



# Working of Indigenous Governing Institution A Study on Apatani Tribe

Dr. Punyo Yarang

Assistant Professor

Rajiv Gandhi University

## Introduction:

In traditional society, there is no formal political organization, no legal and no formal administration. Yet they manage to maintain social order and unity. In such a society, political control that exists is largely expressed through the representatives. The violations of the mores are ordinarily met by restitution and punitive requirements. The nonpolitical controls are also involved in large to induce the offender to make proper amends. Nevertheless, such societies possess their special code of behavior, in other words, a special system of etiquette, moral standard, and kinship. To guide the relations and interactions between members of societies were without some form of specialized mechanism for regulation and integration of group activities. In this society, the mechanism was provided by headmen, the council of elders, chief, and shaman, priests, special clubs such as bachelor's dormitories and so on.<sup>1</sup>

The Apatani knew well that their complex economy and their whole pattern of living could be maintained only if peace reigns in the valley. Peace was assured by clan representatives who in their plurality constituted a kind of village council. Yet there never existed a centralized authority exercising control over the entire tribe. These representatives of a clan are known as *Buliang*. Through the council of *Buliang* the Apatani's were governed from time immemorial. Council member are men of character and ability, who had attained their position either because they were members of a family which owing to its wealth and status always furnished one or two *Buliang* or on account of their personal standing and popularity in the community.

## Objective

This paper is an attempt to understand the working of *Buliang* (indigenous political institution) and its relevance.

## Study Area

The study area is on Ziro valley of Lower Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh. The Apatani settlement of Ziro valley originally consisted of 7 (seven) large villages. They are (1) Hari, (2) Biila (3) Hiija (4) Hangu, (5) Bamin-Michi, (6) Miidang-Tage, and (7) Dutta, but new villages have been established and extended outside the village due to the rapid growth of population and influence of modern lifestyle. The Apatani has its way to organize the social system. They follow the tribe endogamy but clan exogamy. Their homogenizing is maintained through the same language, culture, religion, and customs.

## Literature Review:

Few available literatures have been consulted to understand the socio-cultural background of the Apatani. Haimendorf (1945) was the first visitor and scholar from the outside country who visited Apatani land subsequently for three times. His notes on 'Exploration of eastern Himalayas', 'Diaries of travels in Subansiri region' and 'Ethnographic notes on the tribes in 1945-45' have made systematic notes on the economic, political, and social life of the Apatani.

Haimendorf (1955) "Himalayan Barbary" gives an account of the role of the village council of the Apatani called *Buliang* to settle the dispute with Nyisi tribe.

Haimendorf, (1962) "The Apatanis and their neighbors" describes the functions of the *Buliang* as village government.

Haimendorf, (1980) "A Himalayan Tribe: from cattle to cash" and (1982) "The Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh" describe the impact of rationalized modern administration and modern education on the social and economic life of the Apatani.

Kani (1996) in his book "The advancing Apatani" gives a good account of the socio-political institution of the Apatani. The author presents Apatani socio-political institutions as an insider, therefore it can be said that his book is one of the most reliable works done on Apatani.

## Methodology:

This study is historical and descriptive-analytic. It is based on primary data which has been collected from seven original villages of the Apatani. Village elders and priests are the main sources of primary data for this study. The open-ended intensive interview method has been used as a tool to collect the primary data through field study. It is also based on participant observation as the author herself belongs to the same community of the study area. Therefore it is partly reflective also. Few secondary sources also supplemented to get the conceptual understanding of the indigenous governance system.

## Origin of Buliang:

The institution of *Buliang* is claimed to be as old as the Apatani community itself. According to the oral literature of Apatani, there was chaos all around in Apatani world. Everyone was quarreling among themselves. Men were at war with each other. Animals were at war with birds and among themselves. Earth was at war with the sky. Trees were at war with stones. The fire was at war with water. Chaos prevailed everywhere. This condition compelled men to ponder upon a way out of this situation. This ultimately resulted in the establishment of the institution of *Buliang* in Apatani society. *Sango* and *Hago* became the first *Buliang* of the Apatani. Four types of *Buliangs* were created in the period of *Kolyung-Kolo* (earliest period of evolution) for different functions in society. They are *Kiimer Buliang* (who castrates the male pig), *Kiidi Buliang* (who disposes of the dead body), *Miido Buliang* (who mediate with the sky god), and *Neha Buliang* (who mediate between men).

