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Impact of Panchayati Raj System on traditional system of Governance: A study of the Kebang system of the Adis

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ABSTRACT

The Panchayat system provided by North East Frontier Agency Panchayati Raj Regulation of 1967 was structurally similar to those prevalent in other part of the country. Along with decentralization of power, the statutory Panchayat in NEFA sought to bring a uniform political practice throughout the territory by introducing integrated political system. The introduction of Panchayat has brought about significant impact on the Kebang of the Adis. The present status with certain developed structural plans and operating procedures reflected the changes it has undergone over the years. The changes are imminent in the process of the decision making, process in deriving mass consensus and the method of proceedings with overall changes in its structures and organisation. The kebang still exist and serves as social mechanism of a local variety for fulfilling political, social and economic affairs in a collective way in the respective villages. The study is an attempt to provide an insight into the changes and continuities that has crept over the years in tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh.

Key Words : Statutory Panchayat, Kebang system, Traditional conventions, Customs, Decision making

INTRODUCTION

The *Adis,* divided into different groups on the basis of lineage, migration pattern, territorial consideration and accent of spoken language inhabits mainly in East Siang, Upper Siang, East and northern part of West Siang and western part of Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The different groups are the *Minyongs, the Pasis*, the *Padams, the Milangs, the Shimongs, the Tangams, the Boris, the Bokars, the Karkos, the Ashimgs, the Pailibos, the Ramos, the Panges* and *the Komkars.* They are known for closely knitted society cooperating among themselves in various ways based on clan, sub-clan affiliation and association with different social institutions such as *Kebang* (village council), *Riglap* (traditional mutual cooperation), etc. There is no social stratification as ruling class or subject class in the society. All are considered equal in the society. They normally live in multi-clan villages. The clan or exogamous sect among the *Adis* is known as *Opins or Oli*. Each clan and its sub-clans normally trace their descent from one common ancestor. In their social life, every family feels it duty to support its fellow members of the village but, the influence of clan, inter-clan and sub-clan division or alignment is also felt in the social life particularly when there is a misunderstanding or quarrel between the members of the different clans and sub-

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clans. The social organization is patriarchal and patrilineal and sons inherit the property of the family. The family known as *Rutum* is the smallest unit in the structure of the society. The senior most man in the family is the head and the final authority. It is his duty to arrange the marriages of his sons and daughter. He could purchase or dispose properties including land for the welfare of the family. He could distribute his property equally among his sons. However, the family authority is not absolute. It has to get the blessings of the village community in issues such as performing rituals, agricultural operations, marriages, etc. Hence, the head of the family normally consults clan fellows and the elders of the village council, so that, they should have prior knowledge of such matters. It is only in the routine undertakings that concerns only family members go without any prior approval of the community.

The British penetration into the region brought in far-reaching effects of great magnitude on the institutions and structures of the traditional society. The system of appointing *Gam or Gaonbura*, political interpreter, and political *jamadar* are new for the *Adis* and other tribes alike. Under the Assam Frontier (Administration of justice) Regulation of 1945, the age-old authority of village councils, headman, and chiefs wherever existed, were formally recognized as village authority and vested with the task of maintaining peace and order within their jurisdiction. The prominent and influential village elders (*Kebang Abu*) were spotted and appointed by the administration as *Gam* thereby created formal leaders in the village. The imposition of statutory organ in the customary institutions (*Kebang)* and official interference in the community administration led to cracks in traditional institutions leading to gradual degeneration of village democracy and cohesiveness based on customary conventions.

Another round of transformation in the *Adi* society took place with the introduction of Panchayati Raj in 1967 and the subsequent election to various posts of the Panchayat bodies. This ushered, at least in principle, to emergence of formally and democratically elected leaders drawn from comparatively younger generation. These emerging leaders of the panchayat bodies become instrumental in the decision making process relating to the developmental programmes and the developmental priorities. Besides, the emergence of party politics has brought about further transformation in the society in the form of politicization of the village community and legitimization of the majority decisions undermining the traditional conventions. This led to ruptures in loyalty, cooperation and over all changes in the functions and composition of the traditional institutions such as *Kebang, Riglap,* etc.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both documentary and interview technique supplemented by both primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected from the *Adi* inhabiting areas of Arunachal Pradesh by undertaking field study through direct interview method by discussing the village elders, panchayat members and the *Kebang abus*. For the secondary sources, various publications, reports and some related works on the area have been referred for clear understanding of the problems.

