



## DISANG SAANAM: AN ADVENTUROUS EXPEDITION TO COLLECT ÉMO (ACONITE) OF THE PADAM (ADI) TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

The Padams constitute one of the major sub-groups of the Adi tribe, inhabiting the river valleys of Yamne, Siang and Dibang of Arunachal Pradesh. The Padam people are known for its courageous and adventurous nature. The *Disang Saanam* or *Disang* expeditions is an example of one of the most adventurous experiences the Padams (Adi tribe) had. It is an organised expedition for collection of the *Émo* (Aconite), poison used in the arrow-head for hunting and war, which is locally known as *Disang Saanam*. The present study is an attempt to in-depth search and documentation of the adventurous experiences of the padam Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

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#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260403046>

**Keywords:** *Theyyam, caste, deity, modernity, ritual, exclusion, marginalization, globalization*

### Introduction

The Padam constitute one of the major sub-groups of the Adi tribe, inhabiting the river valleys of Yamne, Siang and Dibang of Arunachal Pradesh. Damro is the oldest and the first parental village of the Padam group. All the Padam people living across the state are the migrants of Damro village who journeyed out at different points of time. The literal meaning of Damro is Padam together. Therefore, sometimes the word Padam and Damro are used as synonyms.

### Background

The Padam people are known for its courageous and adventurous nature. The *Disang Saanam* or *Disang* expeditions is an example of one of the most adventurous experiences the Padams had. It is an organised expedition for collection of the *Émo* (Aconite), poison used in the arrow-head for hunting and war, which is locally known as *Disang Saanam*. The *Émo*/Aconite is collected from snow claded Abroka mountain ranges situated to the north-eastern side of present Mariyang area.

The knowledge of *Émo* was known from *Banji-Toori/Leene Pérok (Hoopoe)*, when the *Éngo-Takar* (mythical first cultivator/civilised social group) villages were planning to kill *Gumgong*—a wild boar which destroyed and ate up their first agricultural cultivation, which comprised of *Nginti* (sweet tuber) and *Nginko* (bitter tuber) crops. But they had no proper weapons to kill with, meanwhile, *Banji Toori* visited the *Éngo-Takar* people and informed them about various type of *Émo* (Aconite) plants found in the area of *Dimu-Taaya* (spirit/people of mountain peaks). The *Éngo-Taakar* people collected the *Émo* from the dwelling place of the *Dimu-Taaya* and brought it to *Éngo-Ane-Raleng-Tenggeng* (inhabiting place of *Éngo-Takar* people). There, the *Médéng sine* (spirits of shrewd lady- the first daughter of *Banji banmang*) made *Émo* poisonous by crushing the *Émo* collected on the *Banji-Tumtan Libyang*—a flat stone believed to be transformed head of *Poolung sobo* (spirit of disastrous) with the *Banji-jiling /Motup*—a stone pestle believed to be transformed private male organ of *Poolung-sobo*. There, after the poisonous paste made of *Émo* was applied to the arrow-heads. It was used to kill the *Gumgong*— the wild boar by *Nuuyi* and *Duling* the great hunters of the *Éngo-Takar* area. So, it is believed that the *Émo* has been use since then by the *Éngo-Takar* people.

The *Disang Saanam*/expeditions of Padams was mostly for 5 days. The preparation for the expedition began with *Gokying*— the announcement of message by shouting in the villages. The elders, olds and young of all the clans of Padam/Damro village were included and formed teams of 50–60 members. However, there was no limit in numbers of expedition teams. Usually the expedition was conducted during the month of November, the season prior to excessive falling of snow in the mountain ranges. The month of November is known as *Disang* in Adi language. Thus, the name *Disang Saanam* probably may be derived from the name of the month on which the expedition is usually performed.

On the first day of expedition, the team was accompanied by lady members representing each clan as load carrier. When they left Damroh village, they carried the food and other eatable items for next 4 days of journey for the team. The villagers observed that day as taboo of not going to agricultural field. The lady group accompanied up to a place called *Kaabak*, from where they had to return to their respective houses. But again they had to receive the team on their return after two days at *Kaabak* and had to carry and bring back the *Émo* collected by the team. It is also the place where others belongings like food items etc. are kept, that are to be used by the expedition team on their returned and night halt.

The teams halted the first night of their expedition at *Kaabak*. The next day, before sunrise they continued their onward journey towards *Dimu Taaya Among* the area where *Émo* are found. The young and energetic members of each clan competed with each other to reach the place called *Bupik* at the earliest; this competition, hence the name, *Bupik-Monker*. *Bupik* is a huge cave of rock where 18 to 20 people can accommodate safely in the severe cold night. Therefore there was the tradition/rule that the representative of the clan who reached *Bupik* first, the clan members of that person could only occupy *Bupik* besides allowing the old/elderly persons of other clans. The rest of the teams (clans) or the losers had to spend the night in open sky.

