

Songs, Stories and Sisterhood: The Rasengs as Indigenous Institutions of Women's Learning Among the Adis

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Abstract. *The Rasengs of the Adis of Upper Siang in Arunachal Pradesh were once vibrant social and educational institutions that nurtured young girls in discipline, art, responsibility and collective memory. These served as dormitories for unmarried women and acted as the indigenous schools of life where knowledge, skills and traditions were transmitted orally through songs, stories and community living. This paper explores the Raseng system as an institution of indigenous institution of women's learning, empowerment, sisterhood and socialisation. Drawing from historical accounts and personal interviews, it argues that the Rasengs embodied an indigenous feminist pedagogy that integrated moral, aesthetic and practical education long before formal education reached the Adi villages.*

Key words: *Adi, Folklore, Indigenous Learning, Rasengs, Sisterhood, Women's Institution.*

1.1 Introduction

Among the Adis of Upper Siang, women have historically played a significant role in maintaining the social, cultural and moral fabric of their community. One of the most remarkable examples of this is *Raseng*, a traditional dormitory for unmarried girls that once stood at the heart of almost every Adi village which means “resting place” or “meeting house” in the local tongue. The *Raseng* was far more than a mere residence; it was a centre of learning, socialisation and communal bonding. Before the advent of modern schools and missionary education, indigenous communities had evolved their own systems of knowledge transmission. The *Raseng* functioned as one such institution where learning took place collectively through storytelling, song, dance and practical labour. This study examines the *Rasengs* as spaces of cultural continuity and women's education, highlighting their social relevance and the values they imparted to young Adi women. The analysis draws upon Feminist Ethnography, communitarian feminism and Indigenous knowledge theory as theoretical frameworks to interpret the *Rasengs* as spaces of women's agency and community learning. These frameworks help reveal how women's voices, communal bonds and experimental education shaped the identity of Adi womanhood long before the establishment of formal schools.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

To interpret the *Rasengs* as indigenous institutions of women's learning, this study draws on three inter-related theoretical perspectives such as Feminist Ethnography, Communitarian Feminism and Indigenous Knowledge Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a lens to understand how the *Rasengs* functioned as spaces of women's agency, collective identity and holistic education within Adi society. Together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced understanding of the *Rasengs* not

merely as dormitories but as dynamic institutions of indigenous womanhood. Feminist Ethnography situates the *Raseng* within women's lived experiences; Communitarian Feminism interprets its collective nature of empowerment and Indigenous Knowledge Theory highlights its pedagogical and cultural depth. It is viewed through these lenses, the *Raseng* emerges as a unique indigenous model of education which is rooted in sisterhood, collaboration and life centred learning.

1.4 Historical Background

The existence of *Rasengs* was first documented during the Abor expedition of 1911-1912 by W.B Hore, a Field Intelligence Officer, who observed dormitories designated for unmarried women in Adi villages (Nyori, 1993). These *Rasengs* were constructed by male members of each clan. Every village generally had a *Raseng* for each clan, reflecting the collective responsibility of the community in nurturing its young members. The dormitory housed girls from around 10 to 12 years of age. And life in the *Raseng* was highly organised as young girls learned from their elders. The senior members took charge of teaching, maintaining order and transmitting stories and rituals. The system ensured that no girl remained untrained in the skills necessary for social and cultural life.

1.5 Structure and Functions of the Rashengs

Raseng were more than communal lodgings and they were structured environments for collective learning. Each dormitory functioned in "batches" corresponding to age groups. Girls were trained in moral discipline, mutual respect and a strong sense of cooperation. During the day, *Raseng* members worked in agricultural fields or performed domestic chores; at night, they gathered around the hearth to sing, narrate myths and weave. The younger girls were responsible for lighting the hearth and maintaining the *Raseng*, while older ones assumed leadership roles. The elder members would often teach traditional dances, notably *Ponung* (a sacred dance performed during the Solung festival). During the Solung celebrations, *Raseng* girls assisted the *Ponung Miri* (ritual specialist), accompanying him in rituals and dance performances. After the festival, as a mark of gratitude, they worked in the Miri's agricultural fields. The *Rasengs* were secular institutions, free from ritual invocations or religious ceremonies. Their primary goal was to inculcate community discipline, aesthetic appreciation and practical knowledge. Skills such as cotton spinning, weaving and folk singing were integral parts of the curriculum forming a holistic education system grounded in oral transmission.

Seen through the Indigenous Knowledge framework, the *Raseng* was a model of experiential education where knowledge was acquired not through texts but through doing, spinning, singing, cultivating and performing. Each act reinforced values of cooperation, responsibility and harmony with nature.

1.6 Socio Cultural and Educational Roles

The *Rasengs* played a central role in socialising young women into responsible and culturally literate community. Elder girls served as teachers, narrating myths, songs and moral tales to younger members, transmitting what Freire (1970) calls *education as praxis*- learning through reflection and action. The *Raseng* also functioned as a secular and inclusive institution, where no religious invocations were made. Instead, it emphasised skill learning and moral training through community interaction. These included weaving, cotton spinning, agricultural cooperation and ritual participation. The elderly women reveal that the *Rasheng* was perceived as a "complete school of life" as they felt they became knowledgeable about every aspect of life at an early age, something that the younger generation children lack. From the standpoint of Indigenous Knowledge Theory, these testimonies affirm that the *Raseng* cultivated practical wisdom integrating knowledge, ethics and aesthetic learning within a lived environment.

1.7 Raseng and Women's Empowerment

The *Raseng*, when interpreted through Feminist Ethnography, emerges as a cultural space where women constructed their own narratives and social agency. Within its walls, women's voices were not silenced but amplified through songs, jokes and shared rituals as "the small voices of history" that

Abu-Lughod (1990) advocate for listening to. From the lens of Communitarian Feminism, empowerment in the *Raseng* did not derive from individual freedom but from collective wellbeing.

The girls learned to value solidarity, cooperation and care creating a network of emotional and social support that extended into adulthood. The *Raseng* this represented a culturally grounded model of feminist empowerment, rooted in shared responsibility rather than competition.

1.8 Decline of the Institution

By the 1980s, with the spread of formal education and modern lifestyles, the *Rasengs* disappeared from most of the Adi villages. The advent of modern schooling altered gender socialisation, replacing communal learning with individualised education. However, the decline of the *Rasengs* also marked the loss of an indigenous feminist pedagogy. The Communitarian Feminist Values of cooperation reciprocity and intergenerational learning gave away to individualistic education systems.

1.9 Conclusion

The *Rasengs* of the Adis were more than dormitories; they were holistic educational spaces that nurtured discipline, creativity and social consciousness among young women. Through the lenses of Feminist Ethnography, Communitarian Feminism and Indigenous Knowledge Theory, the *Rasengs* can be reinterpreted as indigenous feminist institutions that empowered women through sisterhood and experiential learning. Personal narratives and historical records together suggest that these institutions produced a generation of women well versed in the art of living, cooperation and leadership. Their disappearance, though inevitable with the forces of modernity, leaves behind a powerful legacy. The *Raseng* stands as a cultural memory of women's collective learning and as an indigenous paradigm of sisterhood that modern education could learn much from.

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