tree. Sacrificial cakes, cloth-pieces, figures of animals and birds prepared with flour etc. are offered in baskets below the tree.

The principal part of the celebration is held on the second day. The deities are propitiated through worship and ritual dance for increasing fertility and general welfare. Horse race, popular dance, drinking and merry making also go on throughout the day. On the third day the deities are to leave the site but the celebration continues. The fourth day is marked by festivity in individual houses.

With the spread of Buddhism such old festivals seem to have gradually lost popularity due to disapproval of the new religious leaders. This explains the obscurity of the festival even among the Monpas. A legend associated with this festival, too, proclaims superiority of Padmasambhava to Bon Tanpa Sherap who was defeated in a contest of ascending a hill by the former. Still, the survival is an evidence of the original vigour of the older cult and its hold over popular imagination.

The Dhammais celebrate an annual festival of religious-agricultural significance which is very popular among them. Known
as Fung-člin, it is celebrated village-wise in the months of Gurkhāyang or Mandinew corresponding to October and November. The celebration continues for six days which is intended to appease the evil spirits of the locality and propitiate the Ju or Sun god and Lu or Moon god. Two gebi or priests officiate during the festival, Fungdo-Gebi or the senior priest and Jung-nung-Gebi or the junior priest. The site of celebration is called Fung-črang.

The festival starts with cleaning of the village and the ways leading to the jhum fields. Next the youths collect sand, pebbles, jungle leaves and a type of creeper called Subosung. The youngmen stay in a temporary hut near Fung-črang during this time.

The sand and pebbles are thrown all over the village by the men folk shouting gro gro meaning go out. The leaves are tied to their waist, head and hands. The priests, accompanying them recite charms. Thus the evil spirits are driven out and the village paths are protected by the leaves. Short poles with bamboo flags one from each house of the village are placed on the earth at the Fung-črang. A long bamboo pole with cloth and ornaments and a similar pole of pine tree with white flags of cloth are implanted on the ground. Local beer (fung-chang) supplied by each house is kept in a brass vessel.

The Dhammas of Nakhu area slaughter with bows and arrows a young bull or a castrated bull, while in Dibbin area a yak is sacrificed on the last day of the festival which is accompanied by
worship known as Fung-nung (when a houng bull is sacrificed) or Fung-do' (when a castrated bull or yak is sacrificed). They also offer a white fowl to the Supreme Being and a pig to their ancestral deities. Wild turmeric, stale eggs, rice beer, maize beer, arum, potato etc. represent items required for the festival which are offered along with prayers to appease the spirits.

Four dancers, two in male dress and the other two in female attire, wielding dao and shields and accompanied by four persons bearing long poles with coloured flags, perform dance first at the Fung-brang and then move around the village dancing. The festival ends with dance at the Fung-brang and sacrifice of yak or bull as mentioned before. The last day of celebration is known as Fung-alin. Sainan-neik and Jangalna-neik are the supreme gods worshipped during this festival. Along with them the gods of rivers and underworld are also propitiated for good harvest and general welfare of the villagers. The priests tie a piece of wool around the necks or hands of the villagers for their well being on the last day. This is followed by community feast. Remuneration to the priests include some articles offered to the deities and some portion of the sacrificed animal. After the festival the villagers go for hunting and chasing. During the period of celebration the villagers observe taboo. Outsiders cannot enter the village, nor the villagers are allowed to go out.

The Morom or Morung and Mloko or Myoko are the two most important festivals of the Apa Tanis. Both are associated with
agriculture.

The Morom ceremony represents a fertility rite performed in winter after the harvest of paddy. It marks the commencement of a new agricultural cycle. Some villages perform it in December-January, while others in February and March.

Youngmen and boys move out from the village with the village priest in front waiving a fan and throwing husked rice grains on both sides of the rice fields. Symbolic dances performed by the youths brandishing bamboo phalli indicate the connection of the festival with fertility and agriculture. Wealthy persons arrange feasts during the festival to enhance their prestige. The more expensive feast called Un-bedo requires slaughter of five or six mithans. The meat is shared by the entire community. But in case of a moderate feast known as Padu-latu two or three mithans are killed and the meat is distributed only within the village of the donor.

The Mloko festival is observed in March and April at the beginning of the agricultural cycle. It may be regarded as a spring festival. The priest performs rites at the altar of the clan placed in a garden of the village. Number of mithans, pigs and dogs are offered as sacrifice along with invocations to Kilo, Kiru, and Kiriliyari. Different groups of villages by rotation perform the ceremony every year.

The villagers start buying sacrificial animals, collecting fire-wood and husking and storing rice grains for the feasts even
weeks before the festival. Wooden oblong plates are used for serving food. During this ceremony different village councils or buliangs exchange gifts. Friends from other villages and guests visit the performing villagers. They are well entertained.

The celebration is accompanied by bobo, their most popular sport. Cane roped are tied to the top of long bamboo poles set up in open space. The participants pull the roll and swing in the air with it to perform acrobatics.

