



The Institution of Slavery among the Tawrä Mishmis: A Socio-Anthropological Analysis.

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Abstract

This study interrogates the indigenous institution of slavery, known as the *Po* system, among the *Tawrä* Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, analyzing its structural function in the regulation of labour, the consolidation of domestic authority, and the reproduction of social hierarchy within a decentralized political formation. Methodologically grounded in a qualitative approach that synthesizes primary semi-structured interviews with secondary historical analysis, the research delineates the aetiology of bondage as being rooted in debt, penal servitude, and hereditary transmission, supplemented by regional exchange networks.

The article argues that while the *Po* system aligned with the theoretical model of "paternal slavery"—evidenced by the spatial integration of the enslaved into the master's household and the semantic utilization of fictive kinship terms—it nonetheless functioned as a rigid regime of domination. The study demonstrates that despite the veneer of familial intimacy, structural asymmetry was sustained through economic barriers to marriage (specifically bride price obligations), the intergenerational transmission of servile status, and enduring social stigma. Furthermore, the possession of *Po* is identified as a critical determinant of prestige and economic stability within the household economy. Finally, the inquiry addresses the historical trajectory of the institution following the Indian Slavery Act of 1843, revealing a disjunction between statutory abolition and local practice, characterized by a gradual decline and the eventual spatial reorganization of the servile population.

Keywords: *Tawrä* Mishmis, *Po* System, Paternal Slavery, Debt, Social Stratification, Arunachal Pradesh.

Introduction

Slavery has persisted across history as a durable structure of domination embedded within the organization of social life. Across diverse political formations—ranging from centralized states to small-scale kin-based communities—systems of institutionalized unfreedom have functioned to regulate labour, consolidate authority, and sustain hierarchical relations.

As A.K. Thakur observes, slavery or servitude is a process which permits a person or a group to compel involuntary labour of another person or group. This process is a dynamic one and "has assumed different forms in different socio-economic and political set-ups over the long period of human history" (Thakur, 2003). It is often characterized as a universal social evil having its origin in the remote past, where the element of force or compulsion is ingrained in the system. Through the tactical application of intelligence, a minority of people could easily suppress a numerically superior group (Thakur, 2003).

The 1926 Slavery Convention defined slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (League of Nations 1926). While this ownership-based formulation provides an important juridical benchmark, its analytical applicability to decentralized societies requires closer scrutiny, particularly where relations of dependency were embedded in kinship and customary authority rather than commercial markets.

Among the Taron Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, the *Po* system constituted an indigenous institution of slavery integrated into household organization and social hierarchy. This article argues that the *Po* system operated as a structured regime of dependency that reinforced authority, regulated labour, and reproduced hierarchical relations within Taron Mishmi society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach combining primary interview data with secondary textual analysis. Primary information was gathered in 2026 through scheduled semi-structured interviews with members of the Taron Mishmi community in Arunachal Pradesh. The interviews focused on customary practices associated with the *Po* system, including pathways into dependency, labour obligations, household authority, and perceptions of hierarchy.

Participants were selected purposively on the basis of their knowledge of traditional institutions and community history. The semi-structured format allowed for thematic consistency while permitting informants to elaborate on experiential and historical aspects of the institution. Detailed notes were maintained to ensure accuracy in interpretation. Informants were informed about the purpose of the study, and anonymity has been preserved through coded references where appropriate.

In addition to primary interviews, the research draws upon secondary sources, including ethnographic accounts, historical documentation, and scholarly discussions of slavery and indigenous systems of dependency. These materials were used to contextualize interview insights and situate the *Po* system within broader analytical debates concerning institutionalized unfreedom, power, and social stratification. By integrating oral testimony with textual scholarship, the study seeks to provide a structured and interpretive analysis of the institutional character of slavery among the *Tawra* Mishmis.

The Aetiology of Bondage: Debt, Descent, and Capture

Historically, the aetiology of bondage among the Mishmis was rooted in the inability of marginalized clans to meet customary financial obligations, creating a system of customary debt-bondage that gradually evolved into hereditary servitude. The primary mechanism of recruitment was penal servitude, wherein individuals unable to discharge customary fines entered the service of a wealthy patron who liquidated the debt on their behalf (Mills, 1952). Vulnerable individuals lacking protection or someone to repay their debts were frequently taken into slavery (interview with Kri). Consequently, the servile demographic was disproportionately drawn from economically marginalized clans.

Furthermore, the status functioned as an ascribed and hereditary condition, with the progeny of slaves born into servitude and retaining this status unless eventually absorbed into the master's clan. Inter-marriage also operated as a pathway to unfreedom, as a freeborn woman who contracted marriage with a male slave forfeited her liberty (Mills, 1952).

