

RELEVANCE OF NAGA TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF SUMI NAGA TRIBE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relevance of the traditional political institution of the Sumi Naga tribe in contemporary times. This paper argues that Chieftainship which is the traditional political institution of the Sumi Nagas' have an important role in the village governance despite the adverse impact on the institution due to elements of colonialism and modern democratic institutions. The study found that majority of the people is in favor of the continuation of the Chieftaincy institution. Peaceful governance, stability, culture, identity, institutional trust was some of the reasons highlighted by the respondents for their support towards the traditional institution. However, at the same time, respondents were of the opinion that traditional authorities were not transparent and accountable when it came to the utilisation of development funds. Lastly, people also revealed that governance under the traditional institutions is compatible with democracy due to the presence of democratic features like consensus decision-making process and public participation.

KEYWORDS: Traditional political institution, Chieftaincy, Sumi, Naga, Democratic governance

INTRODUCTION

What are traditional political institutions? We define them broadly as institutions whose legitimacy is based in part on their association with customary modes of governing a community. These institutions are political in the sense that they make decisions regulating and providing for the collective, and they are traditional in the sense that they are popularly believed to be connected to custom (Baldwin and Holzinger, 2019: 2). It also refers to the indigenous political system or arrangements whereby leaders with proven track records are nominated, appointed and installed in accordance with the provisions of their native laws and customs (Malami 1978 as cited in Abdulqadir, 2016: 2). Traditional political institutions encompass a wide range of entities, for instance village-level Shura councils in Afghanistan to the Zulu monarchy in South Africa (ibid.).

Traditional political institutions still occupies a great deal of importance in the rural areas of Nagaland since the village administration of most of the Naga tribes still primarily revolves around their traditional political institutions. Nagaland is among the few states² where the implementation of three-tier Panchayati Raj system has been exempted under article 243M(2) of the Indian constitution. Therefore, though it has adopted the system of electoral democracy at the state level, administration at the village level continues to revolve around their traditional political institutions. There have been efforts towards the institutionalisation and modernisation of village

administration through the passage of various acts, most prominently the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978, which was amended as the Nagaland Village Council Act 1978 by the Nagaland Village and Area Council (Second Amendment) Act 1990. The nomenclature of the Act was amended again by the Nagaland Village Council (fourth amendment) Act 2009 as the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act 1978 to give legal status to the tribal councils constituted under Naga customary practices and usages (Ao, 2019: 170). However, adoption of such acts was not intended at abolishing or replacing the traditional political institutions with modern institutions. On the contrary the adoption of such acts has resulted in the assimilation of the traditional and modern institutions for the governance of village administration.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF SUMI TRIBE

The state of Nagaland has been put under a unique and special category in Indian constitution, provided in Article 371(A). This is in order to safeguard the culture, tradition and ways of life of the Nagas'. Nagaland and Nagas' are known for its myriad tribes and rich culture and tradition. There are 17 recognised tribes as well as many sub-tribes in the state with its own tradition and system of governance distinct from each other. Writing on the life and culture of the tribes of the then Naga Hills district of Assam, Verrier Elwin notes: "Naga society presents a varied pattern of near-dictatorship and extreme democracy. There is a system of hereditary Chieftainship among the Semas and Changs. The

Konyaks have very powerful chiefs or Angs who are regarded as sacred and whose word is law; before the greatest of them, no commoner may stand upright". (Elwin, 1962:6-7)

Sumi village administration revolved around a hereditary Chieftainship system. Though there is ambiguity regarding the origin of this institution, according to John Sema the common understanding is that like other traditional practices or institutions hereditary Chieftainship among the Sumis might have grown out of the needs of the community, which in due course of time because of its utility became an established norm (Sema, 2013: 21). According to him, Tukukha (Chief of Michimi village), who is considered perhaps the first Chief of the Michimi village, before his death, declared his eldest son to succeed him as Chief upon his death. According to him, the Chief might have taken such a decision with far-sighted thoughts to prevent any claim to Chieftainship by others. Moreover, since almost the entire land and properties belonged to the Chief, it might have necessitated that the post of Chieftainship to be hereditary to prevent power and resources of the Chief passing outside of their family lineage or clan (Op.cit., 2013: 12).

