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GRT AN OVERVIEW ON THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE AMONG THE NAGA VILLAGES

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Abstract:-The North Eastern part of India having rich cultural heritage and indigenous local institutions at different levels speaks the facet of the great culture of our country. Most of these communities had self governing village councils and tribal chiefdoms even during late British period. The tribal were allowed to have institutions in accordance with their traditional customary laws and practices. Therefore, a variety of institutions dominated by the traditional tribal culture with semi-autonomous and self managing indigenous local institutions at different level exist. This paper attempts to describe the local self governing institutions of the Ao /Naga existing in the form of the Village Councils, which still has the traditional ethos in modern local government setting .Basing on such direction, further investigation of Naga society and culture can be undertaken covering each and every tribe that may go a long way.

Keywords: Naga, Self governance, culture, customary law, village council.

INTRODUCTION-

North-Eastern part of India is absolutely a land of tribal people having very rich cultural heritage that speaks the facet of the great culture of our country. The Naga society, proud of its historical base, is tribal in nature. The Nagas belongs to multi ethnic group and sub-group with varied dialects, cultures, customs, traditions and legends. The people of this land have been carrying out some notable sets of social values and good principles. The Naga society is unique in the real sense of the term, as it has been maintaining its social norms and values independently despite various inconveniences and difficulties. (Singh Chandrika, 2008, 19).

The Naga society was unknown to the outside world, before the arrival of the British in the Nagas inhabited areas. The Naga succeeded in maintaining its separate identity because of their existence in the mountainous ranges covered with dense forests that served as a protective zone. No doubt, the early Nagas living near the foot-hills of Assam had some interaction with the Ahom rulers (who tried to subjugate the Nagas, although the Nagas never allowed the Ahoms to establish their sovereignty over them either socially or culturally) (Singh Chandrika, 2008, 19). History bears the testimony that several old cultures and civilisations lost their identities in the mighty wave of subjugation and assimilation by the powerful forces. However, in the case of the Nagas, as far as the cultural and traditional values are concerned, they never lost their original identity. Even during the British rule, the Naga society preserved its socio-cultural norms and kept their social identity intact; despite embracing Christianity and the modern modes of living.

Remarkably, due to lack of contact with the outside world, the social changes in Naga society was very slow. Even with the coming of the British, life for the average Naga did not change drastically from the way their forefathers lived. Thus, the benefits of civilisation were slow in coming; although they did come. The pace of change was slightly accelerated by the arrival of the Christian missionaries; which brought about several significant improvements in the way of living (Horam M, 1997, 20).The missionaries introduced medicines, clothes, dispensaries, education, and of course a new form of believe system. Christianity was thus instrumental in spreading education and promoting group identity among the Nagas(Gokhale,1961, 34-60).Today, Nagaland along with Meghalaya and Mizoram in north eastern region of India are

Christian majority states (Census 2001). The changes in Naga society have been very rapid after their exposure to the outside world, and especially due to the introduction of education. One could observe that although, over the years, the Naga society has undergone changes, they have self-containing values and are generally conscious of the changes in the world around. They are capable of maintaining self-identity till today, while many other counterparts are either extinct or merged with mass milieu in due course of time.

NAGASOCIETYAND GOVERNANCE IN GENERAL/SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE.

Nagaland is known for its myriad tribes with its rich cultural heritage and traditions. There are sixteenth major tribes namely Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Chang, Konyak, Lotha, Sumi, Kachari, Khiamungjam, Kuki, Phom, Pochuri, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchungrü, and Zeliang and numerous other sub-tribes that differ from one another in terms of language, values, customs and traditions or even systems of governance. What is interesting is that all kinds of governance systems are found within such a small geographical area. On Administrative and Governance system of the Nagas Verrier Elwin said: "Naga society presented a varied pattern of near dictatorship and extreme democracy".

For example, there is the *autocratic* system of the *Konyak* tribe where there are *commoners* and the powerful *chiefs* (Anghs) or the hereditary chieftainship system of the Sema tribe where the chief's words are considered law. Then there is the kind of *republican* system of governance of the *Ao* tribe where the citizens of the village have an active role in the affairs of governance and the government is not headed by the hereditary ruler or chief but by the council of elders representing the clans and the family groups in the village.

There is also *extreme democratic* system of governance of the *Angami* tribe where the search for consensus was the norm. The Angami, Lothas, and Rengmas, practiced peculiar type of democracy with a little variation in the nature of composition of political institutions. Thus, *there was no similarity in the system of governance among the Naga tribe, but the spirit of these governing institutions was democratic*. Elwin, remarked that:

.....it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communities than these Nagas. (Elwin Verier, 1969, 324)

The Naga people are bound by strong ties of loyalty to their village and clan which define their identity within specific boundaries of ethnic and linguistic space. Traditionally the family, clan, Khel and village represented the extent of a Naga's concern.

The Nagas are homogenous, self-sustaining and independent with distinct system of village administration, clan distribution, socio-cultural practices and institutions. The village was the highest political unit and the similarity in culture and shared concerns for security gave a broad framework of meaning that loosely held the members together (GoN, 2004). The clusters of villages speaking the same language and ingrained in common culture were concretized as tribal entities during the colonial times and these solidified with the passage of time (Aier, 2008). The social fabric of Naga society is based on village. Each village had a system of governance based on their customary laws with the practical reasons for managing common affairs, maintain law and order, provide justice, and protect the inhabitants from alien aggression. The Naga villages were more democratic in nature and practice than other tribal communities of the world.

