Contents lists available at JournalsKart

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU COLLEGE
MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH JOURNAL

Vol. 1 | Issue No. 1 | Jul–Sept 2026

journal homepage: https://journalskart.com/journals/jncj

Research Article

ROLE OF WOMEN IN MONPA SOCIETY: A STUDY OF DIRANG CIRCLE, WEST KAMENG DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Women occupy multidimensional roles in Monpa society as caregivers, economic contributors, custodians of tradition and participants in local governance. This paper examines these roles among the Monpa of Dirang circle, West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight women from Dirang town and the villages of Khaso, Dirang, Lish, Phudung and Namsu in August 2026, supported by published literature. Women are primarily responsible for child-rearing and moral education, and carry out key agricultural tasks such as sowing, weeding, transplanting paddy and storing the harvest. Mothers pass on weaving skills, including the making of the traditional Shingka dress, carpets and Dangnya bags, as well as songs, dances and oral narratives that preserve community history. Women prepare households for the Losar festival, arrange materials for religious rituals and take part in community rites such as Chosker. Through self-help groups under the Arunachal State Rural Livelihood Mission, they run small enterprises and two rural marts, and they increasingly serve in village councils and Panchayati Raj institutions. Although Monpa society remains patrilineal, women's contributions are central to family life, the local economy, cultural continuity and community governance. The study is exploratory, and further research with larger samples is recommended.

KEYWORDS: Monpa women Dirang West Kameng agriculture self-help groups oral tradition Panchayati Raj.

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Published by JournalsKart – Jawaharlal Nehru College Multidisciplinary Research Journal, Vol. 1, Issue No. 1, Jul–Sept 2026.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Monpa are a Buddhist community of the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Monpa of the Dirang and Kalaktang areas of West Kameng speak varieties of Tshangla (also spelled Tsangla), a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodic group, and are often referred to as the Tsangla Monpa (Andvik, 2010). The Monpa are not linguistically uniform, however: the people of Lish, one of the villages covered in this study, identify as Monpa but speak Lish, a language of the Kho-Bwa group (Lieberherr & Bodt, 2017). The Monpa practise Mahayana Buddhism, which shapes their festivals, rituals and social life (Sarkar, 1980). In Monpa society, the family is the smallest social unit. The family is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal, and the father is the head of the household. The mother nevertheless holds a respected position in the family and in society, and the opinions and suggestions of women are respected and followed.

Studies of women in Arunachal Pradesh have highlighted their substantial contribution to

household work, agriculture and the rural economy (Mandal & Ete, 2010). Legal provisions have also opened space for women in local governance: the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1997 reserves not less than one-third of the directly elected seats, and of the offices of chairperson, in Gram Panchayats, Anchal Samitis and Zilla Parishads for women (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2001). Among the Monpa, women's participation in the traditional village council has reportedly increased in recent years (Rhomo & Hussain, 2025). However, relatively few published studies document the everyday roles of Monpa women across family, economy, culture and religion within a single locality.

This paper addresses that gap for Dirang circle. Drawing on field interviews, it describes the roles of women in bringing up children, in agriculture, in teaching arts and crafts, in transmitting oral traditional knowledge, in festivals and religious rituals, in self-help groups and in local politics.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

1. To understand the role of women in the family, particularly the role of the mother in bringing up children.
2. To examine the role of women in agricultural practices.
3. To study the role of the mother in teaching arts and crafts.
4. To examine the role of women in passing on oral traditional knowledge.
5. To examine the role of women in festivals and religious rituals.
6. To study the participation of women in self-help groups and local governance.

3. STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study area

The study was carried out in Dirang circle of West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh, which is inhabited mainly by the Monpa community. Fieldwork covered Dirang town and the villages of Khaso, Dirang, Lish, Phudung and Namsu.

3.2 Data collection

The study follows a qualitative approach. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight women from Dirang town and the villages of Khaso, Dirang, Lish, Phudung and Namsu between 11 and 13 August 2026 (Table 1). Secondary data were drawn from published books and journal articles. Each interview focused on the informant's area of knowledge (Table 1), and the information was analysed thematically under the headings presented in Section 4.

Table 1. Informants interviewed during fieldwork in Dirang circle.

