



A Historical Analysis On The Chieftaincy Of The Nocte Tribe Of Tirap District Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The research paper attempts to study the aged-old chieftaincy, a social institution of the Nocte tribe of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh. The Noctes are one of the major tribe of the state, inhabits in the eastern most part of India. In social organization of the tribe, chief is the head of village administration. Every village has an independent chief who is hereditary in nature. However, they are not enjoying an absolute power in the village administration. He consulted village council members and elders for taking any decisions in regards to village affairs. Above all he is binding by the customs and traditions of village. The object of this study is to examine the various functions, and social status of the chiefs in the society with the application of empirical study and method. The study is on historical analysis. A valuable data is gathered through field studies and interaction with the people of the community. Secondary sources are also referred to further authenticate the research work. This study is confined to the Nocte tribe of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: Chieftaincy, Hereditary, Absolute power, Empirical, Historical analysis,
Village council, Custom, Tradition.

Introduction

The social institution of the Nocte is based on the Chieftainship, in which Chief is at the apex in village authority. The notable feature of the Nocte Political System is the existence of village council. Inter-village conflicts, raids and headhunting were very common in the early society of the tribe. Due to this reason, a village security arrangement was made and assigned to the youths to safeguard the village. All the power of a village authority is vested in the hands of chief. However, Chief is assisted by the council in the village administration. Dutta quotes that “the political life within the village was maintained by the chief with the help of a body of village elders called “Ngothun, Ngonthun, ngontheit” by different groups. Each village has such a council of elders, which maintains law and order, takes decision on intra and inter-village disputes and

also organizes development activities in the village.”¹ Village meeting is called by the chief when it felt necessity for developmental activities, civil and criminal cases. All the cases related to villages’ community are installed in the dormitory, the seat of village council. However, in certain cases, if disputes arise between the two villages which belong to a group or allegiance under different paramount chief. Here the matter is interfered by the paramount chiefs and placed it for thorough examine. Thereby they give a final verdict according to their custom. In such case both the parties have to present in the meeting and whosoever found guilty may be given punishment with fines. In the early Nocte Society, there were two paramount chiefs under whom many subordinate villages were kept under their control, namely Borduria and Namsang Chiefs.

The inter-village feud was very common feature in the early Nocte society. It threatens the normal life of the villages. It also has negative effects on the economic life of the villager. Dutta quotes that “the scenario of relationship among the Nocte villages has been changed in 1958, when a general meeting arranged in Khela village in which all the Nocte village are participated including Namsang and Borduria. In the meeting both the Chief of Namsang and Borduria joined their hands and stood as hosts to the participants while welcoming the gathering the two chief said to our good luck we have been able to meet here today in this ‘NGONGTHUNG.’”² Dutta says that “so long we had only heard about such meeting from our elders. Time is the first occasion that we have with our own eyes seems this mass assembling.”³ Thereafter the relationships among the Nocte villages are maintained cordially.

Chieftaincy

Vidhyarthi, & Rai mentions that “the political life of the tribal of India reflects a paradoxical situation in which democracy and monarchy co-exist.”⁴ In the state, Chieftainship is found among the tribes like the Nocte, Wanchos, Khamtis and Singphos. In this system, chief is honoured, obeyed and accepted as head of the village. His office is hereditary. The supreme and final authority is vested in the hands of chief in the society. It is one of an important characteristics trait of the Nocte Social Organization. Literally, it is a political institution in which there is chief of a clan, and tribe. It also explains that chieftainship form a centralized social organization relying primarily on allegiance and not on formal coercive institution. It is characterized by the emergence of pattern of social stratification. Nocte chief is the fountain head of the village administration that holds all responsibilities of village welfare and developments. Though he is the supreme of a village, he cannot exercise an absolute power. His power is being checked by the Ngongawang (village council) and social customs. Pandey mentions that “the chief along with the council of village elders settled disputes and had the right to punish guilty of breach of taboos or of crime against individuals, or the community.”⁵

Chief is the most important person in Nocte Society who is believed that all laws are ultimately derived from the chief and his council. The chief is the political head of the Nocte Community. According to the Social customs, the Chief's post cannot be inherited by anyone other than the eldest son of the Chief. However, in the exceptional cases, the society can also accept and recognize the younger son of chief as the successor if the former proved ineligible, who is abnormal, suffering from fetal disease, deaf, blind, lame, and so forth. Among the Nocte, a war of succession in the Chief Post never happened till date because it has been deep rooted in the minds of the people that only eldest son is a legal heir to succeed his father.