Historically, the indigenous slave population was further augmented through the external procurement of Assamese captives from neighbouring groups, as well as through rare instances of internal commodification involving the sale of children or captives during clan feuds (Mills, 1952). Early colonial records confirm that slavery formed part of regional exchange networks in the Mishmi Hills. William Robinson noted that the Mishmis bartered elephants' teeth with the Singphos “for slaves, daws, and buffaloes,” indicating that enslaved persons constituted a recognized commodity within inter-tribal trade relations (Robinson, 1841). Although Robinson's account does not provide a detailed institutional analysis of slavery within Mishmi society, his observation

establishes that the circulation of slaves was embedded in broader frontier trade networks during the early nineteenth century. The Mishmis were also involved in regional exchange networks, acquiring slaves and knives from neighbouring groups such as the Khampteas and Tibetans in return for musk and teta (Cooper, 1873).

The Social Status and Domestic Conditions of the Enslaved

In marked contrast to societies defined by rigid social segregation, the relationship between the master and the Po (slave) in Tawrä society was characterized by a distinct degree of domestic intimacy and smooth social integration. This structural closeness was linguistically reinforced through the use of fictive kinship terms; slaves frequently addressed their *maring's* (master's) as *Napu* (brother) or *Naba* (father), signaling a relationship framed by familial incorporation rather than absolute alienation (Interview with Tabronyu).

However, this social integration was circumscribed by significant economic and status barriers, particularly in the realm of marriage. While customary law theoretically permitted a slave to contract a marriage with a free woman, such unions were rendered practically impossible by the exigencies of the bride price system. The heavy requirement of providing mithuns—which necessitates the collective resource mobilization of a groom's extended relatives—effectively precluded slaves, who lacked such corporate lineage support, from securing the capital necessary for establishing such unions.

In some instances, a slave could be absorbed into the master's clan; however, such incorporation was neither automatic nor universal (Interview with Kathak). Even after absorption or manumission the stigma associated with a slave past often persisted. J.P. Mills also noted that full absorption into the master's clan was possible, but typically occurred only after several generations, further indicating the lingering nature of this social distinction (Mills, 1952).

Slaves were allowed to own property and retain whatever they earned or acquired. They were not deprived of personal possessions (Mills, 1952). However, the possession of property by slaves appears to have been a relatively rare phenomenon. A slave lived in his master's house. A rich man who married one of his own slave girls remained free. A wealthy member of the Yun clan even purchased the freedom of an elderly slave in order to remove the stigma from his clan (Mills, 1952).

The treatment of Po varied significantly depending on the disposition of the owner. Some masters were relatively lenient and treated the Po with consideration; in rare cases, they even permitted marital alliances by giving a daughter in marriage. However, treatment could also be harsh. Certain owners reportedly subjected slaves to physical punishment, including beating them with the blunt edge of a dao or confining them in a cage known as *Po aang*. Despite such coercive practices, killing a Po was not customary. Masters were generally reluctant to take a slave's life because doing so would obligate them to perform the *Talo*, a death ritual that carried ritual and social consequences. This ritual responsibility acted as a deterrent against extreme violence, indicating that even within asymmetrical authority, customary norms imposed certain limits on the exercise of power (Interview with Tayang)

Paternal Slavery and Domestic Incorporation

The *Po* system among the Tawrä Mishmis exhibits several characteristics consistent with paternal slavery. Slaves lived within the master's household and were integrated into domestic life rather than spatially segregated. The use of kinship terms such as *Napu* (Brother) and *Naba* (Father) symbolically framed the relationship as familial rather than purely coercive (Interview with Tabronyu). Slaves were allowed to retain certain personal property and were not wholly deprived of material rights; moreover, the master was responsible for providing food and clothing (Mills, 1952). Masters could absorb slaves into their clan, and manumission occurred in certain cases.

However, marriage restrictions and enduring stigma reveal that paternal incorporation did not eliminate hierarchy. Authority remained asymmetrical, with masters exercising decisive control over labour, mobility, and status recognition. The language of kinship thus functioned not to dissolve domination but to legitimize and stabilize it

within accepted social norms. Thus, while structurally unequal, the *Po* system operated through domesticated authority and symbolic kinship, aligning closely with the model of paternal slavery.

Slaveholding, Household Economy, and the Structure of Power

The *Po* system among the *Tawrä* Mishmis functioned as an integral component of the master's household economy. Enslaved persons contributed labour that sustained cultivation, animal care, and daily subsistence within the master's household. Their presence ensured a stable and controlled labour force that reinforced the productive and social standing of the master.