No.	Informant	Place	Date	Topic discussed
1	Mrs. Norbu Droma	Khaso village	11.08.2026	Upbringing of children
2	Mrs. Kesang Lhamu	Dirang village	11.08.2026	Agricultural practices
3	Mrs. Nima Phaichurpa	Lish village	12.08.2026	Arts and crafts
4	Mrs. Pema Yangchen	Dirang town	12.08.2026	Politics and local governance
5	Mrs. Yeshi Droma	Phudung village	11.08.2026	Self-help groups
6	Mrs. Karmu	Namsu village	11.08.2026	Oral traditional knowledge
7	Mrs. Sang Droma	Khaso village	11.08.2026	Festivals
8	Mrs. Kungma	Dirang	13.08.2026	Religious rituals

3.3 Limitations of the study

The study is exploratory. It is based on interviews with eight women over three days, and most themes rest on the account of a single informant. Men, younger women and members of other Monpa villages were not interviewed, and topics such as inheritance, land ownership and customary law were outside the scope of the fieldwork. The findings therefore describe women's roles in the villages studied and should not be generalised to all Monpa communities without further research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Role of the mother in bringing up children

In Monpa society, a mother is addressed as *Ama*. A mother teaches her children to speak and to pronounce words correctly, and helps them take their first steps and learn to walk. A mother is a child's first teacher. She teaches her eldest child to take care of the younger siblings, and teaches all her children to respect their elders and to speak respectfully to them. It is the mother's responsibility to feed, bathe and comfort her children, and to teach them moral

values (N. Droma, personal communication, August 11, 2026).

4.2 Role of women in agricultural practices

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Monpa people, and Monpa women play a vital role in it. Sowing seeds in the fields is done exclusively by women, as are weeding and the transplanting of paddy seedlings. Women also collect firewood and vegetables from the forest to support their families, and they rear domestic animals such as chickens, ducks, goats, sheep and pigs, which further supports the household. After the harvest, women are responsible for collecting the crops and storing them properly in the storeroom, and for protecting them from fire, wild animals and rats (K. Lhamu, personal communication, August 11, 2026). These observations are consistent with wider studies that show the large contribution of women to agriculture and household livelihoods in Arunachal Pradesh (Mandal & Ete, 2010).

4.3 Role of the mother in teaching arts and crafts

The mother teaches her daughter to weave traditional garments, such as the *Shingka* and *Pangten*, as well as bags. Carpet weaving is one of the most important crafts of the Monpa. Mothers teach their daughters the art of carpet weaving, which is known as *Tan Namchu Lampana*, and carpets are woven at home in leisure time. The traditional Monpa bag, called the *Dangnya*, is very popular in the society, and teaching a daughter to weave it is known as *Dangnya Nanchu Lampana*. In their free time, mothers also teach their daughters indigenous songs and dances, which is known as *Nang-Broh Lampana* (N. Phaichurpa, personal communication, August 12, 2026).

4.4 Role of women in passing on oral traditional knowledge

Women take the initiative in telling folk stories to their children, through which the children learn about the origin and history of their society. The narration of stories is known as *Danpu Tam*. The folk songs that women sing during festivals and on important occasions also convey knowledge about Monpa society and life. Narrating folktales, folk songs and legends helps to preserve oral traditional knowledge and provides an important oral source for reconstructing the history of Monpa society. One such legend is known as *Lingjasher Gepu Tam* (Karmu, personal communication, August 11, 2026).

4.5 Role of women in festivals

Losar, celebrated as the New Year, is the most important festival of Monpa society. Before the celebration, the women clean and decorate the house. Women carry out the preparations for the festival, including making *khapse* (sweets), which are offered to the deities, and it is the women who prepare the first meal for the family on the first day of Losar (S. Droma, personal communication, August 11, 2026).

4.6 Role of women in religious rituals

The Monpa perform many religious rituals for the good health of family members and the prosperity of the village as a whole. Women light the lamp, called *Chomin*, before the deities and offer water every morning, a practice known as *Yonchap Phubana*. When a household conducts a religious ritual, it is the women who arrange all the materials required. Women also take part in *Chosker*, a community religious ritual performed before the paddy harvest (Kungma, personal communication, August 13, 2026). These practices reflect the central place of Mahayana Buddhism in Monpa life (Sarkar, 1980).

4.7 Participation of women in self-help groups

The women of Dirang are organised into many self-help groups (SHGs), which are members of the Arunachal State Rural Livelihood Mission (ArSRLM). ArSRLM is an autonomous society under the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and the state's nodal agency for the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, which aims to reduce poverty by enabling poor rural households to access gainful self-employment and skilled wage employment (Pandey et al., 2024). Under this mission, women's groups in Dirang have started their own businesses in weaving, knitting, handicrafts and vegetable vending (Y. Droma, personal communication, August 11, 2026).