SUMI CHIEFTAINCY IN PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

The Chief in the pre-colonial period enjoyed and performed a wide variety of legislative, executive, judicial, and military responsibilities. Further, the Chief not only carried out political and social duties but also performed various religious rituals, usually performed by religious leaders in other tribes (Hutton, 2007: 151). This dual role played by the Chief further enhanced the status of Chief among the villagers, as the position of Chief was considered not only a political institution but also a sacerdotal institution³. In the village's administration, the Chief presided over all the matters of the village. He was the chief administrator and commander in chief during peace and wartime. In the administration of justice, the Chief along with village elders known as 'Chochumi' presided over the village court to settle disputes among the villagers. The village court settled all cases whether civil or criminal in nature and their verdict was final and binding (Op.cit., 2013: 46). Being the Chief of the village he owned most of the village land as a result of which he enjoyed great influence in the decision-making process of the village⁴. However, unlike the oppressive rule that is normally associated with the monarchical system, the Chieftainship system among the Sumi tribes is well respected and revered by the villagers and being the Chief of the village, it was his duty to look after the welfare of the villagers and act as the protector and provider to his followers. In return, he is obliged for certain privileges from his followers like free labour to prepare, cultivate and harvest his jhum fields.

Sumi's like the Zulu tribes in South Africa believe in the sacred case to select the successor who should be of noble or royal blood. As a result any would-be heir to the post of Chieftainship should be from the royal blood (Op.cit., 2013: 25). The process of succession of Chieftainship is hereditary. It passes from father to eldest son. Further, the claim for Chieftainship is not confined to only one clan. Therefore, we can find Chief from different Sumi clans like Swu, Chishi, Yephthomi etc (ibid.). The future Chief of the villages in Sumi villages is expected to be a capable, rich, intelligent and a benevolent person, a good orator, a warrior and a courageous person to lead and command the respect and obedience from his followers. He is also expected to be well versed with the customary practices and laws of the tribe and should be a married person (Op.cit., 2013: 23). There is no prescription of age, however, in case the heir apparent is minor, the mother of the heir or any relative from the clan is expected to take up the responsibility of the day-to-day affair of the society until he attained maturity. The position of the Sumi Chief is that of both autocratic and benevolent in nature. He is autocratic in the sense that the Chief ruled by himself arbitrarily with the assistance of his council members. His words were the law of the land. He acted as the chief judge; administrator and commander in chief during war time (Op.cit., 2013: 26). He is also benevolent in the sense that villagers for their obligation and obedience expect him to take care of them, provide general protection and extend all possible support in times of crisis/scarcity (Muir 1969 as cited in Brul 1980: 124).

Among the Sumi tribe, setting up a new village holds great significance since it leads to the emergence of new Chiefships. Unlike in other tribes like Konyak tribe where one Chief rule over several villages, among the Sumi tribe one village is under one Chief or in some cases under two or three Chiefs. Most importantly, the new Chief enjoys a similar status and position like the old Chief. According to John Sema new villages were usually founded to meet the requirement and address the villagers' needs. For instance, problems of scarcity of resources due to overpopulation forced the leaders to search for fertile land leading to the migration of some sections of the villagers to new place. Secondly, quarrels among the villagers or quarrel between the brothers of the Chief or the desire of the Chief's son to be Chief himself independent of his father led to founding of new villages and thereby emergence of new Chiefship (Op.cit., 2013: 22). It is because of such migration from the Chief lineage to carve out a new village of their own, especially by his sons that we find Sumi villages are small as compared with the villages of other Naga tribes (Davis 1891 as cited in Elwin 1969: 373).

IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON SUMI CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION

After some initial setbacks, the British with the passage of time subsequently established their control over the Naga Hills. After the occupation of the Naga Hills, the British divided it into three zones. a) Administered areas b) Political control areas c) Area beyond political control (Shakespeare, 1929: 163). The British adopted a non-intervention policy while dealing with the Naga tribes as a result Nagas' were allowed to carry out their own system of administration based on their traditional political institutions. Though there was least intervention policy adopted by the British towards the Naga tribes, however the British occupation did lead to changes upon the Sumi Chieftainship institution which are discussed.

Before the coming of the British, every Naga village were functioning as an independent nation, however, with the British control over most of the Naga territories, the Naga villages lost their sovereign status, and they became subordinate to the British government. The British further introduced the post of Dobashi which greatly impacted the power and the status of the Chief. The word 'Dobashi' is not a Naga word. It is a word coined during the period of British administration. It has an Assamese and Hindi origin. The word 'Do' means two and 'basha' means language. Therefore Dobashi is the name given to a Naga elder who knows two languages, i.e., the Naga tribal dialect and the language of the British (Ao, 2019a: 918). Initially, Dobashis were appointed by the British government to act as a medium of communication between the British officers and the native leaders. Over time the British gave more power to the extent of allowing them to hear cases of the villagers, (Op.cit.,2013: 48) thereby encroaching upon Chief's power.

In terms of administration of justice, the Chief and his elders became incompetent to try any civil and criminal cases as the first class magistrate took over their roles. Thus, the Chiefs who enjoyed unlimited power in the pre-colonial period were confined to maintaining law and order and collecting house taxes from their respective villages. Even in civil cases, if the other party was not satisfied with the decisions of the village Chief and his elders, they took the cases to the district court or to a higher court. Thus the position of the Chief was relegated below the position of the Dobashi who were originally supposed to be only the language mediator between the administrators and the people (Op.cit., 2013: 48).

