

TRADITIONAL JUSTICE IN A MODERN WORLD: A STUDY OF THE *ABBELAH* SYSTEM AMONGST THE IDU MISHMIS

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Abstract

This study examines the *Abbelah* system of the Idu Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh as a traditional mechanism of justice, deeply rooted in their social and spiritual life. It functions as a community-based arbitration, which is more than just a means of resolving disputes, as it embodies the values of harmony, reciprocity and restoration. By adopting the qualitative methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews, the research explores how the arbitration process operates through dialogues and collective consent, rather than relying on codified or written law. The ethnographic insights were therefore gained through conversations with elders, mediators, and some younger members of the community. The study explores the various aspects of *Abbelah*, from its historical origin, spiritual foundations, to structural dynamics. This paper highlights how this institution, once functioning as the sacred restorative system, has undergone transformation under the influence of the state judicial system, modern education, and monetisation, and has shifted away from its essence as a reconciliation process. It highlights how, being a mediator was once a sacred duty, guided by visions and rituals, has been reduced to a normal job, motivated by monetary consideration. Although in decline due to such changes and transformations, it continues to persist in rural areas as the living expression of legal pluralism. Such persistence, along with various modifications, reflects the adaptation of indigenous institutions in a modern world dominated by the modern legal order.

Keywords: *Abbelah*, Idu Mishmi, Traditional Justice, Legal Pluralism, Cultural Change

1. Introduction

Indigenous and tribal societies worldwide have long maintained traditional justice systems. Distinctively, such a system is transmitted orally from generation to generation, thus deeply rooted in the culture, kinship, and ritual life of the people. These systems are typically restorative in nature, aiming to restore and maintain harmony within the community. Their legitimacy comes from the common consensus, shared moral codes, and collective traditions (Griffiths, 1986). Such customary laws have played a crucial role in the social organisation and governance among the tribal communities of India, especially in the Northeast region. Such continued relevance in the plural legal landscape is highlighted by the fact that the constitutional provisions in India, such as the Sixth Schedule and various provisions under Article 371, recognise the authority of traditional institutions and their legitimacy (Baruah, 2005). Among the Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, these mechanisms are closely connected and intertwined with the cultural life of the people, serving not only as a means of dispute resolution but also as a means of reinforcing social integration and solidarity (Delley, 2016). While adapting to the pressures from modernisation, these indigenous systems and local practices continue to safeguard the cultural practices and identity.

2. Methodology

Drawing from the secondary works by Delley (2016), Mene (2011), and (Baruah, 2005), to situate the *Abbelah* within a broader pattern of social transformation. The study is based on qualitative ethnography, conducted among the Idu Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh. The fieldwork involved participant observation and informal interviews with elders, renowned mediators, shamans, and young people (with modern education), mainly focusing on their lived experiences. It centred on local narratives, myths, and oral accounts transmitted through generations. To match the nature of the study, informants were purposefully selected based on their lived experiences and knowledge

of traditional mediations. Recognising the researcher's positionality and the interpretative nature of the survey, reflexivity was maintained throughout.

3. Contextual Background

With a population of approximately 14,000 spreads across around 250 villages (Mene & Miso, 2022), the Idu Mishmis are a scheduled tribe of India and one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They primarily inhabit the Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley District. However, some also reside in East Siang, Lohit District, and Upper Siang District. They belong to the Mongoloid race and speak a language of the Tibeto-Burman family. Mene & Chaudhari mention that outsiders generally knew them as Chulikata Mishmis (Mene & Chaudhuri, 2019). Trading partners gave this name because of their distinct hairstyle. They are often recognised as the people formerly called Chulikata Mishmis.

Additionally, they include the Bebijiya Mishmis, a subgroup of the Idu that was mistakenly identified as a separate tribe (Chaudhari, 2008). As Miso (2005) argues, the terms Chulikata and Bebijiya were used to distinguish between the administered and partially administered Idu Mishmis (Miso, 2005). In some historical records, such as Allen, they are referred to as a sub-tribe of Chulikattas (Allen, 1905), particularly when describing their attack on the Khampti village. Among the Abors (Adis) and Tains (Digaru Mishmis), they were known as Midhi. Dalton even considered Midhi the proper name for the Chulikattas, although he referred to them as a clan rather than a tribe (Dalton, 1872).

The traditional social organisation of the Idu Mishmi includes a nuclear family structure, typically consisting of parents and children (Barua, 1960). It also features a frequently found stem family type, where one married son - usually the eldest - remains with the parents, while other sons establish their own independent households. However, in rare cases, the family may comprise two or more lineally related kinsmen, along with their wives and children.