The SHGs of Dirang circle have set up two rural marts to sell their products: Dirang Rural Mart and Tajong Rural Mart. In these marts, women sell finished products such as the traditional *Shingka* and *Tudung* dresses and *Dangnya* bags, as well as vegetables and other agricultural produce, earning money to support their families. Similar SHG-based livelihood activities have been reported elsewhere in rural Arunachal Pradesh (Pandey et al., 2024).

4.8 Role of women in politics and local governance

In Monpa society, women have the right to take part in decision-making for the development of the community. Women serve as members of Panchayati Raj institutions, supported by the reservation of not less than one-third of seats and chairperson offices for women under the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1997 (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2001). At the time of the study, the Zilla Parishad chairperson was a woman, Mrs. Pema Yangchen, under whose initiative several schemes for the development of village women have been implemented, including activities under ArSRLM (P. Yangchen, personal communication, August 12, 2026). Women are also taking an active role as members of the traditional village council, a trend also observed in a recent study of Monpa customary institutions (Rhomo & Hussain, 2025).

5. DISCUSSION

The findings show that the roles of Monpa women extend well beyond the household. Within the family, the mother is the child's first teacher, responsible for physical care, language, manners and moral values. In the economy, women carry out the most labour-intensive agricultural tasks, rear livestock and store the harvest, which agrees with wider evidence on the contribution of women to agriculture and household livelihoods in Arunachal Pradesh (Mandal & Ete, 2010). In culture and religion, women are the main transmitters of weaving skills, songs, dances and oral narratives, and they organise the household and ritual preparations through which Buddhist practice is lived in everyday life (Sarkar, 1980). In this sense, Monpa women act as custodians of both material and intangible heritage.

The findings also point to changes in women's public roles. Self-help groups under ArSRLM have given women in Dirang an organised route into enterprise, and the two rural marts provide a direct market for their weaving and farm produce. Similar opportunities and challenges have been reported for self-help groups elsewhere in rural Arunachal Pradesh (Pandey et al., 2024). In local governance, the statutory reservation of one-third of seats and chairperson offices for women (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2001) has opened space for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, and women's participation in the traditional Monpa village council has reportedly grown (Rhomo & Hussain, 2025). The presence of a woman Zilla Parishad chairperson in the study area reflects this change.

These roles must be understood within a family structure that remains patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. Respect for women's opinions and their central place in family and community life do not by themselves establish equality in all spheres. The present study did not examine inheritance, ownership of land and property, customary law or final authority in household and village decisions, which are important indicators of women's status. These questions, together with the effects of education and migration on women's roles, deserve further study.

6. KEY FINDINGS

The interviews indicate that women hold a respected and influential position in Monpa society, and that their opinions, views and suggestions are valued in the family and community. Women play different roles in various fields: taking care of their families, teaching moral values to children and looking after their grandparents. Women participate actively in agricultural activities such as sowing seeds and weeding the fields. Mothers are an important source of knowledge about the history of their society, narrating folktales, folk songs and legends to their children; through these oral traditions, they help to transmit and preserve that history across generations. Women further contribute to political life by serving as members of the village Panchayat and taking part in decision-making. Through self-help groups and rural marts, women have also become active entrepreneurs. Thus, Monpa women perform multiple roles and make a significant contribution to their families and to society at large.

7. CONCLUSION

Monpa women play multiple roles in the family. They are the backbone of the family and provide care and support to its members. They perform various duties as mothers, wives and daughters, and play an important role in maintaining family relationships and ensuring the well-being of their families, fulfilling their responsibilities with love and dedication. Beyond the household, they sustain agriculture, pass on crafts and oral traditions, lead preparations for festivals and rituals, run self-help

enterprises and take part in local governance. Women in Monpa society therefore play an important role in both the family and the wider community, while the family structure itself remains patrilineal. As this study is based on a small number of interviews in one circle, further research is needed, with larger and more varied samples of informants, comparisons between Monpa areas, and attention to inheritance, land rights, customary law and the changes brought about by self-help groups and Panchayati Raj institutions.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgements. The authors thank the women of Dirang circle who generously shared their knowledge and time for this study.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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