In the pre-independence society of the Nocte, many new villages were established by the chief in consultation with the council. The reasons might be of two factors, viz. over population and extension of territory. In such case, the chief used to send one of his younger sons along with some other clans members to establish a new village which shall be remained as sub-ordinate village of the former. The sub-ordinate village used to pay an annual tribute to both the paramount as well as parental chiefs in the form of kinds like local rice beer, pig, buffalo, and chicken. It was known as 'SEIKO' in return, the former is always taken care of all the internal as well as external activities of the latter. Even during the natural calamities, the former used to help them from every possibility. However, the concept of exploitation was not known to them.

The chief post is inherited by his younger brother if he has no male heir. However, chief can marry another woman if his first wife proved barren. It is socially accepted norms and customs in the society. And in the village, clan's chiefs are also existed, which are also hereditary in nature. In case of Borduria village, there are few clans chiefs like HOMCHHALOWANG, LATEY LOWANG, TOSU LOWANG, KHETAY LOWANG, MONGCHANG LOWANG, and TANGDONG LOWANG. The sub-ordinate Chiefs never disregards the authority of paramount chief. Nonetheless, they sometime give suggestion to him concerning the village administration.

Origin of the Chieftaincy

The genesis of chieftainship is obscured. However, some legends are there which refers to its origin. In the early society, an inter-village or tribal conflict was very frequent and common phenomenon among the Nocte. The main causes for disputes were for land, river, cattle, and forest. And at this juncture, without an able leadership no particular tribe or village could even win against the enemy. Most probably a person who was brave, wise, oratory or the influential has always organized and led the people, become more popular among them. Therefore, gradually he become chief leader of the community and in course of time, a permanent chieftainship was established which later also become a hereditary.

Various legends are thus narrated by different villages which could not be fully accepted but it helps to understand and traces the origin of chieftainship to some extent. Dutta quotes that "the Nocte legend tells that the first chief came from the Hukong valley of Myanmar whose name was Khunbao. With a few attendants he crossed the Patkai hill and followed a very difficult route to a place called Sajuok, near the present Laptong

village. The inhabitants of Sajuok whom he subdued accepted him as their chief of Namsang, Borduria and Laptang and later claim themselves as descent from Khunbao.”⁶

According to the various recorded notes, the first chief of the Noctes, descended from heaven by an iron ladder. Dutta quotes that “the chief of Badoria and Namsang are descendants of the ‘indra – pancha pandov’ family descended from heaven by a golden ladder.”⁷

Another legend mentions by Dutta that “the Chiefs are descended of Ahom Raja Gadadhar who married to Nocte girl falling to love with her during his evils.”⁸

The first chief of Kaimai, narrates Nokrian that a man named Barpua was sent by the chief of Nuasa village along with a group of people (Chindongthe) to the present Kaimai village. He and his fellowmen established a settlement and finally Barpua being a leader of a group became the first chief of kaimai village and popularly known as Hocha Lowang.⁹ However, a few years later, the chief of Borduria sent one of his relatives with some fellowmen to Kaimai village which is already occupied by the Barpua and settled down with those of the previous occupant. And initially they had no cordial relationship between these two groups and stayed separately with their own social customs. For many years it goes on and could not settle their differences but later with the influence of a Vaishnavite priest from Assam, settled their conflicts and thereafter stays together. Henceforth, there are two chiefs in Kaimai village such as ‘Sala Lowang’ (coming from Borduria) and the ‘Hochha Lowang’ (coming from Nuasa). Both are respected and enjoyed a special social status in the society.

Similar case is with Paniduria village in which there are two chiefs such as Longchang Lowang and Sala Lowang respectively. The story of migration and establishment of the villages like Namsang, Borduria and Laptang, were quoted by Dutta that “according to the Chief of Namsang, the ancestors of the families of Namsang, Borduria and Laptang Chiefs originally lived in Burma. Due to some internal troubles he left his original home, crossed the Patkai hills passing through the deep jungle of Tirap and arrived at Sajuak, the present Laptang village. The inhabitants of the village accepted him as their leader. Later he went down to the plains and met the Ahom Raja, while returning from the plains he followed the course of the Dehing River, halting one night in a Naga village in the plain. He returned to the hills following the course of ‘Chatjo’ river.”¹⁰