The Kebang :

The society of the *Adis* is largely conforms to the basic democratic norms. There is no social stratification as ruling class and subject class or any institutions of centralized authority which could claim absolute allegiance from its members. The society is an integrated whole within which all

social institutions are concerned with welfare of the corporate whole as a single entity with politics, religion and economy overlapping one another. The social life is characterized by equality, mutual respect, sharing and an acceptance of obligation to work collectively for greater social interest regulated by spontaneously evolved traditional self-governing institution or village council called *Kebang.* The *Kebang* organized on pyramidal or hierchical order from village level to the tribe as a whole is the highest authority of socio-cultural and politico-administrative institution that regulate the social order based on collective and cohesive social ethos. This institution symbolizes the traditions, norms and values such as belief in consensus, inclusion, reciprocity, fairness and trust, etc., and facilitates cooperation and collective ethos of the people. In brief, the *Kebang* as an institution is a complex or composite body of administrative, developmental, juridical and welfare mechanism of the *Adis* to deal with mundane day to day activity of the community.

Nature of Organization:

The organization of the *Kebang* is Pyramidal or hierchical. Based on the jurisdiction of its operations the kebang can be broadly categorized into three kinds: *Dolung Kebang* (village council), *Bango Kebang* (inter-village council) and *Adi Bane Kebang* earlier known as *Bogum-Bokang Kebang* (the council of the whole *Adi* tribe). The *Dolung-Kebang* is the strongest and the smallest administrative institution. It look after all the administrative, developmental, judicial and welfare activities of the village. The number of cases and functions of *Dolung-Kebang* is more than that of the other two *Kebang i.e.* the *Bango and Adi Bane Kebang*. It is more organized and effective. On the basis of the issues taken up for deliberations, the *Dolung Kebang* can be further grouped into two; *Atek Kebang and Bane Kebang.* The *Bane Kebang* is the meeting of all the villagers to discuss and resolve the socio-political, administrative, socio-economic and religious matters concerning the individual and village as a whole. Every case whether a case of disputes or misunderstanding between the persons when brought to the *Kebang* for justice become *Bane-Kebang.* The *Bane Kebang* is convened only when the *Atek-Kebang* fails to resolve the case. But in case of village administration and welfare activities, the cases directly fall under the jurisdiction of *Bane-Kebang.* On the contrary the *Atek-Kebang* is convened when there arises disputes abruptly between the individuals and groups. The attendance of members in this *Kebang* is voluntary. However, in both the cases, in modern days, the presence of *Dolung* secretary or witness is necessary and decision made has to be made known to others.

The next higher level is known as *Bango-Kebang*. A number of villages falling within a Geographical location or demarcation constitute the *Bango-Kebang* which is comprises of two or more villages depending on their proximity. At present there are thirty four *Bangos* in the *Adi* area of Arunachal Pradesh. All the active members of the *Dolung Kebang* automatically become the members of *Bango-Kebang* and take part in its proceedings. The *Bango Kebang* takes up all the cases of inter village level such as sharing of river water, village boundary, general welfare of the area, etc.

At the top is the *Adi Bane Kebang* (council of the *Adi* tribe). All the prominent *Gams* and *kebang abus* of the different *Bango*s, public leaders and elite automatically becomes the member of *Adi Bane Kebang*. Since most of the issues are settled in the *Dolung Kebang* and *Bango-Kebang*, very few cases go to this *Kebang.* Hence, the existence of this apex body is not so much felt by the common folk. Though an informal body, it is generally regarded as the *Adi* council. The representative put forward the problems and issues for apex discussions. This *Kebang* takes up the major issues concerning its unity and integrity, peace and harmony of the entire tribes or sub-

tribes. Development plan and policies relating to indigenous tradition, culture, religion, language, etc., are discussed and chalked out at this level of *Kebang*. The *Adi Bane Kebang* even passes resolution on the issues which concern the Adis as a whole and forwards the same to the government. Though the origin of *Kebang* is traced back to the very beginning, the present system of *Kebang* got systematized in line of modern administration during British period for the maintenance of frequently disturbed inter-village peace in the area. At its first session, held at Pangin (East Siang), some important proposals for social reforms - abolition of slavery, child marriage, excessive punishment, and superstition were tables for open discussion. In course of time, the *Adis* accepted the idea of abolition of slavery, child marriage, superstition, etc., without any hesitation.