Each village was, as it were, a distinct miniature republic, with the necessary (traditional) amenities for the social wellbeing and happiness of the members of that village. Traditionally, each village had a government comprising of a Council of elders, which used to be responsible for village administration. The tenure of the council varied from tribe to tribe; although two broad patterns had been discernible:

(1) Firstly, and the most widespread one was the one in which the clan replaced its representative following demise or on his reaching the age of about sixty years or so, or when the clan families came to the conclusion that their representative was incapable of discharging his duties.

(2) In the second system, the council fixes tenure of thirty years or twenty five years; and all members were replaced within that span of time. There was yet another system, where each village was governed by a hereditary chief, who owned all land and parceled it out to families for cultivation.

A study of the traditional political system of the Nagas reveals the truth that they had enough practical wisdom to manage their affairs in the common interests, and developed timely appropriate social values. Though they were devoid of any written constitution, they used their customs and customary laws for socially cohesive existence. They were loyal and obedient to the village head(s). This is all because the customs were based on long experienced wisdom containing enough social and political values.

Among other Naga tribes the Ao people, who were known for the governing system based on democratic norms, were the first to develop well organized administrative system. A study of ancient political institutions of the Ao tribe shows that the administrative systems of the Ao community were more democratic and well advanced. The traditional Ao villages were the symbol of republican form of government. The entire social and political system of the AOs has been structured under the system of *Putu Menden* (the Council of elders). *Putu Menden* is the highest authority in a given Ao village; a system that originated at *Chungliyimti*, and it is found to be very distinct which is followed even today. The social cohesion and stability achieved by these village communities have succeeded in preserving their traditional values till today. With the advent of the British rule and spread of Christianity, the significance of the village organizations including the *Putu Menden* began to decline. Though the British administrators did a little interference in the local affairs of the Nagas, the new set of rules and

administration, which was imposed on the Nagas by the British, attracted the Nagas towards broadening their mind. Today, considering the importance of their traditional institutions and customary practices, and in order to preserve such practices, the constitution of India has made a special provision by enacting a special article 371 (A) for the Nagas.

NEW GOVERNANCE SYSTEM:

Village councils are an important component of the modern governance system in Nagaland. The local self-governance system of village councils is based on the traditional Naga ways, and it enjoys constitutional sanction vide Article 371 (A) of the Indian constitution. The history records that Naga villages were organized as independent small states or republics. However, there was no uniform legal system of village government in Naga society till 1970. After realising the importance of village government, soon after the formation of the State of Nagaland in 1963, these traditional village councils were restructured. The state government of Nagaland passed an Act known as Nagaland Village Area and Regional council Act in 1970. Thereafter, it was further amended in 1973 and 1978 as Nagaland Village Area council Act with a view to bringing structural uniformity in the Village Council all over Nagaland, and to give legitimacy and recognition to local self-governance. In the past four decades there has been a remarkable extension of the administrative reach to the far-flung corners of Nagaland. In many ways, the organisation of the districts along with general tribe geographical boundaries has provided continuity to traditional tribal practices and linguistic affiliations. While the District Planning and Development Board provide the needed flexibility to ensure a responsive and holistic approach towards development of the district, a linkage to the grassroots through the Village Development Boards (VDB) have been established for delivering the rural development inputs. These linkages have become vital for decentralising governance and decision making in the post-independence and statehood eras.

CONCLUSION:

Today, it can be said that the entire socio-cultural aspects of the Nagas have totally changed. Their socio-cultural life is quite different because of the sudden changes that are taking place around them. There is no aspect of their lives and culture-political, economic, religious, social, linguistic- which have not been touched by change and has not passed through the phases of transition and transformation. Unlike in the days of yore, they are no more isolated from various outside influences. The overwhelming changes brought in recent years were of multi-dimensional nature. In the process some of the factors which have brought rapid change in Naga society are the following.

1. Growth of administration and the development and welfare activities of the Government.
2. Modern education.
3. Christianity.
4. Participation in the Second World War.
5. Greater mobility and decreasing communication gap.
6. Urbanization.
7. Increasing effect of the media.
8. Assembly and parliament election.

All the cultural values and ethos of the Nagas began to disappear gradually with the arrival of the British rule and Christian missionaries in their land, which brought to them a new set of social, political as well as cultural values.

After India's independence and creation of Nagaland State, the scenario totally changed in Nagaland. The introduction of various Acts and Regulations by the Government of Nagaland undermined the authorities of the traditional institutions to a great extent. The creation of Nagaland village and Area Act, 1978 and the Village Development Boards Model Rules, 1980, brought about new agencies began to decline. Today, the *Putu Menden, Council of Elders*, etc., are still in existence, no doubt, but their earlier fervor and enthusiasm are not seen. Their roles and performances are limited to the field of welfare of the people and resolve the petty disputes in villages. The new order ushered in a period of tremendous changes. The main agent of such changes is the government itself. The impact of the modernity on the Naga people as a whole has not only transformed the society affecting the old cultural values and traditional institutions but also changed the character, habits, behavior and mind of the Nagas. There is an urgent need to save Naga culture for the present and upcoming generation, primarily for the young generation so that they are aware of their roots, their identity.

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