Another version of the story connected with the first traditional chief Khunbao as narrated by the chief of Laptang village mentions Dutta, “long ago, Khunbao came from the Hukung valley of Myanmar to the land of the Nocte crossing the high Patkai hills. He was accompanied by a few attendants and a dog. After a long

and sedition journey in difficult valley, jungle and forests, river and streams, he came to a place called Barang near about the present village of Laptang (Longthan) on the bank of the river Chatjo. At that time there was a village at Barrang, the people of which were called Munlung, the native of that place. Khunbao was given shelter as guest by the people of Barang. He had some peculiar qualities for which the native of Barang were charmed. He knew magic and demonstrated before the people. He also told them the interesting story of his journey from Hukung valley to Barang. Thus, the people of Barang became pleased at his charming talks and behaviour.”¹¹

Legend of Tupi village narrates that the chief of Tupi came from Laju at a place called Janghi and dies in the course of their migration. A conflict has taken place with Borduria after their settlement at the present habitat. They were unable to resist Borduria’s attack because of their small population. It compelled them to flee away toward the plain of Assam. However, they were stopped on their way and forced to stay on at the present site under the control of Borduria. Since then Tupi has become subordinate to Borduria chief.

Dutta quotes that “in the ‘Charit Puthi ‘(biography) of Shri Shri Ram Dev of Bareghar Satra of Nazira written in Assamese we find some reference to the distribution of the chieftainships among the sons of Khunbao. It is written there – “Borduworia Rajya Pesthya Putrak dila Kanisthaka Namsang Rajya Arpila.BhatriPutre Laptong Pariduwarat Rajapati, Gurur Sangat Jaibe Karilanta Goti.”¹²

Translation: Borduria was given to the eldest son and the youngest was given Namsang. The brother and another son were made the chiefs of Laptang and Paniduria respectively. After thus distributing the chieftainships he wanted to leave this world along with his guru (preceptor).

Ascendancy

The office of chief is hereditary. The method of selection did not exist since time immemorial in the society. According to the custom, chief used to keep two wives, one of them is from prince of other village chief. She becomes the queen of the village, called ‘WANGCHADONG’. The second wife is generally from the commoners, called ‘WANGCHANADI’. She can never become queen. The post of the chief is succeeded by the eldest son of the first wife. There are certain prescribed norms to become chief. For instance, a son should be physically as well as mentally fit. When the first son is unfit for being a chief because of the above statement then chief’s post is passed to second and third son respectively. Dutta quotes similar contention that “if the eldest is found to be invalid on any ground, mental or physical, the second son is selected. If there is no male issue the chieftainship will go the brother’s line.”¹³

Bhuyan mentions that “the first son of the first wife (i.e., the woman first married from a Lowang’s family) will inherit his father’s chieftainship. If the first wife does not have any male issue then the son from the immediate next wife will inherit the chieftainship.”¹⁴

In accordance with the Nocte custom, a second wife does not enjoy the same privilege as it enjoys by first wife. Similarly, her son is also not entitled to become chief of that village. However, when a new village is established then he would be preferably appointed as a chief of that village.

Case Study – I “In 1980, Kaimai chief, WANGPAM LOWANG established a new village, called ‘WASATHONG.’ He appointed the eldest son of WANGCHANADI (second wife) named WANGNOAP LOWANG as a chief of that village. He was accompanied by some section members from each clans of a village. Most of the brothers and sisters of family were parted during this time so; still some of the kins and kith of Kaimai village are living there.”¹⁵

In this case, a new village is remained as sub-ordinates to the parental village. So, they are to pay an annual tribute, called ‘Seiko’ to the former in the form of Service, animals and rice beer during the celebration organized by the chief. In return, Chief also assists to his sub-ordinate villages from every Possibility. In Nocte customs, when chief die with leaving a minor son then the paternal uncle is given right to hold the authority of the village administration until heir attain maturity. However, he does not declare himself as chief of the village. He acts only as a caretaker of the village administration. And in case if the chief has no son then customarily his post is inherited by the younger brother and his eldest son respectively.

