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Buliang – The Traditional Institution of Apatani Tribes and the Impact of Modernization: A Study of a Tribal Village in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Traditional village councils in Arunachal Pradesh have been working as indigenous self-governing institutions which are responsible for maintaining law and order, peace and harmony of the villages. In other words, village councils are the traditional socio-political organizations of tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh. These village councils evolved on the basis of the tribal customs and indigenous traditions of the concerned tribes. In fact, the traditional village councils of Arunachal Pradesh being the primitive political institutions existed since time immemorial. Likewise, the traditional institutions of Apatani tribes known as Buliangs were working as some sort of local self-government. However, society and politics in Arunachal Pradesh is undergoing through a process of social modernization and political development. Initially the Buliang of Apatani tribes safeguarded and preserved the justice of its people but for the last few decades the Buliang had been in defunct position due to introduction of modern system of governance and administration. But still the role of Buliang is considered as indispensable traditional unit of Apatani tribes from the socio-cultural point of view. Thus, this study could be helpful in understanding the system of traditional institution of Buliang and the impact of social modernization and political development in Apatani society.

Keywords: Apatani, tradition, Buliang, role, modernization, impact.

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, the land of rising sun is a tribal dominated land which is situated in the north-eastern part of India. It is a homeland of heterogeneous tribal populations. Prior to the dawn of independence, Arunachal Pradesh remained mostly cut off from the mainstream. There was an absolute paucity of the means of communications. As a result, the various tribes living in the area mostly remained confined to themselves. Moreover, the British never showed an interest to extend its civil administration in this area. The political life of the tribal, therefore, was not much influenced by the modern ethos. As such, naturally, the political life of this area was village or tribes oriented (Pandey 212). In every tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh there is an indigenous self-governing institution based on the customs and traditions of the concerned tribes responsible for maintaining law and order, peace and harmony, solution of disputes as per traditional customary laws of the society, maintaining tribal solidarity and also to look after village welfare and development activities. The traditional political institutions of different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh being the primitive political institutions existed since time immemorial (Dubey 2.4).

The Apatani tribes are the native settlers of Ziro valley; headquarter of Lower Subansiri district in the central western part of Arunachal Pradesh. The people of this valley are scattered in various villages such as Hari, Bulla (Reru and Kalung), Tajang, Hija, Hong, and Diibo. Each of the Apatani village is inhabited by many clans (Habung 26). In order to govern the village life as well as to generate a corporate life, the Apatani tribes had developed their own indigenous self-governing institutions in their respective clan (Habung vii). These traditional self-governing institutions are known as Buliangs. Buliangs of Apatani tribes were the basis of political units till the introduction of modern governance and administration in the tribal villages of Arunachal Pradesh. However, these traditional village councils continue to exist side by side with the statutory modern political institutions and discharge their functions (Gyati 3).

Objectives of the study

The study was undertaken with a view to the following objectives:

- i. To understand the traditional role and function of Buliang.

- ii. To identify the impact of modernization on the traditional system of Apatani tribes.

Methodology

In the light of the objectives of the study, a systematic research design was drawn. It is a descriptive study where both primary as well as secondary data were collected. Primary data was collected using questionnaire and interview. For the purpose of convenience, the questionnaire-cum-interview schedule was designed in English. It was translated into local dialect at the time of administration to the respondents. The secondary data was collected through various sources like published books, websites, articles, government documents and unpublished works. The study was carried out by visiting all the 6 original villages of Ziro valley – Tajang, Reru-Kalung, Hija, Hari, Hong, and Diibo. The sample size of the respondents for this research study was 140. The respondents were selected randomly.

Table 1: Sampling of respondents

Categories of Respondents	Tajang	Hari	Hija	Hong	Reru-Kalung	Diibo	Total
Buliangs	10	12	12	12	12	12	70
Villagers	10	12	12	12	12	12	70
Total Respondents	20	24	24	24	24	24	140

Source: made by the author (2016)

In the above mentioned categories of respondents, Buliangs are the traditional leaders or village council of Apatani tribes and the villagers are the local people or the native settlers of villages in Ziro valley.

