



Mon-Shugu: An Indigenous and Sustainable Papermaking Technique of the Monpa Tribe of Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Mon-shugu is a traditional handmade paper produced by the Monpa tribe of Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh, using the bark of a plant locally known as Shug Sheng (*Daphne papyracea*). This indigenous craft has been practiced for centuries and holds immense cultural, religious, ecological, and economic significance. Despite its durability, eco-friendly nature, and historical importance, the practice of Mon-shugu (paper) making is rapidly declining due to modernization, availability of cheaper industrial paper, and lack of awareness. The present study aims to document the traditional techniques of Mon-shugu paper making, examine the raw materials and processes involved, assess its socio-economic importance, and highlight the urgent need for preservation. The study is based on both primary and secondary data collected through field surveys, observation, and interviews in Mukto village. The findings reveal that Mon-shugu is not only an environmentally sustainable craft but also a vital component of Monpa cultural identity and livelihood. This study contributes to the documentation of endangered indigenous technologies and emphasizes the potential of traditional crafts in promoting sustainable community-based development.

Keywords: Mon-shugu, Indigenous knowledge, Handmade paper, Monpa tribe, *Daphne papyracea*, Tawang district

I. Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems represent centuries of human interaction with nature and are deeply rooted in local culture, traditions, and livelihood practices (Agarwal, 1995, Posey, 1999) One such remarkable example is **Mon-shugu**, the

traditional handmade paper of the Monpa tribe inhabiting the high-altitude regions of Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh.

Mon-shugu is produced from the bark of a shrub locally called **Shug Sheng**, meaning “paper plant.” The scientific name of this plant is *Daphne papyracea*. Historically, this paper has been widely used for writing Buddhist scriptures, printing religious texts, and performing ritualistic activities (Hunter, 1978; Sarkar, 2017). Its durability, resistance to climatic extremes, and chemical-free composition make it unique among traditional papers.

Despite its cultural and historical significance, systematic academic documentation of Mon-shugu paper making remains extremely limited. At present, the practice is on the verge of extinction, with only a few households in Mukto village continuing this traditional craft. Rapid socio-economic transformations, declining demand, limited market access, lack of institutional support, and competition from machine-made paper have contributed to its decline. This research paper seeks to document and analyze the traditional techniques, cultural significance, socio-economic relevance of mon-shugu, thereby emphasizing the urgent need for its preservation.

II. Study Area

The present study was conducted in **Mukto village**, located in Mukto Circle of **Tawang district**, Arunachal Pradesh. Tawang district lies between latitudes **27°25'N to 27°55'N** and longitudes **91°35'E to 92°20'E**, in the north-western extremity of the state.

The district is bordered by **Tibet (China) in the north-east, Bhutan in the south-east, and West Kameng and East Kameng districts** in the



south-west. Tawang is often referred to as the “Hidden Paradise” due to its scenic beauty, rugged terrain, and rich cultural heritage. The district covers an area of **2,172 square kilometers**, accounting for **2.59%** of the total geographical area of Arunachal Pradesh. The region is sparsely populated and predominantly inhabited by the Monpa tribe, whose livelihood is closely linked to agriculture, animal husbandry, and traditional crafts.

III. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study are:

1. To study the existing indigenous paper-making techniques practiced by the Monpa tribe.
2. To document the traditional knowledge associated with Mon-shugu production.
3. To examine the raw materials used in the paper-making process.
4. To identify factors affecting the production and continuity of Mon-shugu.
5. To assess the socio-economic importance of Mon-shugu paper making.
6. To explore the potential for income generation, self-reliance, and employment through indigenous paper making.

IV. Significance of the Study

The present study focuses on the documentation and preservation of a rapidly disappearing indigenous craft. Mon-shugu is not merely a paper-making technique but an integral part of Monpa cultural identity, religious practice, and traditional economic life. Very limited scholarly work has been undertaken on this subject, and systematic documentation remains inadequate.

Historically, Mon-shugu paper was traded with regions such as **Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, Thailand, and Japan**. However, with the influx of cheaper industrial paper, particularly from foreign markets, the indigenous paper industry declined sharply. Today, its use is largely restricted to Buddhist monasteries and a few craft centers. Documenting this craft is therefore essential not only for cultural preservation but also for promoting sustainable and eco-friendly livelihood opportunities

V. Methodology

The study is based on both **primary and secondary sources of data**.