Besides, the village chief, there are many clan’s chief whose position are below than the former. Nonetheless, these chiefs also play vital roles in the village administration. They along with chief of a village take decision regarding the social activities of the village. These posts are also hereditary. The clan’s chiefs enjoy special status like they are to sit along with the village chief during the social gathering, meeting and celebration. People begin their speech in the social gathering or council meeting by referring their names. And their power is confined within the village itself. They preside over the clan’s meeting but decision is taken unanimously along with the elder of the clan. The clan’s chief vary from one village to another, sometimes it is found two to three or single clan’s chief in the village. As for example in Borduria village, there are six clan’s chiefs as already mentioned in the previous discussion. And in Kaimai village only a single clan’s chief is found viz. Hochha Lowang who came to present village from Nuasa place situated now in the wancho. Once a chief is ascended, he remained as chief throughout his life. He is not removed on any account. The succeeding chief has to perform rite, called ‘PONGBANG’ for social recognition. Schaltz & Lavenda defines that “rite that serves to mark the movement and transformation of an individual from one social position to another.”¹⁶ Pongbang is a rite to observe by chief which has sanction by the Nocte custom. It was compulsive for every new chief in the early society without which they cannot recognize as village chief. This rite is observed with sacrificing dog by the chief. It believes that by sacrificing dog, chief is proved his competent to

tackle any kinds of difficulties. Similar statement gives by Dutta, “the succeeding chief has first to observe rites called Pongbang, prior which he would be as acting chief.”¹⁷

In the early society, chief needs to be wiser and brave to respond the attack of the enemy. Diplomacy is very popular among the Nocte in order to gain a support from neighbouring village.

A new chief have to perform a rite called ‘CHAMKAT’ to recognize him socially as member of the village. It is a social obligation to observe by every male child of a village including chief’s son. It authorizes a person eligible to entry in the dormitory. Moreover, he has right to claim a share from the community distribution. It is done during the celebration of festival ‘Chalo Loku’. However, the nature of its observation is varied from one village to another. In some village, only the eldest son performs this rite and remaining sons are automatically recognized by the village authority. In some village, all sons are required to perform. There is no age limit as such to observe this rite but it generally is performed after attaining maturity.

Likewise, there are some rituals to be fulfilled by chief to recognize as new chief in the society. Schultz & Lavenda defines ritual, “a repetition social practice composed of a sequence of symbolic activities in the forms of dance, song, speak, gesture or the manipulation of objects adhering to a culturally defined ritual scheme and closely connected to a specific set of idea that are often encoded in myth.”¹⁸

A ritual like ‘Chinlik’ is also performed by chief. According to custom, chief has to put a piece of ginger from his maternal uncle home. The day is observed for a big community feast. The commoners put it on the second day celebration of Chalo Loku (festival) from their maternal uncle house. Maternal uncle called ‘Hokappho’ put a piece of ginger with blessing to his nice and nephews and serve them food and drink. Besides, a person also put it when a village priest advise them to do so if one has fall sick. Dutta quotes similar contention, “Chinlit was the first ritual performed in 1966. In this the maternal uncle gave a garland of zinger. As Wanglin’s (Borduria chief) maternal uncle’s house is at Khela village he had to go there for the ritual. He was accompanied by some young boys of Borduria village, who are called Nok paangmi.”¹⁹

JHANKHAK (cock fight) is another prominent ritual observed by the chief before he is ascended to the post as a full-fledge chief. However, except Borduria village others do not observe it in the present society. Now it is observed during the festival of ‘Chhaliwen’²⁰. Here the guests from neighbour villages are also attended. The most important part of this festival is to organize cock fight among different groups of clans. In this event, village chief, clan’s chiefs, village council members and villagers are attended to witness the same. There is a custom in the game that the defeated party would give half of a cock to the winner. Dutta mentions

that “in this ceremonial cockfighting is held in the village which the chief attends. In the ceremony the chief is given to sit on a decorated chair symbolizing a throne.”²¹

Functions of the chief

Chief is the head of the village administration. He maintains order and presides over the ‘Ngongthun’ (meeting). All the authorities are vested in him. Therefore, a final verdict is given by him. The chief as the political head has to maintain territorial integrity of the village and deals with all the disputes and cases. He has to maintain cordial relations with the neighbour villages in order to gain assistance in emergency. Hitherto, chief maintain a good relationship with his sub-ordinate villages by extending assistance. He never treats them in the oppressive manner. In the event of attacks of an external force, chief rushes immediately to assist his sub-ordinate chiefs.

The council of elder assists the chief in executing laws and order in the village administration. They also advise him in certain matters but it does not bind on him. He is a court of higher appeal and all unsettled cases from the subordinate villages come to him for final verdict. In the past, it was his duty to ensure protection and safety of the village from external aggression. Chief also helped his village and subordinate villages to get over any economic set back due to natural and other calamities. In return, the subordinate villages rendered a great honour to him and pay an annual tribute in kinds of prescribed quantity popularly known as ‘Seiko’. The articles of tribute are paddy, millet, rice beer, fermented grains (Ju), meat, and fish.