Review of literature

Christopher Von Furer Haimendorf was the first to study the Apatani and their way of life systematically beginning in March 1944. His exploration of eastern Himalaya, diaries of travels in Subansiri region (1947) and Ethnographic notes on the tribes describe the tribes

he encountered in his first exploration trip of this area. In his *The Apatani and their Neighbors* (1962), Haimendorf describes about the organization and functions of Buliang, the village council of the Apatani people. His other works titled *A Himalayan Tribe: From cattle to cash* (1980) and 'The Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh' (1982) brings out the impact of rationalized administration, opening up of improved means of communication and introduction of education, etc. His work *Himalayan Adventure: Early travels in North East India* (1983) is the revised and expanded version of his earlier book titled 'Himalayan Barbary' (1955) and it outlines the organization and function of Buliang of the Apatani tribes. However, all his works are mostly ethnography.

Verrier Elwin's *Democracy in NEFA* (1965) gives a descriptive account of almost all the village councils of Arunachal Pradesh. He also brings out the main common features of these village councils. Elwin also gives a general overview of the village councils in different parts of India. Although Panchayati Raj system was not yet introduced in Arunachal Pradesh till then, Elwin discusses the possible impact of this modern democratic institution. In another book edited by him titled *India's North East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, Mumbai, 1959), there are extracts from accounts of early European explorers like R.B. McCabe, H.M. Crowe, G.W. Dun etc., about Apatani people.

Tage Habung in his work titled *Gorra: socio-religious institution of Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh* (2013), made a historic description of origin, structure and function of Gorra. His study also gives a short description of other traditional institution such as Nyibu (Priest), Patang (Agricultural gang-labour) and Buliang (village council).

Pura Tado in his doctoral thesis, "*Political transition among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh; A case study of Apa taniis*" (2001), gives a good account of the village council of the Apatani people. He also explains the structure and functions of the Buliang in judicial, political, religious and social aspects. He also made the study of the impact of panchayati raj on ApaTanii Society.

Though certain studies of Buliang have been carried out, however, the present study is a humble attempt to understand the traditional role of Buliang and to find out the impact of social modernization and political development on the people of Apatani so that it will serve as broader knowledge to know about the Apatani people from both traditional and the modern aspects.

The Buliang of Apatani tribe

The Apatani tribes with their unique position in Arunachal Pradesh had developed their own system of self-governing institution. The traditional village administration and the enforcement of laws were the responsibility of the selected persons who would be able to manage the village affairs based on customs and traditions. These selected persons are called Buliang (Pandey 219). The Buliangs are the representatives of a clan which are responsible for maintaining peace and harmony in the society. They are men of character and ability drawn from amongst the members of a lineage; therefore, the position of Buliang is heredity within the clan (Gyati 36). “Though the Buliangs are collectively the upholders of tribal law, they act primarily as the spokesmen of their own clan or clan-group and not as village headmen invested with absolute authority” (Haimendorf 1962, 67). The mythological folklore tells us that the institution of Buliang is as old as the Apatani society itself. The chaotic situation and the absence of a regulatory authority were the basic reasons for the emergence of the Buliangs. As such, according to folklore the origin of Buliang (Gyati 36) runs as follows:

There were quarrels among all inhabitant of the universe. There were feuds between the sky and the earth between the rocks and the plants as well as among human beings. Thus everybody was at one another’s throat and complete chaos prevailed in the universe. Everyone was fed up with the situation that prevailed. Hence, a few persons were asked to volunteer and settle the feuds among different disputants, thus, became Buliang. Their decisions were accepted as just and equitable by the disputants. Since then, Buliangs were accepted as arbitrators of disputes to establish peace in the society. (Tado 56-57)

Therefore, the origin of the Buliangs of Apatani tribes is based on both social and divine sanctioned behind it (Gyati 37). Besides Buliang there are other socio-religious and economic institutions which are operating in Apatani society such as Gorra, Patang, Nyibu, etc. The Gorras are considered as socio-religious institutions of Apatani tribes, represented by each clan of the village who perform the rituals and rites for the entire village. The Patangs are the agricultural labour groups formed within the same age groups to help each other's in their agricultural activities whereas Nyibu is a priest who mediates between human being and supernatural being (Habung 29-30).