The Idu Mishmi community follows a patrilineal descent system with bilateral emphasis. It is a system in which lineage is traced and inheritance is passed through the father's side, but kin reckoning includes both paternal and maternal relatives (bilateral). Such kinship rules influence marriage practices and affinal relations, which traditionally include monogamy and polyandry. Their religious life is rooted in an animistic faith that recognises the existence of many spirits. Shamans (*igu*), acting as mediators in human-spirit relationships, uphold myths, taboos, and rituals that are central to the Idu Mishmi belief system. This connection with spirits lies at the core of the Idu belief system, and shamans play a vital role in preserving these traditions (Mene, 2011). Along with these social and spiritual structures, there exists the *Abbelah* system, a form of pseudo-judicial customary law or arbitration system that functions without formal institutional sanctions.

4. Aspects of *Abbelah*

Idus did not have a structured political organisation; they lacked a democratic system like the *Kebang* of Adis or the chieftainship of Noctes and Khamptis (Delley, 2016). Instead, they have an arbitration system called *Abbelah*, which involves engaging a mediator who conducts arbitration through negotiations. In the absence of a structured and stable political setup, the *Abbelah* had various functions, thus having its relevance in various aspects of society.

(i) Mythological aspect of the origin of *Abbelah*

There is a myth among the Idu Mishmis that the world before the inception of *Abbelah* was chaotic, and creatures of various kinds were engaged in constant conflicts with each other. An old woman narrates that all creatures, e.g., *Awokra* (ants), *aluba* (houseflies), *ekhondo* (stick insect), *enulu* (mantis), etc, were killing each other. It went to the extent that even clouds captured the sun, and the world was left in the dark without sunlight. The capture of the sun led to the failure in agriculture, thus leaving the people without fields and crops (*Yi nga*, *Maa nga*), leading to them starving. When

many failed to mediate the case and convince the cloud, a person named Alumi Akhenda was called upon, as he was very well-versed in the art of mediation. He was considered to be blessed by the spirits and could converse with the natural elements - air, clouds, sun, etc. His intervention brought back the sunlight, thus becoming a reference point for the mediators. Therefore, a good mediator among the Idu Mishmi is a person who possesses the quality of Alumi Akhenda (*Ini Alumi Droya*).

(ii) Structural Aspects

The structure of *Abbelah* has been presented as consisting of village elders in some writings, for instance, Baruah understood Abbala (sic.) as a 'tribal council, which is usually composed of a few elderly villagers' (Baruah, 1960). This may have been a case of misinterpretation or an ethnocentric view from the researcher, as *Abbelah* does not have a recognised or fixed structure, defined size, defined timeline, or membership. It can consist of one or more people which comes into existence only when someone is called upon to mediate and cease. It may be completed within a day or a single round of negotiations by the mediator, but it may also be prolonged for months, going through a series of rounds. Likewise, it ceases to exist the moment a conflict is resolved by the mediator by convincing the conflicting parties to terms.

One may argue that mediators in general are elderly people, but what needs to be understood is that the age of a person has no bearing on becoming a mediator. As much as it is considered a gift, the becoming of a mediator also requires a good knowledge of oral history and genealogy. So, they generally tend to be elderly people, thus giving an outlook or an expression that it consists only of village elders. Also, unlike what is mentioned in some writings that consist of village elders which listens to the case, it is, in reality, a process of negotiation held by the chosen mediator, and the conclusion is reached once the mediator convinces both parties to a term.

(iii) Spiritual Aspects

The *Abbelah* for an Idu is no less than a sacred practice, as it is considered a gift from the spirits, so attached to it are the beliefs and also the rituals, which require strict adherence. During the interview, an elderly person and an experienced mediator claimed that he can do it because he is gifted with that quality; thus, he only takes up the call for arbitration when he has a vision in his dreams. He added that he does not do it for the monetary values that he receives, and even turned down many cases, since he did not have the visions before those call-ups, so it was not meant for him. *Abbelayi* (mediator) have a vision in the dreams of future mediation, especially in criminal and serious cases (*etho* and *ashu*), similar to the visions of shamans they have before being called up to perform rituals. Such visions are considered not only signs for possible callups (in the near or far future) but also believed to hint at the success or failure of the mediation; thus, the interviewees revealed that they even warned the calling party of the possible failure of the mediation at the very beginning. Acceptance of mediation without such visions, in his belief, would fail to solve the issue and may even cause further aggravation of the conflicts. Therefore, the mediation, just like shamanism, is a spiritual act which only a few people who possess the spiritual quality (*Ini Alumi droya*) can perform.