Although labour was broadly shaped by gender, it was not rigidly fixed. Female *Po* generally performed household chores such as cooking, food preparation—including preparing feed for pigs—and other forms of domestic maintenance. They also participated in agricultural activities, contributing directly to cultivation and subsistence production. However, the responsibility of tending large livestock, particularly mithuns and cows, was primarily assigned to male *Po*. Hunting expeditions were typically reserved for male members of the household and did not ordinarily include female *Po*. In cases where the master possessed a male *Po* instead of a female one, domestic tasks such as cooking and related activities were assigned to him, even though these were conventionally associated with female labour. Additionally, male *Po* used to carry the meat after hunting and accompanied the master on such expeditions (Interview with Tayang). Thus, while gender influenced the organization of work, labour allocation ultimately responded to the needs of the master's household rather than strictly to gender norms. The *Po* system therefore operated as a gendered yet flexible economic institution embedded within the structure of the household.

Slaveholding not only strengthened the economic base of the master's household but also structured social hierarchy within *Tawrä* society. The possession of *Po* functioned as a visible marker of prestige, distinguishing wealthier and more powerful lineages from those without dependents. Control over servile labour enhanced the master's authority and reinforced his position within the community's informal ranking system. At the same time, the *Po* constituted a distinct lower status category marked by restricted marital mobility and enduring social stigma. Even where domestic incorporation softened the outward expression of inequality, the boundary between free members and the servile population remained socially recognized and symbolically reinforced. The hereditary transmission of servile status further ensured that inequality was reproduced across generations. Thus, slavery was not merely a household arrangement but a structural element in the reproduction of hierarchy and differentiated status within *Tawrä* society.

Transformation and Decline of the *Po* System

Although slavery was formally abolished in British India through the Indian Slavery Act of 1843, its implementation in practice was gradual rather than immediate. In frontier regions such as the Mishmi Hills, customary forms of servitude persisted well beyond formal legal prohibition. British administrators and ethnographers, including J. P. Mills and T. T. Cooper, continued to record the existence of slavery among the Mishmis, suggesting that the institution remained deeply embedded within local socio-economic structures despite its official abolition.

The decline of the *Po* system, therefore, appears to have been a slow and uneven process rather than the direct outcome of a single legislative intervention. Instead of abrupt termination, it underwent gradual transformation shaped by administrative penetration, changing political authority, and evolving social norms.

Oral testimonies further suggest that the final phase of the institution involved spatial reorganization. Two informants reported that enslaved individuals were eventually relocated to a separate settlement during the later phase of colonial administrative consolidation (Interview with Tayang and Kathak). Although documentary evidence confirming this relocation was not accessible for the present study, such accounts indicate that the erosion of the *Po* system involved displacement and restructuring rather than outright elimination.

Furthermore, contemporary observations within the society reveal that fear of modern legal repercussions and customary fines acts as a powerful deterrent, preventing individuals from identifying specific families or persons of servile descent (Interview with Marap). This reluctance highlights the continuing sensitivity surrounding the institution's legacy. It also underscores the importance of oral memory and local narratives in reconstructing the final transformation of slavery in the region, while simultaneously necessitating careful ethical consideration and respect for community privacy.

Conclusion

The *Po* system among the Tawrä Mishmis constituted an institution of servitude embedded within the structure of the master's household, the organization of labour, and the reproduction of social hierarchy. Rooted primarily in debt, penal servitude, and hereditary transmission—and supplemented by the external acquisition of captives through regional exchange networks—the system functioned as a mechanism for concentrating labour and consolidating domestic authority.

Slaveholding operated as a marker of prestige and hierarchical distinction, reinforcing differentiated status within Tawrä society. Although domestically incorporated and articulated through kinship idioms, the *Po* remained structurally subordinate, constrained by restricted marital mobility and enduring social stigma. Customary norms, including ritual obligations such as the *Talo*, placed limits on extreme violence, indicating that domination operated within locally recognized moral frameworks rather than through unchecked coercion.

Despite the formal abolition of slavery in 1843, the persistence of the *Po* system in frontier regions underscores the disjunction between statutory prohibition and local social practice. Its eventual decline appears to have been gradual, shaped by administrative expansion and internal transformation rather than abrupt legal intervention. The case of the Tawrä Mishmis thus demonstrates how unfreedom was institutionally organized, socially legitimized, and historically reconfigured within a decentralized society.

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Interviews

Interview with Nadu Tayang, a senior member of the society, aged around 65 years, a permanent resident of Jeinko village, on November 21, 2025 at Jeinko village.

Interview with Janailu Kathak Manyu, an elderly member of the society, aged around 65 years, a permanent resident of Khorabah village, on November 22, 2025 at Khorabah village.

Interview with Songalum Tabronyu, an elderly member of the society, aged around 66 years, a permanent resident of Khorabah village, on November 23, 2025 at Khorabah village.

Interview with Khulu Kri, an elderly member of the society, aged around 62 years, a permanent resident of Khoraliang village, on February 13, 2026 at Khoraliang village.

Interview with Kumble Marap, Gaon Burah of Khorabah, aged 49 years, a permanent resident of Khorabah village, on November 15, 2025 at Khorabah village.