CHIEFTAINCY IN POST-COLONIAL NAGALAND

The Chieftaincy institution has been the embodiment of political power in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. However, the traditionally unfettered powers of Chiefs have undergone transformation as a result of formal colonial rule and the introduction of parliamentary democracy after Indian independence. Further, the introduction of Nagaland

Village and Area Council Act 1978 also had an impact on the Chieftainship system. For instance, under this act, the government of Nagaland is the sole authority to grant recognition or withdraw recognition of villages. Thus the governance of the village was brought under the supervision of the state government. The term of the village council was fixed to 5 years and the act also made the provision of appointment of village council Chairman who acted as the head of the village administration. However no provision has been made that prevents the Chief from occupying the village council Chairmanship post. Thus we see in some Sumi villages Chief occupying the post of Chairman as well.

A closer analysis of the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act of 1978, one can find that the act did not in any way drastically change the working of the village administration under the traditional political intuitions. The act brought about some structural changes in the working of the traditional institutions like the term of the council member was fixed to five years, laying down the criteria of qualification and disqualification of members to the village council etc. All these measures were adopted not with the intention to control this institution but was done with the intention of bringing some kind of uniform pattern of village administration across the state. The act was also an effort at institutionalisation and give legal recognition to the Naga traditional political institutions. This can be seen when we analyse the act where the word 'in accordance with the customary practice' has been placed in many of the important clauses of the act. An important aspect of the Act of 1978 was that it made an effort to encourage the participation of women in village administration. Women in Sumi villages like in other tribal societies were excluded from the decision making process of the village administration. Though the act did not provide any reservation of seats for women in the village council, it provided 25 per cent reservation of seats in Village Development Board (VDB) an important body under the village council. With the spread of education and awareness without reservation also there are some Sumi villages where women have been selected in the village council as members⁵. However, the extent of their participation and influence in the decision making process is debatable.

METHODOLOGY

This section highlights a review of the research design:

SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTION

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in collecting data. Primary data were obtained from both questionnaire administration and personal interviews. Data derived through questionnaire administration was supplemented by data collected by interviewing key informants. Secondary data were generated on the basis of

extensive literature survey and sources such as books, journals, reports, and newspapers.

SAMPLE DESIGN

Using purposive sampling method four Sumi villages namely Lumami, Khukeyi Lukhai, Khetoi and Khewoto under Zunheboto district in the state of Nagaland, India were selected. The target population of the study included the villagers, Chiefs and village council members. Altogether a total of 120 respondents were purposively selected from the four sampled villages.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data from the survey was analysed using simple method of calculation. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews was transcribed, translated and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This portion presents the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data that was collected with the standardised structured questionnaire and personal interviews.

On whether they support the continuation of traditional political institutions, 90 per cent of the respondents answered in the affirmative. Some of the reasons given by the respondents for their support of the Chieftainship institution is that they associate it with their tradition, culture and identity. Apart from it, they also pointed out that governance under this institution has kept the unity and harmony among the villagers since time immemorial. Majority of them are against the idea of introducing elections for the selection of members of the village council. They opined that the introduction of electoral politics for the election of their representative in the State Legislative Assembly has created division among family members and villagers on party line and candidate choice. If the same election system is introduced for the selection of Chairmanship and other posts under village council it will further divide the village which will be detrimental to the harmonious and well-knit family like co-existence among the villagers. They also pointed out that selection of leaders under the traditional practice to some extent is based on merit since within the village everyone gets familiarise with the capability of each other and thus they have an idea as to whom should be chosen to act as their representatives in the village council. In most occasion those persons who are regarded to be competent are selected. The selection process under the traditional institution enables even the persons from humble background to be appointed as council members based on their capability and competence. Emphasising this, one of the respondents said that the modern election process is a zero-sum game where there will be loser and winner and this creates enmity among the supporters and the candidates. However, under the selection process, though there might be some argument regarding the selection of some members, and

they might be favoritism in the selection process. However, once selection is done there is complete support and cooperation among the villagers. This will not be the case in election process since once elected the candidates will mostly think of looking after his support base rather than working for the benefit of the village as a whole.