Apart from such beliefs, there are rituals directly related to *Abbelah* in the form of *Meshala* and *Aetobru-Apeshu*, both of which require the service of an *igu* (shaman). *Meshala* is a more elaborate ritual that lasts overnight and is generally conducted by both parties. The ritual involves Shamanic chanting, cursing (*Ipu/Tō*), and ritual exclamations (*Ashowō*). Participants in the chanting, cursing, and exclamations march from the house to the *Lāwuka* (designated place for such rituals, and forbidden for other uses).

The receiver of the compensatory fine performs the ritual of purification (*Aafuya-Aalaya*) for the resources received, since they come from others without exchange and may carry bad omens. The giver of compensatory fines also performs the ritual to rid themselves of *Etho-Aashu* (slander and violent acts), so that they may not commit such offences in the future.

Aetobru-Apeshu is a simpler and more concise ritual, generally conducted by the mediators. Its purpose is to prevent the mediators from bringing bad omens (*Tiyi-Poko*) upon themselves. The rituals are generally, therefore, conducted to drive away the bad omens. Non-adherence to such principles in their beliefs is considered to bring crisis and issues to the conflicting parties, as well as may bring misfortune to the mediators.

(iv) **Legal Aspects**

Unlike most tribal societies, the Idu Mishmi society lacked an established political system, such as a village council or chieftaincy. The *Abbelah* system, along with spiritual traditions and kinship systems, served as a normative framework that imposed sanctions and guided social conduct in its absence. It, however, does not have codified rules and norms in written forms, but is socially recognised, orally transmitted and legitimated through popular consensus. Functioning as a pseudo-judicial system that resolves disputes and acts as a safety valve for social integrity and continuity.

The *Abbelah* system could address a wide range of cases, including both civil and criminal matters. These range from murder, enslavement, sexual offence and theft to breaking of taboos (intent to harm others), slander, or defamation. A common misconception is that the *Abbelah* system issues binding judgments. However, it is important to understand that, rather than a mechanism for delivering binding decisions, it functions as a negotiation process to reach settlements or compromises. Because of this, it may sometimes prove ineffective in resolving issues, leading to a new session of *Abbelah* with a different negotiator or even exacerbating the dispute.

(v) **Procedural Aspect**

The system generally has no set time frame or tenure. The *Abbelah* process begins when a mediator accepts a call from either of the conflicting parties. The formal process starts when the negotiator approaches the counterpart of the sender and begins dialogue. The mediator presents the sender's arguments and asks for conditions or the settlement price. The initial phase might lead to various outcomes, such as immediate settlement, denial of involvement in defamation, or counter-arguments. If denial or counter-argument occurs, negotiations may continue in the next rounds until an agreement is reached or it becomes clear that settlement is not possible. Negotiations demand great care and skill, as they involve carefully conveying messages. Only those with spiritual gifts (*Ini Alumi droya*) are considered capable of conducting proper negotiations. To quote Baruah:

"The members of the abbala (sic.) have a great responsibility, because they are supposed to scrutinize the claims of both the parties and then to come to a provisional decision. They have a hard task in persuading the parties about the justness of their decision and to bring about a settlement. This naturally entails long discussions and endless comings and goings to the houses of the plaintiff and the defendant, till at length the decision is accepted by both the parties." (Baruah, 1960)

Once a settlement and compensation amount are agreed upon and paid through the negotiator, who then takes their share from the receiver, a ritual is performed at both the receiver's and mediator's homes. This ritual marks the end of *Abbelah*.

(vi) **Political Aspect**

The Idu Mishmis did not have a concrete political structure. This led to the belief, and a misquote by early researchers, that the *Abbelah* acted as the village council and consisted of the village elders. It has never been a political system per se and has only functioned as a mechanism for maintaining socio-political relationships within society by handling conflict resolution. In fact, it contrasts with the state or formal systems in nature, as its authority is not statutory but rests on the collective consent of the community and respect for age-old tradition. Therefore, its legitimacy is based on consensus over codification, relying on oral transmission, shared values cultivated through community participation, and collective enforcement of tradition. Moreover, it has no formal

structure or fixed jurisdiction; consequently, it did not play a direct role in governance and diplomatic relationships with neighbours. To quote Choudhury, "Its jurisdiction is restricted to judicial matters only, and does not include village administration". (Choudhury 1978)