On reaching *Bupik*, they kept their belongings in the cave except the *Eyok* (dao), *Tali* (haversack for male) and lunch pack of a day. They continued towards *Dimu Taaya Among* to collect *Émo*, which was at a walking distance of an hour or two. They started the collection of *Émo* on reaching the area/region. The *Émo*/Aconite plants are said to be similar to cotton plants with tuber root, *till sisamum* plant or *arum* and like vegetables locally called as *Gulgo* or *Rumdum* etc. The *Émo* are in the form of tuber, they collected the tubers of the plants. The maximum collection or harvesting is done by the lucky group who believe to be found new plot (*Rikpa*) as similar to new *Jhum* plot. The unlucky ones would collect the least and considered to be in *Rigang* an old plot of the *Dimu-Taaya* people.

As per the experience of the Padams, the *Émo* collected from the cold region did not cause any poisonous effect in that area. The people used to touch and collect it with their naked hands; and due to the shortage of water in the region they could not even wash their hands properly but no harmfulness was found. The Padams believed that it (*Émo*) becomes poisonous after chanting or shouting of *Gokbat* –a traditional ritual shout for success of hunting and pronouncing the *Disang Aabang*–ballads of rhapsodies. It is interesting to know that, the common conversation or dialogue is not used in the *Dimu Taaya* region while collecting the *Émo*. They used coded words for specific purposes, for example – the youngers are called *Taaní*, elder as *Taabing*, *Taabir* for friends and *Tangkéng* for seniors. The first timer (person) in the expedition is called *Tanggak*, as there is special identification mark made ready for the first timer as they have separate walking stick (*Banggén*) made of *Tanang* plant, other used walking stick made from other plants. A small basket (backpack) made of bamboo in which a dried squirrel are kept and tied in the back and the ropes of backpack are tied in crossed shape. This identification system is actually called *Tanggak*. The food items are called *Taasang*. They called *Taasang kamaye* for let eat food and *Tasol Solye* and *Boli Kuye* for urinal and toilet purposes respectively. The plant of *Émo*/Aconite is called as *Tana*.

In the evening, after day full of collection of the *Émo*, they returned to *Bupik* for the night halt. The clan people whose representative reached *Bupik* first in the morning use to sleep the night in the cave. Some elderly persons of other clans were also accommodated and allowed to sleep in cave but the rest had to sleep the night in the open sky or below tree that too in the cold snowy ground. After night halt at *Bupik*, the next morning the team left for *Kaabak*. At *Kaabak*, some village elders and lady members received the team. They halted a night at *Kaabak* camp on the way back journey to their village. On the next day the lady member carried and the brought *Émo* up to a place called *Romkey Dumbang*. They took rest at *Romkey Dumbang* which is located in the outskirts of the village.

At *Romkey Dumbang*, they organised *Poonung*–traditional dance of Padam, where the *Disang Aabang* were recited or sung, they shouted the *Gokbat* for the victorious/success of the expedition in the night. The last day, the teams along with the receiving team entered the village in procession with dancing and singing *Miri/Disang délong* after crossing the Sidip River. The procession culminated at the *Musup*–the male dormitory of the village. The procession of singing and dancing is called as *Disang Poknam/Délong*; it is akin to the tradition performed in *Lutur/Solung Nuunam* of Lutor festival.

In *Musup*, all the villagers received the *Disang* team, and community feast was organised that day. The meats were collected beforehand/in advanced by organising a *Disang Kiruk*–traditional community hunting for the community feast by the other villagers who did not go to *Disang*.

The collected *Émo* was then mixed with a traditional ritual hunting leaves by chanting of the *Aabang* and *Gokbat* which made the *Émo* more poisons. Then, the *Émo* was distributed equally to all the families of the village. The next day was observed as taboo (*Nyonam*, no one is allowed to do agricultural activities, making cloths, even they restricted moved out of villages).

In the evening, the family members of (*Tanggak*) first timer of *Disang Saanam*, hosted a dinner to the team. The friends and relations also invited the members of the *Disang* team. The dinner was followed by *Poonung* and merry-making in *Musup*.

## Conclusion

In the earliest days the *Disang Saanam* was an annual occasion during the period when there were no modern guns and ammunitions. And it was one of the wishes of every energetic young Padam to be the part of *Disang Saanam*, at least once in his life time. But now a day, the use and importance of *Émo* has diminished and it is almost about 25-30 years since the last expedition happened. And the day is not too far when the *Disang Saanam* would remain simply as an adventurous tale of the Padams (Adi) tribe.

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** *Dr. Odol Pertin:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** The author has given consent for the publication.

**Competing Interest:** No

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