



INDIGENOUS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN TRANSITION: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The academic and policy oriented studies on decentralization are not new in themselves. Decentralization connotes the transfer of authority – legislative, judicial or administrative from a higher level of government to a lower level. Panchayati Raj system was envisaged as the mechanism for rural development and furtherance of democratic political culture. Panchayati Raj initiate the process of bringing the communities, who were otherwise self-sufficient in their internal organization of governance, to join with the governmental agencies for socio-economic advancement. The introduction of the Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh shadowed the village councils to some extent in certain areas of activities. At the same time it also brought about certain changes in the participation of the women folk, the important segment which so far remained non-participant in the village councils under the traditional governance system. The study is an attempt to provide an insight into the importance of such institutions which are on vogue among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.



KEYWORDS : Democratic decentralization, indigenous institutions, panchayati raj system, governance, change.

INTRODUCTION

The socio-political and economic institutions of the society are the instruments through which it fulfills its needs and aspirations. Society over the time creates, restructure and modifies political, social and economic institutions in accordance with its changing requirements and growing demand and constraints which in turn conditioned and moulds the societal environments. The strengths of the society to overcome crisis, face challenges and fight stagnations depends largely on the vitality of the institutions within its fold and the nature of precision with which the institutions are built. In case of the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh, the institutions are not product of consciously design at any specific point of time (as in structure plan and operating procedures) but evolved spontaneously through generations, without any external force to meet the different social exigencies. One such institutions which was evolved spontaneously and transmitted from generation to generation among the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh for regulating the public life, manage resources, maintaining social order and conflicts resolution is traditional self-governing institution (village councils). These institutions are known by different local names in different tribes and led either by village chiefs or council of elders exercising the authority in council's deliberation. These councils

administered justice in case of disputes or conflicts and also directs developmental and welfare activities within villages. In the realms of social domains these time-tested and time-honored institutions works as a catalyst in maintaining the intrusion of social anomalies and aberrations. Therefore it can be concluded that the art of governance and local administration is not an alien to the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh from the beginning.

Over the years, however, changes have crept in, affecting the traditional status of these institutions, because of amalgamation with various mechanisms for political intergration toward the larger administration such as Assam Frontier (Administration of justice regulation) 1945, and introduction of the Panchayat raj 1967 with objectives to facilitate better governance of the society, meet the growing requirements of the citizens as well as making it people friendly and citizen caring. These led to changes in composition, function, criteria of reaching the consensus, the methods of choosing the leaderships, which further blended the matured political thinking and institutions of the tribal people with certain developed democratic formalities and technicalities, thereby making the system more dynamic and democratic. Hence, the study is an attempt to provide an insight into the importance of such institutions which are on vogue among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. It also aims at discussing the changes that might have crept over the years.

DECENTRALISATION:

The academic and policy oriented studies on decentralization are not new in themselves. Efforts at reducing the power and authority of the central government in favor of decentralized political and administrative structures have been part of the nation building process. In common usage, decentralization connotes the transfer of authority – legislative, judicial or administrative from a higher level of government to a lower level. Essentially, decentralization implies dispersal of power and authority from pinnacle of an organization, while centralization is concerned to maximize the accumulation of power at the top of the organization. Decentralization, hence, could be understood in terms of centrifugal forces in society that aims to transfer the greatest possible part of the community as far away as possible from the centre. The advocates of decentralization stand for greater autonomy and creation of new governmental and non-governmental organizations outside the established administrative hierarchy. These alternative policy options are designed to drastically reduce the role of the state to its minimum essentials. Notwithstanding such familiar plea, it is also recognized that decentralization in itself is not a remedy against all sorts of administrative ills and political problems. Nevertheless, the arguments and justifications for decentralization can be formulated in many different ways. In brief, both normatively and empirically, the idea of decentralization is closely identified with creation of democratic and self-reliant political and economic units as well as effective administrative structure at the grassroot levels.

Decentralization, on the other hand enhances democratic stability. Research conducted by Lipset, Diamond and Linz found that substantial power of local elected councils over community development and services has been a sources of democratic vitality in Botswana. This led them to conclude that the decentralization of state authority and devolution of power to local and regional administrations appears to be an important condition for the development, consolidation and improvement of democracy. It is also true that due to proximity, it is easier for the people to know, defect and act on corruption and abuse of office at the local level than it is at state and federal level. They know the councilors; they can walk up to them and challenge. Indeed, to build a grassroot democratic society, devolution is the only method, which permits maximum popular participation and empowerment at the local levels.