Therefore, when the *Gaon Buras and Kotokis* (political interpreters) were introduced among the Idu Mishmis, it didn't have a direct impact on *Abbelah*, as it did not overtake the jurisdiction, nor did it have a direct conflict. Rather, when the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation was passed in 1945, it empowered the village authorities for public duties. The discharge of ordinary duties of police in respect of crime, maintaining peace and order, right to apprehend, criminal proceeding, imposition of fine, right to order of attendance, civil justice system including power to award costs, as well as compensation, became duty of the village authority. The *Gaon Buras* and *Kotokis* acted as agents for political socialisation into the new modern legal order. So, the traditional arbitration system continued alongside the later introduced systems.

The introduction of decentralisation of power was introduced through North East Frontier Agency Panchayat Raj Regulation of 1967. The introduction and formation of panchayat members in the Idu Mishmis areas, filled the void left by the absence of a formal political set-up rather than overtaking the powers and jurisdictions of any previously existing traditional political system. The village or Zilla Panchayats functions as political functionaries that helps in planning and carrying out the developmental activities of the concerned villages. Therefore, the Panchayati raj, like the *Gaon Buras* and *Kotokis* did not have a direct impact on the jurisdictions and functioning of the *Abbelah*.

(vii) **Economic Aspects**

In this system of arbitration, disputes are resolved through the payment of fines or compensatory amounts, which may take the form of monetary payments or material goods, as agreed upon during negotiations. The gravity of the wrongdoing typically determines the value, although the initially demanded sum can often be reduced (sometimes substantially) during the negotiation process. The settlement further includes a compulsory fee for the mediator, which is borne by the recipient of the compensation. While the payer is socially expected to demonstrate courtesy during the transaction, this remains a customary expectation rather than a binding obligation, unlike for the recipient, as they are the ones who call for the help of a mediator and initiate *Abbelah*.

In Anelih Village (Dibang Valley), as recounted by a respondent, a dispute arose concerning the ownership of a small bamboo clump. Due to the dispute, one of the parties ambushed and fired an arrow at the basket of a woman who had just collected bamboo shoots from the contested site. The matter was subsequently brought before a mediator through *Abbelah*, who facilitated a settlement between the parties. As remuneration for his role in solving the conflict, the mediator was ultimately granted ownership of the bamboo clump that had been the source of dispute. Due to the absence of a specialisation and a fixed division of labour, the mediation in the *Abbelah* process is not a separate or distinct profession for a person. Therefore, the mediators are generally an eloquent senior male member who is regarded as a good mediator and has a good command of the knowledge of traditions and genealogy.

(viii) **Socio-cultural aspects**

Customary laws are the unwritten laws that are passed down for generations orally, and their legitimacy is rooted in consensus. These laws form an integral part of a tribal community by playing an important part as a form of legal pluralism by adding the modern legal system through its function of maintaining social integrity and cohesion. These laws work as a social mechanism for identifying the guilty and differentiating them from the innocent, as well as punishing the guilty. One such mechanism was the various forms of truth testing oaths and ordeals. The Oaths among the Idu Mishmis were in the form of taking oaths in the spirits of various living and non-living elements, with the belief that if wrongfully taken, the Oath to hide or cover the truth would invite wrath from those spirits. The commonly referred and recognised oaths are in the form of an Oath in

the Sun (*Ini-Atuya Loyi mey Nga Taayi fre-* which means, ‘the sun spirit may take away my life if I lie’), and an Oath in the Snake (*Etapri or Etapri-* which means, ‘a snake may bite me if I lie’). Traditionally called *Aseye*, there were also various ordeals to try and identify the guilty by invoking the help of a shaman in the process. The most utilised methods were pouring molten metal into the palm, holding a heated and red-hot piece of rock, dipping the hand in boiling water, etc.

Despite the prevalence of such customary laws, the Idu community saw persistent social conflicts and struggles due to the absence of a concrete and structured political and judicial system. They were often involved in petty wars and disputes amongst each other before the arrival of modernisation, especially through the development of transport and communication. Various interpersonal and intergroup problems, such as enslavement, property intrusion, slander, etc, were very common. Along with such problems, they are traditionally a staunch believer in revenge, which poses a threat of further aggravation and social chaos. In such scenarios, *Abbelah* stood as the mechanism of accountability as well as facilitating reconciliations. In the case of suspicion, the mediators may even recommend a traditional oath or ordeal. Thus, it is a coping mechanism against the anomalies that helps in maintaining the social order and upholding the moral order.