Structure of Buliang

The Buliang of Ziro valley is classified into iipyo Buliang, kiidi Buliang, Mudo Buliang and Kiimer Buliang. The function of iipyo Buliang is to look after the administrative activities of a village such as preservation of customs and traditions, imposition of fines or punishment to the criminal, settlement of disputes, etc. The Kiidi Buliangs assist the priest during the period of rituals and funeral ceremony. On the other hand, Mudo Buliang performs the ritual function for the prevention of natural calamities so as to protect the agriculture. The function related to animal such as castration of male boar is performed by the Kiimer Buliang. Above all there is a kind of Buliang known as Miha Pillo which works as a mediator between Buliangs and the public in case of any misunderstanding from both the sides.¹

However, Haimendorf, the first to study the Apatani tribes and their way of lives, has classified the Buliang of Apatani tribes into Akha Buliang, Yapa Buliang and the Ajang Buliang. "The Akha Buliangs are the principal leaders of the villages, who even when too old to take a very active part in the life of the community must be consulted on all important matters. The Yapa Buliangs are middle-aged men who carry on the day-to-day conduct of village affairs, settle dispute and keep the Akha Buliang informed of the development. The Ajang Buliangs, finally, are young men who act as messenger and assistants of the Yapa

¹ Extracted from an interview on February 14, 2016 with Buliang members of Tajang village.

Buliang and function in some respect as the leaders and spokesmen of the younger generation”. He, however, opines that, “In practice, this division of duties is not always clear-cut” (Haimendorf 1947, 6).

The classification of Buliang into Akha, Yapa and Ajang has been referred to by various government officials in preparing government reports and by scholars in their work on tribal village councils of Arunachal Pradesh and on various other subjects. However, this classification of Buliang has been rejected by many of the Apatani scholars (Gyati 38-39). Pura Tado opines that “...there is nothing like Akha, Ajang and Yapa Buliang. The interpreters of the officials visiting Apa tanii valley during 1940s might have added the prefix Akha (old), Yapa (youth) and Ajang (young) with Buliang for easy understanding” (Pura 63).

Table 2: Village wise distribution of Buliang

Name of village	No. of Buliang
Tajang	20
Hong	27
Reru-Kalung	34
Hija	24
Diibo	31
Hari	23
Total	159

Source: Bye laws of Supung Bulyang Council, Ziro

Role and functions of Buliang

The Buliangs are the highest authority of socio-political and judicial administration in the Apatani society. However, they have no absolute power to do arbitration and do not take any action unless a dispute is public issue or an individual dispute has become public issue. Under the judicial function, the Buliangs solve the problems like encroachment of land, hostility between two villages, damage of public properties like roads, bridges, and other religious and traditional properties. The Buliangs solve these problems as per the tradition and customary laws. Besides the judicial function, the Buliangs work for the village administration and development.

Impact of modernization in Tribal village

The manner of proceeding of the traditional village council is in the process of change due to the influence of modernization in the grassroots. Frequent political changes have been brought with the introduction of democratic institutions and procedures in the local governance of tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh. The enactment of Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation of 1945 recognized the importance and authority of the village councils, thereby giving them certain additional power and at the same time it also took away many of their original powers. Today, the role of traditional indigenous political system as a judicial machinery has been replaced by modern political institutions to some extent (Gyati 49). Previously, before the introduction of Assam Frontier Administration of Justice Regulation, 1945, the tribal people did not get the chance to approach the court of law for settlement of any dispute. Today, if the village council cannot settle the case, the council will hand over the case to the government for settlement. Thus, the Buliang no longer remains as the sole village authority for the administration of justice in the Apatani society as in earlier days (Yappa 129).