### Neha Buliang or Buliang

*Neha* means mankind, the mediator between man to man. The purpose of the *Neha Buliang* is to mediate the disputes between man to man and to maintain peace and harmony in the society. The myths of the Apatani reveals the origin of the *Buliang* at *iipyo ganda* (earliest place of evolution) when there was a serious disorder in the society due to war and hostility among the people in absence of law and order. There were quarrels among all the inhabitants of the universe. There were feuds between the sky and the earth, between rocks and plants as well as among human beings. Thus, everybody was at one another's throats and complete chaos prevailed in the universe. Everyone was fed up with the situation that prevailed. Hence, a few persons were asked to volunteer to settle the feuds among different disputants of the universe. The persons, who volunteered to arbitrate the disputes, thus became *Buliangs*. Their decisions were accepted as just and equitable by the disputants. Since then, *Buliang* were accepted as arbitrators of disputes, and their services were availed of for settling disputes to establish peace in the society.<sup>2</sup>

## Structure of Buliang:

As per folklore, the *Buliang* institution arose in response to the chaotic situation at the mythical place of *iipyo*, which the Apatani society underwent in absence of a regulatory authority. It has both social and divine sanctions behind it. *Buliang* is the representative of a clan that inhabits a particular quarter of an Apatani village. In the beginning, some villagers were persuaded to be *Buliangs* to restore order thus giving them authority over the society. They are men of character and ability, drawn from among the members of a phratry of a clan, which, owing to its wealth and status, furnishes one or two *Buliang*. They are proficient in customs, traditions, customary laws, good oratory and personal standing in the society. Nobody has any clear idea about the actual process of their election/selection. However, now a day, the *Buliang* comes from only a particular family in a clan and has thus become hereditary. It is believed that the position of the *Buliang* is an ancestral property. Hence, the father nominates the son to this position who has the ability and have well converse in customs and traditions. But, in general, the eldest son inherits the position. However, there is no strict rule that the eldest son only should be appointed. Occupying the position of *Buliang* depends upon the willingness of the father and the capability of his son. Even the youngest son can hold this position. If the *Buliang* has no sons but only daughters, his place is taken up by a person closest in lineage to him. Thus, the *Buliang* is retained in the same phratry. This shows that the position of *Buliang* is inherited within the family.<sup>3</sup>

In *Buliang* councils, only the male members of the society take part. Women are not even allowed to witness the proceeding of the deliberations except for serving rice wine. But they respect the women in many ways. They exclude women from the council member, as mentioned earlier that *Buliang* become hereditary and they consider it as ancestral property. Therefore, a female cannot inherit the ancestral property as per the customary laws.

The *Buliang* consists of two structures. They are *Buliang* proper who are contributed by powerful families in a clan. The less powerful families of a clan are not left out unrepresented. Hence, one or two representatives are chosen from these less powerful families of a clan. They are known as *Miha Pello*. These *Miha Pellos* are associated with all the deliberations and decisions of the *Buliang*. However, in religious ceremonies, *Miha Pellos* do not receive the same rewards called *Buliang Amang* as the main buliang. For instance, if the *Buliangs* get rupees one hundred as *Amang*, the *Miha Pellos* will get rupees fifty as *Amang*. It may be noted that *Buliang* is the only village council with two structures from its inception.

## Functions of Buliang:

*Buliangs* are collectively upholders of community laws. Though they do not have absolute power, they act primarily as the spokesman of their clan or clan group and not as a village headman invested with absolute authority. Their duties are those of arbiters rather than judges. They do not take action unless they are requested to intervene or the dispute has become a public issue, which must be dealt with by the community as a whole either by mediation or by use of force. *Buliang* can use absolute power when disputes or problems disturb the peace of society as a whole. It acts as the judicial body in the settlement of disputes. In addition to it, certain social and welfare functions are also taken up by the *Buliang* providing social security to the people and minimum socio-political needs to the individual members. The modern government initiative in development and administration perspective has limited the role of the *Buliang* to some extent. But still, the *Buliang* plays a role of socio-religious aspect in a greater way.

Functions of the *Buliang* can be categorized into three (a) Politico-judicial, (b) Religious (ritualistic) and (c) Social-welfare.

### Politico-Judicial:

The *Buliang* has the power to regulate society and individual life according to a set of conducts and punish those who transgress the codes.