5. Changes and recent developments

The institution, which once stood as a central mechanism for maintaining social order and stability among the Idu Mishmi, has undergone a series of changes over recent years. These changes reflect the community’s shifting social, cultural, economic and moral landscape under the influence of various factors.

(i) Decline of Relevance

The respondents (especially elders and mediators) recall that in earlier times, the *Abbelah* system was the primary avenue for conflict resolution, dealing with a wide range of disputes, such as marital issues, inheritance, interpersonal conflicts, homicides, slanders, etc. Today, only a handful of cases are brought before it and are mostly prevalent in rural areas. This decline reflects a broader shift where the institution is no longer central to maintaining social harmony. A key factor that contributed to this decline is the reduction in violent conflicts and feuds within the community. As recalled by an elderly woman, the disputes arising from issues related to kinship and marriage alliances, particularly in cases of kin marriages where emotional and honour-based responses could escalate to violence, used to be a major cause in the past. It was very common where the male relatives would even kill their daughter or sister for violating kinship rules, sometimes even delivering the severed head to the male partner as a form of restitution. They would even go so far as to attack the man for eloping with their daughter or sister. However, with growing exposure to the outside world, other cultures, new moral frameworks, and awareness of human rights, such violent incidents have become rare, and hence, the need for traditional mediation in such cases has diminished. The people have learned new forms of romantic relationships and marriages on one hand, and on the other, they have adopted a modern culture, which discourages violent acts. Therefore, there has been a decline in the possibility of a feud as well as the chances of handling such a possibility violently.

(ii) Arrival of State police and the Formal Judiciary.

Another important development is the arrival and expansion of the state’s formal policing and judicial systems, which have increasingly encroached upon the domain once exclusively governed by traditional authorities. Serious cases (especially criminal cases) are either directly handed over to the police and judiciary, or the Police themselves get involved, and the option of settlement through traditional systems becomes unavailable. Although many Idu Mishmis still express a preference for resolving disputes “within the system” to preserve community harmony, the presence of police stations, courts, and lawyers has offered new routes for justice. The presence of external institutions

like the judiciary has made the *Abbelah* less binding and more optional. The introduction of defamation cases and other legal instruments under the Indian judicial framework led to cases like defamation, assault, or property disputes often overlapping between both systems (traditional and legal) has particularly discouraged public trials through *Abbelah*, as individuals now have recourse to state institutions for redressal and protection. Therefore, we can argue that the institution has lost its power as well as the confidence of the community in its ability to handle grave matters.

(iii) **Weakening of spiritual and ritual aspects**

Traditionally, conflict resolution through *Abbelah* was not only a social act, but also a sacred one, accompanied by rituals and the invocation of spiritual forces. These ritualistic elements fill the process with moral weight and collective accountability. The process, however, in recent years has become more secular and pragmatic, thus losing its spiritual significance. An elderly person and an experienced mediator informed that in the present day, a mediator accepts the calling without any dreams and visions. Further informed that the associated rituals, which were once an integral part of the process, have either been neglected or modified, such as *Meshala* or other rituals, are hardly done by both parties, as well as the mediator. The rituals and offerings that once legitimised the decisions and symbolised the reconciliation are ignored or rarely performed. Absence and non-adherence to such beliefs and rituals have led to the loss of moral gravity and sacred sanction. Such a loss can be easily seen through the instances of people challenging the verdict given by the *Abbelah* and moving to the judicial court.

(iv) **Narrowing jurisdictions**

The scope of *Abbelah* has narrowed considerably in recent years. It used to deal with a wide range of issues; in the past, it was, however, confined mostly to civil and domestic cases, with very few criminal cases. On one hand, the arrival of the State police has significantly narrowed the jurisdiction by taking over the criminal cases. On the one hand, the arrival and functioning of the Women's Commission and Child Commission, aided by NGOs, have further diminished the invocation of *Abbelah*. The marriage-related issues, such as adultery, elopement with an extramarital partner and marital abuse, were some of the major factors behind the call-up of *Abbelah*. These cases in the present are generally taken to the police or the State Women's Commission through the interventions of NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). Apart from direct involvement in the form of helpline and providing aid in the cases, the commission, NGOs, CBOs, with the help of educated women, have been actively involved in the awareness and education process also. Such involvement has shifted the focus on such issues from a patriarchal point of view to a women-centric approach. This also explains the relevance of such activities more prominently in urban areas.