The introduction of the modern political institution known as Panchayati Raj in the year 1969 in Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA) has been the most important political event since independence. It has brought major changes in social, political and economic scenario of the tribal villages of Arunachal Pradesh. As a result the function of the Buliang has been diminished to some extent. Modern representative members such as MLAs and Panchayat leaders, who are popularly elected, enjoy wider support in the administration of village affairs. In Arunachal Pradesh, with the introduction of Panchayati Raj system the democratic political process was started. It strengthened the corporate life among the village community and enhanced the village welfare by implementing various developmental schemes. Particularly, after the enactment of Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1997, the tribal women got 33 per cent reservation of seats in different levels of Panchayat bodies; accordingly the participation level of women in politics was increased (Talukdar 77-79). As a result, the traditional political proceeding of the indigenous tribal society has changed up to some extent.

The development of road and means of communication helped the people to interlink from one village to another; the education system provided by the government broadened the knowledge of people in every aspect. As such, the tribal people have become more conscious of their life style. Today, the educated tribal people are not much in favor of the prevailing traditional method of settlement of disputes – they are more inclined to the legal procedures of the government. Similarly, the traditional belief and faith of the tribal people has also changed. Most of the tribal people now prefer medical service in place of priests in order to eradicate any kind of epidemic. In the service sector also the progressive society of the Apatani tribes have brought changes. Currently, many educated people amongst them are engaged in the Government services and business of different types which demand lots of their time. Therefore, those who are in such service and business and are also eligible for inheriting the post of Buliang traditionally may find difficult in discharging the role of Buliang (Sohkhlet & Lalyang 55).

In order to analyze the impact of modernization in these tribal villages the respondents were asked the following questions:

- i. Do you think modern political institutions have brought changes in the village?
- ii. Name the nature of changes brought by the modern political institutions?

The response to these questions has been tabulated in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3: Response patterns of Respondents to the question- “Do you think modern political institutions have brought changes in the village?”

Categories of respondents	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
Buliangs	63 (90%)	0 (0.00%)	7 (10%)	70 (100%)
Villagers	58 (82.85%)	0 (0.00%)	12 (17.14%)	70 (100%)
Total	121 (86.42%)	0 (0.00%)	19 (13.57%)	140 (100%)

The above table highlights that out of the total respondents who agreed that modern political institutions have brought changes in the village, 90 per cent of the respondents are traditional leaders i.e. Buliang and 82.85 per cent of the respondents are villagers. While there is not a single respondent who thinks modern political institutions have not brought changes in the village, about 13.57 per cent of the total respondents are not able to give answer in either way.

In Table 4, respondents were asked to name the nature of changes brought about by modern political institutions.

Table 4: Response patterns of Respondents to the question- “Name the nature of changes brought by modern political institutions?”

Categories of Respondents	Role of Buliang has been diminished	Brought development in village	Total
Buliangs	31 (44.28%)	39 (55.71%)	70 (100%)
Villagers	33 (47.14%)	37 (52.85%)	70 (100%)
Total	64 (45.71%)	76 (54.28%)	140 (100%)

Category-wise analysis of respondents in the Table 4 reveals that 44.28 per cent of the Buliangs have said that with the introduction of modern political institutions the role of traditional leaders in the village administration have been diminished up to some extent. 55.71 per cent of Buliangs have said that modern political institutions have brought various developments to the village. In case of villagers, more than half of the respondents (52.85%) have agreed that modern political

institutions have brought about development in the village and the rest (47.14 per cent) of the villagers said that with the introduction of modern political institutions the role of traditional leaders in the village administration have been diminished.

Conclusion

Thus, the Apatani society has developed a well effective indigenous village council that handles the disputes and internal affairs mainly at the village level. Though the modern socio-political and economic institutions have brought certain changes in the proceeding of the traditional village council system, yet till today the village council is performing its socio-religious functions almost in the same ways as it was earlier. Some important festivals like Myoko cannot be performed without the involvement of Buliang. As such, traditionally and culturally, the Buliangs continue to have relevance till today, but politically their role has been diminished.

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