They derive this power and authority from age-old customs and traditions. The Apatani are great individualists. Though the Apatani does not have centralized authority but the *Buliang* acts as a court of justice. It interprets and adjudicates cases as per the customary laws. All disputes between clans, families, groups, and individuals over encroachment of property, divorce, adultery, robbery, theft, murder, etc are settled by the *Buliang*, if it affects the community as a whole or a party to the disputed appeal to the *Buliang*. The level of punishment and fines are awarded to the wrongdoers according to the nature and gravity of crimes.

There is a peculiar practice in Apatani, if a fellow tribesman does wrong to someone, his first reaction is not to appeal to the *Buliang* to mediate in the dispute but to retrieve his loss or vindicate his honor by taking law into his own hands. They resort to *Lisudu* (self property destruction competition) between two individual disputants to humiliate the opponent. This practice is now totally banned by Apatani Students Union and other civil societies. Thus, Apatani is in no way perturbed if two villagers fight it out a quarrel over any dispute. Therefore, a *Buliang* does not interfere in disputes either between individuals, families, or clans. Only the immediate relatives of the involved parties use to persuade *Giitu-Giira* (knowledgeable persons) to act as *Gondu* (mediator) and arbitrate the disputes. When the *Gondu* comprising knowledgeable

village elders fails to mediate and settle the dispute, one of the parties may appeal to the *Buliang* for arbitration.

When the dispute comes to the *Buliang*, first the *Buliang* of the village tries to settle the dispute and usually, the disputants agree to the settlement. When the *Buliangs* of the disputants' village fail to settle the dispute and feel that, it may, in the future disturb the peace and tranquility of the society, will enlist the support of *Buliangs* of other villages.

When a dispute arises between a family or clan of a village with a family or clan of another village over certain rights like hunting and trapping ground or grazing lands, it invariably tends to disturb the peace of Apatani as a whole. In disputes like this, the *Buliangs* take the initiative to settle the dispute.

Another type of dispute is when a village has some grudge against another village. There is a system called *Gyambo Sonii* (Armed demonstration) by the aggrieved party. In the *Gyambo Sonii*, a fully armed man of an aggrieved village demonstrates tactics of war as if they are fighting a war with the enemy. This demonstration is done in the millet or paddy field near the village against which they have a grudge. This is usually done in the summer months of May or June when millet and paddy saplings have grown well. Out of excitement the youth of the *Gyambo* party may destroy half-grown crops of millet, paddy saplings, and bamboo groves. *Gyambo* party's destruction of paddy and millet is to tighten the economic power of the enemy village. Therefore the *buliang* may initiate to stop such destruction of economic power. The village economy is fully dependent on agriculture. Destruction of paddy and millet may lead to a food shortage for the whole village. Hence *buliang* ensure the food security and stable economy of the village.

Invariably, the decisions of the *Buliangs* are accepted as just and equitable. However, when a party to the dispute is stubborn and do not accept the decision, the *Buliangs* resort to *Dapo* (instrument of *Buliang*) to enforce the decision.

### **Religious Function:**

Another function of the *Buliang* is religious or ritualistic. In festivals like *Subu*, *Murung*, and *Myoko*, the *Buliang* has a specific role without which the festival cannot take place.

The *Subu* ritual, which is performed by an individual but joined in festivities by whole clans and relatives. In this rite the all the *Buliang* of the *Subu* performing clan or clan groups are invited to the house of the performer. They are entertained with 'Oh'(local rice wine) besides giving a piece of *Alo* (salt), *Tapyo* (indigenous Apatani salt), *Tai Dilang* or *Yaalang* (a piece of raw meat), and *Heyih* (a small part of the stomach of slaughtered mithun). Also, the *Buliangs* are given rupee one hundred as *Buliang Amang* (a gift or offering). Earlier *Amang* was paid in kinds like bacon, a puppy or dried salt. Now it is given in cash also.<sup>4</sup>

During *Murung* rites, *Buliang* and *Miha Pello* are given special recognition and status. This rite is of two types, *Murung Rontii* and *Ronser*. In *Murung Rontii*, meats of sacrificed animals are distributed to all the households of all the villages which are divided into three units for ritual purposes. They are (1) Hangu (Niichi-Niiti), (2) Biila (Reru-Tajang) and Hari (Talyang Hao) and (3) Tiini-Diibo (Diire-Hija, Duta, Miidang Tage and Bamin-Michi).