A truly federal system must, therefore not debate whether there is need for decentralization, because it is supposed to be one of its characteristics. As Lijphart found in his study of 21 democracies, there is a strong correlation between federalism and decentralization. Rather, the debate should be over the extend of decentralization. Hence decentralized governance is a precondition for success of participatory democracy.

PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE:

There have been a lot of changes in the administrative thought regarding the planning and management of developmental activities pertaining specifically to the rural areas. In the last two decades or so the changing objectives and settings as well as the target of developmental assistance have rendered obsolete conventional approaches to the planning and implementation of development programmes. Large scale misuse and improper utilization of developmental funds has been a common complain widely noticed. Differential treatments with regard to allocation of funds are equally emphasized as a pertinent cause for unequal regional development leading to popular discontent. Hence, there has been a significant change in the focus of development projects and programmes and in the manner in which development assistance is planned. Accordingly, there has been a shift in the approaches from mechanistic, bureaucratic, top-down models primarily concerned with economic development towards more dynamic, welfares, participatory approaches focusing on human development. The principal reason for this shift of focus is due to widespread dissatisfaction pertaining to allocation of developmental funds and manner in which developmental programmes are being implemented persistence of poverty and inequality in most of the developing countries. It has not been effective in strengthening the capacity. Hence, alternative approaches emphasizing bottom – up models as effective policy choices are made both at the national as well as at state level. Infact, while deliberating over the issue in the Working Group Meeting of DAC at Paris in 1993, it was observed that sustainable development requires a positive interaction between economic and political progress. This connection is so fundamental that participatory development and good governance must be central concern in the allocation and design of developmental assistance.

Governance can be defined as the manner in which authority is organized and exercise in the management of a society's affairs and resources for development. Hence the World Bank's document emphasized that governance is central to creating and sustaining environment which foster strong and equitable development. It should be understood as a broad concept that encompasses the functioning of organizational structures and activities of central government and local authorities as well as the institutions, organizations, and individuals that comprise civil society in so far as they actively participate and influence the shaping of public policy that affects their life. Hence, improvement of local governance is gaining currency. It provides a direct mechanism and opportunity for people to participate in the decision-making process as well as structures of governance.

TRADITIONAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH:

Arunachal Pradesh graduated from NEFA through Union Territory to statehood in 1987 is politically a nascent state situated in the eastern most part of northeast India. It is a home of about 26 major tribes is truly a mosaic of tribal population having distinct social-cultural and linguistic patterns. Despite multifaceted developmental activities that is taking place in the other part of the country, Arunachal still lagging behind in the realm of socio-economic development. Traditionally, all these tribes and sub-tribes are having their own self-governing institutions looking after their local needs of governance. Due to location disadvantages and topographical constraints the tribal groups even today are settled in specific areas and are scarcely migrated to other part of the state. Almost all tribal groups in Arunachal are having their councils. These councils are known differently in different tribes and differed considerably from tribe to tribe. It is known as *Mangmazamabana* or *Tsorgen* among the Monpas; *Buliang* among the Apatanis; *Jung* or *Jhungthong* among the Sherdukpens; *Mele* among the Akas; *Tra-Tungdas* among the singphos; *Khapa* or *Khapong* among the Tangsas; *Ablala* or *Kebaya* among the Idu-Mishmi; *Phrai* among the Kaman Mishmi; *Mokchum* or *Mokchup* among the Khamptis; *Ngothum* among the Noctes; *Wanchoo-Wancha* among Wanchos; *Nyile* among the Nyishis and *Kebang* among the Adis. These village councils, however, are different in their structural organisation and nature of working. The *Kebang* of Adis is a sort of direct democracy while the *Mele* of the Akas or the *Tsorgen* of Monpas is a representative democracy. The Sherdukpen *Jung* or Apatani *Builliang*, on the other hand provide a clan oligarchic model. The village council systems found among the Khamptis,

Noctes, Wanchos, Singphos, and Tangsas can be called chieftaincies. All the systems have a gerontocratic tendency in their constitution and have respect towards age and experience. Despite their typological differences, there are several commonalities in all the tribal self-governing institutions of Arunachal Pradesh. All of them while having certain amount of democratic ethos in their modus operandi, however is gender biased. In all the systems, space for the womenfolk is very negligible. This has been so due to patriarchal nature of the societies. All the systems are base upon the spontaneous loyalty and respect of customs and traditions. Administration of justice has been the common function for all the systems.