5.1 Primary Data

Primary data were collected through:

- Direct observation of paper-making activities
- Structured and semi-structured interviews with local households engaged in paper production.
- Face-to-face questionnaire surveys to gather information on raw materials, tools, techniques, and economic aspects of production.

5.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from:

- Books and academic journals
- Research articles and published reports
- Newspapers, magazines, and unpublished records related literature to indigenous crafts and handmade paper.

VI. Raw Materials and Types of Mon-shugu

The primary raw material used in Mon-shugu paper making is the bark of *Daphne papyracea*. The quality of the paper varies depending on the processing techniques and intended use. The major types of mon-shugu include:

1. **Gochema** – Finest quality paper
2. **Tsarsho** – Thinnest and longest quality paper
3. **Kangyur Parsho** – Finely polished paper used for religious texts
4. **Kyosho** – Lowest quality paper used for household purposes

VII. Tools and Techniques of Mon-shugu Paper Making

The production of Mon-shugu involves several carefully executed stages:

7.1 Harvesting of Raw Materials

Mature stems and long branches are harvested between March and December. The bark, locally known as *Khopa*, is carefully peeled. During flowering and reproductive stages, the shrubs are not cut to ensure natural regeneration.

7.2 Scraping (Khogo)

The outer greenish layer of the bark is removed using a traditional knife (*Kyochung*). Excess bark content results in darker and weaker paper.



7.3 Washing (Chuyu)

The scraped bark is washed thoroughly in running water to remove dirt and impurities.

7.4 Drying (Khromo)

The cleaned bark is sun-dried for three to four days until completely dry.



7.5 Soaking (Tse-ga Jasu)

Dried bark is soaked in water to soften it and then cut into small pieces.

7.6 Boiling (Tso-gu)

The soaked bark is boiled for six to eight hours in water mixed with ash filtrate, which helps in fiber separation and improves paper quality.



7.7 Beating and Pulp Preparation (Thungu)

The boiled bark is beaten using a wooden hammer on a flat stone until it forms a fine pulp.





7.8 Sheet Formation and Drying (Shugu-chosu)

The pulp is spread evenly on wooden frames to form sheets, sun-dried, bundled, and stored for use or sale.



VIII. Utility and Socio-Economic Importance of Mon-shugu

Mon-shugu plays a crucial role in religious, cultural, and economic life of the monpa community. It is traditionally used for:

- Writing Buddhist scriptures and religious texts
- Printing prayer flags (*Phan*), scrolls (*Mani*), and *Pe-cha* texts
- Producing artistic and craft items such as notebooks, diaries, and gift paper
- Traditional packaging, including wrapping local butter

Economically, Mon-shugu (paper) making once served as an important source of livelihood for household income in Mukto village. In recent times, however, its contribution has been reduced to a supplementary or ceremonial activity due to declining demand and limited market opportunities.

IX. Challenges and Factors Affecting the Craft

Several factors have contributed to the decline of Mon-shugu paper making:

- Easy availability of cheaper machine-made paper
- Lack of organized market access and promotional support
- Limited participation of younger generations
- Absence of sustained government and institutional intervention
- Labor-intensive and time-consuming production process

X. Conclusion

Mon-shugu represents a valuable indigenous knowledge system that reflects the cultural wisdom, environmental ethics, and craftsmanship of the Monpa tribe. The study reveals that this traditional handmade paper is durable, eco-friendly, and deeply embedded in religious and cultural practices. Despite its immense potential, Mon-shugu paper making is on the verge of extinction due to socio-economic changes and lack of support.

There is an urgent need for **systematic documentation, government intervention, skill transmission, and market development** to revive this traditional craft. Measures such as Geographic



Indication (GI) tagging, inclusion under handicraft development schemes and promotion through cultural tourism and monasteries can help generate sustainable livelihoods for local artisans. Preserving Mon-shugu is therefore essential not only for safeguarding cultural heritage but also for promoting environmentally responsible and inclusive development.

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