Membership:

There is no restriction on the person to become member in the *Kebang.* All the adult male members of the village naturally become active members of the *Kebang* on reaching adulthood. The test of adulthood among the *Adis* is based on the three considerations physical, mental and sexual. However, an adult male may be temporarily debarred from attending *Kebang* under certain taboos such as one bitten by snake, father of a child up to a week of its birth, etc. Theoretically, every woman is also a member of the *Kebang* and presence of women in the *Kebang* is not a taboo. However, the participation of women in the *Kebang* is very limited owing to patriarchal and patrilineal society. The role of male is predominant in almost all the activity. Secondly the girl after marriages goes away to other clans or village and as such, they are not permanent members of the village. But women are allowed to voice her grievances or where women feel it necessary, she can make her voice heard and her opinion felt in the *Kebang*

Nature and Process:

Traditionally, all the elderly and influential orators of the village are respected as the *Kebang Abus* (village elders). The *Kebang Abus* become *Kebang Abus* because of their own genius, knowledge and integrity. The leadership is collective one. All the adult male members of the village are its member and equally participate in the process of deliberations and decision making process. In the process of deliberations, matters of interest and importance are discussed, debated and argued in detail. The deliberation goes as long as the consensus is reached to a definite conclusion or arrived at an agreeable decision among the members. In any *Kebang,* generally matters are put into and moved by the experienced members. All the members' present in the session are given opportunity to stand up and speak out. The criteria for reaching the consensus are basically based on customary law and on that basis the decision is made. In the process, customary laws are thoroughly interpreted and in certain cases, the decisions of the past are also referred. The verdict of the *Kebang* is binding on both contending parties. The *Kebang* penalizes the convict to pay *Ajeng* or fines or compensations, depending on the intensity or gravity of crime.

In the matters relating to developmental and community functions, such as the construction of village community hall, community fencing, bridges, hunting, celebrating festivals and even in extending social help or assistance to person in distress, detail discussion are made by the members present in the *Kebang*. They collectively check out the plan for action to be taken on the matters and distribute responsibilities and functions to all. Therefore, howsoever it may be classified into different tiers; the functionality remains almost same, except in certain specific functions that a particular tier performs.

Functions:

The *Kebang* directs all the activities in the villages, looks after day to day administration and involve itself in all the activities that may or have effect the villages *or* community as a whole. It is a complex and composite body functioning as institution of administrative, developmental, juridical and welfare mechanism for desired social order. The *Kebang* has the power to regulate all aspect of the community and individual life according to the set code of conduct and to punish those who transgress the codes. It derives its power and authority from the age old customs and traditions. It is supported not only by social but also by supernatural sanctions. The *Kebang* as a "court of justice" interpreted and adjudicate cases as per the customary laws. All disputes between clans, families, groups and individuals over sharing of properties, ownership, money suit, debt, non clearance of dues, misappropriation, causing injury, divorce, elopement, adultery, rape, theft, cheating, robbery, murder, etc., are settle in the *Kebang*. Punishment and fines are awarded to the wrong doers according to the nature of the crimes.

Besides the maintenance of law and order, the *Kebang* perform various developmental activities. It decides when and where to clear the jungles for cultivation, when and in what manner, the festivals and taboos are to be observed, when to conduct community hunting, fishing and so on. It extends relief and help to person in distress. It takes up and decides the matter like the construction of community hall and maintenance of bridges, tracts within the village boundary, the community fencing, clearing of jungles for Jhum cultivation, community hunting and fishing, celebration of festival such as *Solung, Etor, Mopun,* etc. At the same time, it takes up various welfare measures for the society in general and to the individual member in particular. Such measures having welfare orientations seek to provide the minimum needs and social security to the individual of the community. The welfare function includes extension of relief and help to the needy and distressed such as widow, orphan, old couple, family bedeviled by misfortune, etc. The *Kebang* being an institution of development, welfare, judicial, and administrative dispense is also instrumental in fostering collective efforts to attain collective social ends.