On the question of suitability of traditional political institution for village governance, 85 per cent answered that it was suitable while only 7 per cent responded that it was not suitable. But at the same time they also emphasised that some changes need to be brought about in the functioning of this institution to make it more efficient according to the changing times⁴. For instance one of the respondent opined that the working of the village governance is becoming complex, specially relating to availing government funds and schemes. Therefore villages where the Chief and council members are not well versed and qualified are not able to properly handle those issues effectively which in turn affects the beneficiaries the most. Similarly, another respondent pointed out that those villages where council members are not well qualified are often intimidated by the government officials on the issue related to fund allocation and are often at their mercy. On the other hand, those villages where council members are qualified can judiciously use their position and negotiate better with government officials in terms of allocation of funds and can bring various government schemes in the village. In addition to fully avail schemes and funds from the government selection of more educated persons in important committees needed to be encouraged.

On whether they think the traditional authorities have a role to play in village development, 74 per cent of the respondents answered in the affirmative and 26 per cent answered in the negative. Traditional authorities have been tasked to spearhead development and progress in their various communities; therefore; it comes as no surprise that most of the respondents are of the view that traditional leaders have a very significant role to play in the development of their various communities. On the question of utilisation of village development funds, 60 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that the traditional authorities were not transparent and accountable. One of the respondent pointed out that most of the villagers are hardly aware of the funds being utilised. Similarly there was accusation of funds meant for the villagers being utilised by the Chief for his personnel benefits. It was also divulged by many of the respondents that there exists a strong nexus between traditional authorities and government officials. As a result, funds meant for the village were being siphoned off. This relationship has resulted in developmental activities being affected and beneficiaries not getting their dues.

On the question of trust towards the traditional authorities, though there is growing mistrust on the issue of transparency and accountability still then majority of the villagers trust the traditional authorities (78 per cent) and believes that most of them work to their best of abilities for the greater good of the community. The reason for such high level of trust is due to the easy accessibility of the traditional authorities by the villagers to share their problems and grievances. Moreover, social capital which is considered to foster trust in institutions exists in the villages. Interpersonal trust among the villagers has spilled over to trust in traditional institution.

On the issue of whether traditional authorities should or should not engage in state electoral politics, 65 per cent of the respondents feel that traditional authorities should engage in electoral politics. Having close relations with the political representatives will help the villagers in availing development funds and other welfare schemes of the government. While those who are against it are of the view that electoral politics only creates division in the villages. Engagement in politics will pose a serious threat to the unity and solidarity that exists among the villagers. It will also undermine the integrity and legitimacy of the institution. On the question of lack of visibility of women representation in the village council, 50 per cent of the respondents highlighted custom and tradition as the main reason behind lack of women representation where as 20 per cent of the respondents said that women themselves do not show much interest and stay away from village politics. Another 20 per cent said that due to rigidly of mindset of the villagers women are not able to participate in the village administration even though some are more capable than their male counterpart.

Discussion of traditional political institution in modern period will not be completed without having analysed the relationship and compatibility between traditional political institutions and democracy. This issue has been thoroughly analysed by different scholar through their research work in the region where traditional institutions were and are in prominence. Scholars like Mamdami (1996), Ntsebeza (2005) and Hariri (2012) highlighted the non-compatibility of democracy and traditional institutions since they find the latter to restrict individuals right of citizens and inhibit the progress of development of democratic states. However such argument has been challenged by Osabu-kle (2000), Oomen (2005), Logan (2013) who based on their empirical evidence highlighted the compatibility of traditional political institutions and democracy. Similarly on the question on whether governance of Sumi village under traditional political institution (chieftainship) is compatible with democracy. Overwhelming 90 per cent answered affirmatively. According to the respondents governance under traditional institution may not have the features of modern

democracy but when it comes to actual functioning, governance under the traditional institutions is compatible with democracy due to the presence of democratic features like consensus decision-making process and public participation.

CONCLUSION

The study has sought to examine the relevance of the Chieftaincy institution of the Sumi Naga tribe in contemporary times. At the end of the study, it was established that the traditional authority system is still relevant in contemporary times as people still support, trusts and finds it suitable for village governance. It was also established that traditional authorities are pivotal in the development of village life. However, it is to be noted that the issue of transparency and accountability persists when it comes to utilisation of funds which does not augur well for good governance. The study confirmed the necessity for the Chieftaincy institution to be improved in order to keep up with the changing trends of modern democratic society.

NOTES

¹ As per Article 243M of the Constitution of India, State of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram,

Sixth Schedule Areas and Hill areas of Manipur are exempted from application of Part IX of the Constitution.

² Naga society in the pre-colonial period was very superstitious. Therefore, they strictly adhered to all the social and religious instructions their leaders gave without much resistance for there was fear that non-adherence to it would bring calamities to their family and the community as a whole.

³ The influence of the Chief in Sumi village varies from village to village. The power of the chief depends on the socio-economic and political status of the Chief.

⁴ Kukhai-Lukhia and Lumami village of Sumi tribe has selected women as council members

⁵ Changes like more transparency, participation of women and youth in village council

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