As in the case of the Apa Tanis the festivals and rites of the Adis are some way or other associated with agriculture. Aran or Pombi is their new year festival celebrated between January and March by different sub-groups after the jungle clearing. The performing village stay away from work for five days. A pig and a chicken are sacrificed and the priest chants prayers to Doing Bote, Kine Nane and Sidkn-Kede, their deities of sky and earth. Repetition of the feast every year is also promised.

Mopun is a sowing rite of the Adis observed by the Simongs, Tangams, Ashings etc. ten days after the sowing is completed. It is an agricultural festival held in February.

Etor or Ettor ceremony marks the fencing-in of the fields. It is also an agricultural festival celebrated by the Padams and Minongs in the month of April. Agam, their lord of animals, is propitiated with sacrifice of pigs and fowls for safety of the fields. This is also an occasion for exchange of presents especially among the families of prospective brides and grooms.
For the prosperity of the cattle the Adis observe Luttor Soiling before the final weeding. They collect their mithans from the jungle and tie them to posts before their houses. The posts are considered as quite important and in case of its wilful damage the offender is punished with fine. This ritualistic practice and sacrifice suggest some association of the festival with the breeding of mithan.

Another important festival celebrated by the Gallongs is Mopin. It is generally held in March-April-May corresponding to local months Lumi and Luki.

The objective behind the ceremony is to ensure good harvest, prosperity of domestic animals and welfare of human beings. The festival is held before the beginning of the cultivation when a failure of good crop is feared.

Mopin Ṣwu, viz., Pinku and Pinte, the god and goddess of wealth are propitiated. Hogan or Mopin structure is constructed with bamboo, cane and wood in an open field. Domestic animals like mithan, cow, pig and fowl are sacrificed to the Mopin god and goddess. The priest called ṣwróbo chants hymns of Abo tani, the legendary ancestor of the tribe, for a long time. Women wearing white dress circumambulate the Mopin structure and pour ceremonial ampong or rice beer on the head of the mithan. Sacred paste of powdered rice is smeared on the horns and sprinkled on the body of the mithan and the Mopin structure. Blood of the sacrificed mithan animal, rice beer and flour are offered to the Mopin god and goddess.
in a small well dug below the Mopin structure to fill it up to the brims.

After this religious ceremony popir or butterfly dance is performed by women clad in white popir dress, first around the Mopin structure and then around the village. A Miri or leader guides them singing mythological songs and the other dancers sing after him. Mopin god and goddess are believed to be accompanied by the butterflies. The popir dancers with faces smeared with rice powder and wearing white dress, tadok or yellow beads on head and bamboo decoration symbolically represent the butterflies. The dance continues for the first two days of the festival. The dancing party visits the different houses where they are welcome by the householders. Exchange of good wishes, sprinkling and smearing of rice powder on each other's face and joint dance by the hosts and guests are followed by offer of apong and meat to the guests. Dance and application of rice powder on the face represent essential parts of the ceremony.

On the last day, the villagers clean the site of celebration but preserve the Mopin structure. Then they go to the field to start cultivation. There again they organise a picnic.

Similar festivals linked with agriculture and welfare of the society known as Loku or Chalo-Loku are celebrated to mark the commencement of spring by the Noctes. The Nyokum festival of the Nisis and Buri But of the Hill Miris also have identical motives behind them.
Many rites such as the Leyo Gokkunam of the Adis are performed by the various tribes of the territory to propitiate spirits in order to cure diseases. Leyo Gokkunam is observed to cure a person suffering from a disease called Leyo which develops symptoms like anemia and general weakness. The family members of the patient engage a priest or charmer who performs the rite on the bank of a river. Rice, two amulets, ginger mixed with rice beer and a hen with a chicken within a cage are the items required for the rite. The priest offers these to the spirit Leyo, believed to live inside water, to get back the soul of the patient. A taboo for one or two days is observed after the ritual.

Community dance and singing are major sources of amusement to the tribal people. They perform numerous such dances which vary from tribe to tribe. Colourful dress and ornaments are worn by the dancers.

Religious dances like the monastic dances of the Vajrayāna group of Buddhist tribes (supra, Ch.II) and the pantomimes among this group as well as the Khamtis are quite fascinating. Curious masks are used by dancers who enact some religious or mythical dramas. Apart from these the war dances of the different tribes are also full of animation and entertainment.

Numerous ceremonies starting from the birth of a child till the death mark the life of tribal people which are celebrated with festivity. Rites of name-giving, first rice-eating etc. are also observed among various groups with religious performances and
festivities. The ceremonies in certain respects offer interesting similarity with those of other communities of India. Importance of the maternal grandparents and especially the maternal uncle among certain tribes in the ceremony of first rice-eating may be cited as an instance. Marriage ceremony obviously involves likely celebrations amid community feast, drinking and dance.

With the spread of modern culture among the tribes the nature of celebration and amusements are undergoing changes. Visit of dignitaries, and events of national importance are also now occasions of festivity among the tribal folk.