Introduction Of Statutory Panchayat And Its Implications :

The Panchayati Raj system was introduced in North-East Frontier Agency (Arunachal Pradesh) in 1969 under the recommendation of D. Ering Committee of 1967 constituted in 1964. The Regulation (NEFA Panchayati Raj Regulation, 1967) provides for different Panchayat bodies at different level following all India pattern of three tier system. The village councils were accorded the status of Gram Panchayat at village level, Anchal Samiti at the Block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. The Regulation did not provide for a separate Gram Panachayat. It simply stated that a Gram Panchayat means a village authority constituted under the Assam Frontier (Administration of justice) Regulation, 1945. This is in reality, mean that the existing traditional village councils were to be regarded as Gram Panchayat. Besides, the Regulation also provides for Agency Council at the territorial level to link with Panchayat bodies in absence of regular legislative assembly in the beginning. The Regulation has been amended six times subsequently in the year 1970, 1971, 1980 and 1992. Except for the amendment of 1971, other amendments brought about minor changes in the Regulation. The Regulation aims at establishing the Panchayat system of local self government and investing the various bodies with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as unit of self-government and provide opportunity to people to take active part in the development administration of NEFA.

The introduction of statutory Panchayat has brought about significant impact on the *Kebang*

of the Adis. The concepts such as majority votes, Adult franchise, representation, election, equal participation, etc., which are new to tribal polity enter the village politics. The *Kebang* laden with rigid customs, traditional conventions in its orginal form has developed certain technicalities and formalities to deal with the present day problems. The changes are reflected in the process of the decision making, method of deriving consensus and proceedings.

The *Kebang* before the introduction of statutory panchayats, has the system of membership hierarchy. Person with good knowledge and command over the customary laws and traditional convention were the most influential and emerged as leaders. Further, the influence of a person was determined by traditional inscriptive factors such as status, wealth, clan, and command over the customary laws and traditional conventions in *Kebang*. This got changed and encouraged equal participation of people irrespective of status, wealth, sex, marital status, knowledge of customary laws and convention in the process of the decision-making. It also led to the emergence of new genaration of leaders in the village *i.e.* Gram Panchayat members, Anchal samiti members and Zilla parishad members. With emergence of the new brands of leaders, the cultures of dominating the *Kebang* by old, elderly people, and persons with command over the customary laws and traditional conventions got shadowed to some extent. The new generation of leaders, comparatively of young age and lack knowledge of customary law tend to assume the role of village elders and undermine the age-old institution despite the fact that role of the Gram panchayat members, Anchal samiti members and Zilla parishad members is quite different from the role of village elders. This has created a sense of mutual skepticism, distrust and defiance among the villagers. Also they tend to view every decision of *Kebang* on political lines which has not only created rift but also a vertical division in the otherwise, homogenous and cohesive village hierarchy.

The Panchayati Raj System is not free from party politics though there is no provision of political party system in Panchayat elections. The panchayat elections are normally conducted on party lines which in turn paved the way for the political parties of enter into the village politics. The symbol of political parties though not figure openly, play big role in the elections. This political transition in the sphere of criteria of selecting or electing the leaders at the grass root level is the consequence of action of the major political parties at national level to serve their interest at the grass root level. The Meddling of the political parties in the panchayat elections and village affairs also paved the way for the role of the personality factor and the concepts of "majority vote" in the process of arriving to the consensus. These elements – the role of personality and forcing a decision by majority is because of their linkage with higher level politician. The meddling of party politics in *Kebang* increased the problem and added to it new dimensions which are political in character and led to the development of complicated and complex problems mixed with social and cultural order.

The *Kebang* in its original form operated on the basis of solidarity of village, unflinching loyalty of the individuals to the community, respect for age, experience and the knowledge of village elders. But with the coming of new leaders, authority in the village passed from traditional leaders to official leaders in the economic and political spheres. Traditional leaders retained only socio-religious domination. In consequence, the political solidarity of the village tends to based itself in line of political party and party affiliation. The introduction of Panchayati Raj System also brought about a certain change in the participation of womenfolk, who were neglected due to traditional governance system. As a result of reservation for women under new Act there has been active participation of women in Panchayat elections, which has helped to end the gender bias that existed in the traditional village governance system.

Conclusion :

The introduction of statutory Panchayat heralded a new era in the political development of Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA). With the effort to attain the objectives of democratic decentralization, it changed the political outlook and trained the people to think in terms of districts and territory instead of village community. The changes in the political outlook of the people have consequent effect in the traditional political institutions. This led to the emergence of innumerable cases of complex and complicated nature of socio-cultural and political order in the society which in turn makes the traditional institutions evolved certain legal technicalities and formalities to deal with mundane day to day activities. The introduction of modern participatory democratic institutions brought with it many new concepts such as election, representation, adult franchise, majority votes, etc., into the system of *kebang* thereby brought overall changes in the leadership pattern, functional and working of the centuries old traditional *kebang* system of the *Adis.*

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