The councils are quasi judicial – politico-cultural independent bodies engaged with the task of conflict resolution, decision- making regarding observance of religious rites and rituals, looking after the developmental issues of the village and overall well being of the village population. It also oversees the task of allotment of plots for agricultural purpose, construction of new house, settlement of new comers or for a new village, selection of location for the village school or health centre, etc. These bodies also play a significant role in the matter of settling inter-personal or inter-household disputes. It also looks in to the issues relating marriage, divorce, inheritance of movable property, etc. As it is being observed in case of *Kebang* of Adis, it decides where and when to clear a patch of land cultivation where and how the festivals and the taboos are to be observed, when to go for community hunting an fishing, etc. It shows the intimate relations of the village authority and their control over the population. It also takes up developmental activities like construction of village paths, sources of water-supply; it also caters to the needy at distressed situations. The task of receiving the visitors and dignitaries are also taken care. Thus, looking into the functions of these bodies, it may be said that the tribal groups of Arunachal are having their elaborate self-governing bodies.

PANCHAYATI RAJ IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH:

The Panchayati Raj system was introduced in North-East Frontier Agency in 1969 under the recommendation of D. Ering committee of 1967, constituted in 1964. The area did not have any popularly elected body or Modern Participatory democratic institution till its introduction. The structural organization under the said Act was similar to that of the structure that were existing in other part of the country. At that juncture, Panchayati Raj was envisaged as the mechanism for bringing about political integration through uniform institutional arrangement consequently leading toward facilitation and furtherance of democratic political culture. It also directs to initiate the process of bringing the communities, who were otherwise self-sufficient in their internal organization of governance, to join with the governmental agencies for socio-economic advancement.

The 1967 regulation did not make any separate provision for Gram Panchayat. In the definition, it stated that the village authorities will function as Gram Panchayat. However, subsequently in 1971 an amendment was made to the earlier Act and incorporated the provision for Gram Panchayats. The election to these bodies was to be as per the tribal customary methods. Since the introduction of Panchayati Raj, the PRI bodies were formulated at regular interval till 1992. However due to intervention of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the election could be held and the term of the 1992 bodies were extended upto 1997. Keeping pace with the 73rd amendment, the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Bill 1994 was passed replacing the earlier Act. But, the same was reserved by the Governor for presidential assent as the Bill did not conform to the 73rd Amendment. The Bill of 1994 did not have provision for reservation of seats for SCs in the PR bodies. The state government's rational was that there is almost no SC population in the state (0.87%, 1991 census). The same could not satisfy the central government. As a result, the 1994 Bill was returned in 1995 with several suggestions. The state government incorporated all the recommendations in the 1997 Bill except reservations for SCs and struggled hard to prevail upon the central government pursuing through the political process resulted in the 86th Constitution Amendment Act, 1999. Under this Amendment, Arunachal Pradesh was exempted from the mandatory requirement of reservations of SCs in the PR bodies. The Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Bill, 1997 got presidential assent on 13th April, 2001.

The state has conducted the elections to the PRIs on 2nd April, 2003. Since then, elections to the PRIs bodies are conducted at the regular interval.

PANCHAYATI RAJ VIS-À-VIS TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

The Panchayati Raj intervention has not made significant impact on the traditional self-governing institutions in Arunachal Pradesh. No doubt the authority of the village councils has undergone certain amount of change. It brought about certain changes in the participation of the women folk, the important segment which so far remained non-participant in the village councils under the traditional governance system. As a result of reservations for the women under the new Act there has been active participation of women in Panchayat elections which help to end the gender biasness that existed in the traditional village governance system. The introduction of the Panchayati Raj since the 1967 shadowed the village councils to some extent in certain areas of activities. Though the Panchayat took away the functions related to local area development from the village council, it still continues to have its role as a judicial body. However, due to the influence of the agents of modernization, gradual erosion is taking place, so far as the independence and jurisdiction of the traditional institutions are concerned. Another negative impact of the Panchayati Raj institutions has been the inroad made by politics in to the rural areas affecting the social ethos and causing erosion in the rich culture of tribal rural life. However, there has been not much of noticeable conflict between the two. One of the reasons for this smooth transition could be the recruitment of the elites. Almost the same sets of traditional elites are also the Panchayat members. Hence the possible clash between the village councils and Panchayats has not occurred. Rather, the introduction of the Panchayati Raj over the years has created a new generation of leaders who subsequently have got elevated to the level of state leadership. Both the institutions have worked together as two parallel bodies working in the direction of development of their locales without interference from each other.

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