A *Myoko*, another festival is performed in March every year in rotation by the above three groups of villages that form the ritual units. *Buliang* play an important role in this festival. Without the inauguration by a *Buliang* which is known as *Khiibo Amang*, *Myoko* festival cannot commence. *Khiibo Amang* is a procession of *Buliang* and young men who are well versed in Apatani folklores. They are led by a well attired priest known as *Byai Mibya* (a priest who leads the procession). A *Khiibo Amang* led by a *Byai Mibya* comes in procession from a village that is not performing *Myoko* festival to a *Myoko* performing village belonging to the same political alliance. They are received in the house of a *Buliang* of the host village. They select two particular *Buliang*'s houses for *riichcha* (to welcome) and *riilo* (to send off) of *Khiibo Amang*, selection of the house confirmed through examination of omen.

### Social and welfare function:

Another function of the *Buliang* is social and welfare. When a family suffers too much from an illness affecting every member of the family very frequently, which neither response to traditional rituals nor modern medications, then the *Buliangs* are invited. They are entertained well with 'O' (rice wine), with meat and cooked rice. A piece of bacon is roasted and given to *Buliang*. This custom is known as *Gensi*. The belief behind this is that feasting the *Buliangs* and getting their blessings will ward off all the evil spirits affecting the family due to which they underwent all sorts of sufferings.

A barren couple may invite the *Buliang* and give them a sumptuous feast. Here, the belief is that the blessings of the *Buliang* will make the barren couple get the offspring.

*Buliang* also has important function of welfare during the time of *dolli-piili* (epidemic and famine). *Buliang* along with *Nyibu* (priest) and *Gorra* (community ritual organizer) perform certain rituals at *layu* (village entrance) to ward off the evil spirits who cause the epidemic. The *Buliang* do not have much developmental function. The construction of *Lapang*, drainage, bridge, community fencing, etc. is done by clan group or group of village or clan sharing common boundary or place for religious ceremonies and sacrifices.

## Leadership:

The leadership of the *Buliang* (village council) is collective. No individual is authorized to shoulder the responsibilities of leadership alone. It may, perhaps, be due to the absence of any centralized authority, exercising power overall inhabitants in Apatani village or it may be due to the individualistic and independent nature of the Apatani which does not allow a centralized authority and leadership. However, an elderly person among *Buliangs* who has a lot of experience and is well conversant in customs, traditions and customary laws of Apatani usually preside over a deliberation of the *Buliangs*. Decisions in these deliberations are based on consensus.<sup>5</sup>

The *Buliang* of the Apatani has a limited role in developmental functions. Perhaps, it may be due to the existence of number of institutions that deliver the specific functions at a time.

## Relevance

These councils have been very strong and often acted sometimes like sovereign bodies deciding all internal matters relating to village or community. Therefore, it is not only a political organisation but also a social agency that regulates the social behaviour of the community as a whole. Again, as a center of social agencies, it also plays a vital role in the transmission of cultural heritage and learning civic duties. These traditional institutions regulate and control all aspects of life. It also plays an integrated role with state or government officials and statutory Panchayat bodies to implement government welfare programs and schemes. Indeed, the *Buliang* has a limited role in the developmental functions. But the *Buliang* is an effective and strong in dispensing justice. But due to the introduction of modern socio, political and legal institutions the *buliang* role is diminishing in many instances. However, the role of this council in socio-religious aspects is still present without any changes. Thus, as an institutional framework, these councils act as social control purpose. This indigenous way of control agent creates trust, fellow feelings towards others and enhances their capacity to join together in collective action to resolve the common problems. This facilitates conditions conducive to social stability and coherence in society as a whole.



## Conclusion

The Buliang was an indigenous government of the Apatani tribe before the introduction of modern government system. The modern government like Panchayat Raj Institution, modern administration and party politics in Arunachal as a whole effected the structure and working pattern of indigenous governance system as a whole including Apatni's *Buliang*. The relevance of the indigenous institutions is not limited to political authority but they are an integral part the indigenous tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The relevance of the *Buliang* are reflected in their day to day socio-religious practices of the Apatani in form of ritual, traditions and customs in many occasion. We cannot deny the fact that this institution has changed in many ways but still remain as core of the traditional practices which inculcate the societal values among the tribe

## References:

1. P.C Dutta, and D.K. Duarah, "Aspects of Customary Laws of Arunachal Pradesh" Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1997, p.4.
2. Pura Tado, "Political Transition Among The Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh: A case study of the Apatanis" (Doctoral Thesis), Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, 2001. P. 57.
3. Ibid
4. Pura Tado, op.cit, p.70
5. Ibid