(v) **Monetisation and materialisation of the system**

The main purpose of the *Abbelah* system had been reconciliation and restoration, rather than punishment or individual gain. Also aided by the absence of cash culture in olden days, compensation was mainly given in the form of animals, ritual goods, tangible goods or even immovable properties, which were aimed at restoring the balance in the community and between the families. The emphasis in recent years has shifted towards monetary settlements, and it has, in fact, become a standard. Therefore, in the past, cases like homicide, adultery, or elopement, breaking kinship ties through kin marriages, etc., were severely treated, leading to violent conflicts, and have become a means of extracting maximum monetary value for many people. Even the mediators have started accepting the mediation task without any ritualistic considerations if lucrative cases arise. They have, in the majority, ignored the importance of a vision as well as the condition of possessing the spiritual gifts (*Ini Alumi Droya*). These shifts, therefore, reflect the broader monetisation and

commodification of customary institutions, which alter the definitive and intrinsic ethos of *Abbelah*, that is, reciprocity and restoration.

(vi) **Modern education and generational distance**

The underlying factors of many of these changes are the growing influence of modern education and the resulting distance of younger generations from local customs and traditions. Education has directly as well as indirectly created these distances. On one hand, the educated youths are familiarised with modern legal proceedings and state structures, so they start perceiving the traditional system as outdated and irrelevant. On the other hand, their continuous and prolonged engagement in modern education diminishes their participation in traditional activities and rituals, including the experience of *Abbelah*. This process of distancing hinders the learning of traditional culture and also erodes, intergenerational transmission of customary knowledge.

(vii) **Continuity**

The *Abbelah* system is undergoing a complex process of transformation, which reflects the movement from a holistic, spiritually grounded, and community-centred mechanism of justice to a limited and semi-formal system that is increasingly monetised. Despite such shifts, the traditional arbitration system still holds its relevance, especially in rural areas.

The conversation with the village elders reveals that the people still feel attached to the *Abbelah* and even prefer it over the modern legal system, as they believe that the system has sustained them for generations and has become a part of cultural identity, thus neglecting it would mean the erosion of their culture. There were also concerns among the people that the involvement of the modern judiciary and the State police impose on them a series of difficulties (referring to paperwork and filings), which harasses both parties. They also referred to some of their experiences in court proceedings, where they had to go for multiple rounds of hearings and spent a huge amount of money that could have been solved easily with less resource involvement if done through *Abbelah*. There were also concerns about putting an end to the conflicts through the legal proceedings, as they argued that the rulings from a lower Court have the possibility of being challenged in the higher court, thus starting another round of legal battles. Many believe that the conciliation reached through the *Abbelah* marks the end of the feud between people, as it is based on the consensus of both parties; however, such consensus is missing in the modern legal process. They also remarked that the decision in courts does not always go in favour of the aggrieved, thus leaving a space for grudge even after the closure of the case.

The historical attachment of people to their culture and the concern of cultural preservation, along with the spaces of doubts upon and issues related to the modern legal set-up, remain some of the driving factors behind the continued existence of the *Abbelah* system in the modern world. Therefore, the Idu Mishmi are negotiating the *Abbelah* system within the framework of modernity, modern law and changing social realities.

5. Conclusion

The *Abbelah* system of the Idu Mishmis is a mechanism of arbitration that embodies a moral universe which is grounded in the reciprocity, restoration and the sacred. It derived its legitimacy from the collective beliefs and the mediator's spiritual aptitude, believed to be gifted by the spirits. The mediation was a social necessity as well as a sacred act aimed at restoring the harmony within the community. However, due to the growing influence of the judiciary, state policing, and modernisation, the essence of *Abbelah* is fading. The modern education has drawn the youngsters away from their cultural morals and traditions. Mediators, who once waited for visions and dreams, now accept calls based on convenience and compensation. Even the rituals that were once indispensable have been reduced, adjusted, or even omitted. Therefore, mediation is shifting from a sacred calling to a practical negotiation. The *Abbelah*, even in a weakened form, continue to prevail,

as surviving tradition especially in remote villages and rural areas. It still functions as an alternative and restorative option to the legal justice system, taking centre stage on many occasions. This endurance reflects the adaptive strength of the indigenous institutions in a modern, legal and cultural order. It shows us that justice need not be a mere verdict but can be a process of healing and moral restoration.

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