The annual tribute is paid in kind by the sub-ordinate villages to the paramount chiefs. There are two paramount chiefs, viz. Namsang chief and Borduria chief respectively who receive annual tribute from other Nocte and Wancho villages. Some of them also paid tribute to the chiefs who are the immediate supreme in their areas and had some relations since the time of the forefather. However, in the contemporary society, an annual tribute paid to the paramount chiefs is discontinued.

The system of paying tribute to more than one chief is something like a political adjustment, viz. inter-village and inter-paramount relationship. There is however, no codified written law for the system. It regularizes relation between the village chiefs and the chiefs of Namsang, Borduria and Tut as the case may be. Sometimes embarrassing situation arises in meeting protocol demands in tributes item like head trophies. Besides, the paramount chiefs, others also claim lay on shares. It resulted sometime a conflict among them.

In social activities also chief plays a formidable role to develop a feeling of oneness and brotherhood among the people. He sometime organizes a community feast or celebration. He also donated lands for community use like construction of dormitory, schools in modern time, health unit (dispensary), and community hall. Besides, he also sold land on meager price to the commoners. The chief of Kaimai village, Late Wangpam Lowang used to give a piece of land for both residential as well as for cultivation to the needy

family of his village. It shows a benevolent approach of chief in the society. Chief also concerned to see that social tradition and customs are honoured, preserved and followed. He also regulates the timings and manner of all celebrations of ceremonies and festivals in consultation with the council of village.

In the early society, chief was the supreme commander in war, though he himself did not actually lead in operation. It is believed that the question of defeat and victory depends on the competency of chief. In order to face against the attack of enemy, Chief along with the village elder organized the village youths into different groups with full war equipments like spears, daos, bow and arrows and gun. Expedition does not undertake without his explicit order. Chief also gives the direction, the way to offence or defenses the village. In Nocte, no one can sell off even his individual land to the outsiders without the prior permission of village chief. A man who committed such mistake is to pay fines to the village authority.

Chief is the fountain head of justice. It is he who gives the final verdict of all civil as well as criminal cases in consultation with the village council. However, he never delays to give the justice and his decision is not bind by any external force. His decision is based on the traditional social customs, norms, and wages. He does not take any decision which is based on his personal interest. He follows the concept of equal laws or punishment for all without any discrimination.

As regard to the present context, any kind of inter-village conflict occurred in minor matter is solved verbally. The question of headhunting which was extensively practiced and quite popular game in the early Nocte society is completely wiped out from the society. Today, chiefs are engaged in village developmental programme or activities. He, along with the support of state government introduced various modern amenities in the village viz. education, health unit, community hall, drinking water, electricity, irrigation, communication like telephone and road. He also seeks help from the village council, Anchal Samity members and Goan Bura to pressure the administration for the village developmental projects. The functions of village chiefs are still more influential in the village administration. Today most of the chiefs are educated which provides more scopes of functions and to deal with the village administration. Today each and every application, memorandum, procurement of scheduled tribe certificate or any other verifying letter is being countersigned by both chief and Goan Bura. They also visit the State Capital, Itanagar to limelight their grievances to the Chief Minister of the state as well as to other ministers. Thus, the position and prestige of chiefs among the Noctes is still very respectable and high in the society.

Notes and References:

- ¹ P.C. Dutta, The Noctes (Shillong: Directorate of Research, 1978), p. 170.
2. This term is referred to general meeting in Nocte.
- ³ Dutta, Op. cit., p. 171.
 - ⁴ L.P. Vidhyarthi & B.K. Rai, The Tribal Culture of India (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1985), p. 195.
- ⁵ A.K. Pandey, Kinship and Tribal Polity (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1989), p. 34
- ⁶ Dutta, Op. cit., p. 190.
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 124.
- ⁸ Dutta, Op. cit., p. 196.
- ⁹ Nokrian Anna (Interviewed), Kaimai village in Tirap District, 12.07.2004.
- ¹⁰ Dutta, Op. cit., (2003), p. 122.
- ¹¹ Dutta, Ibid, p. 200.
- ¹² Dutta, Op. cit., p. 206.
- ¹³ Dutta, Ibid, p. 141.
 - ¹⁴ B.B. Pandey, et al, ed. Tribal village councils of Arunachal Pradesh (Itanagar: Directorate of Research, 1999), p. 382.
- ¹⁵ Nokrian Anna (Interviewed), Kaimai village in Tirap District, 12.04.2004.
 - ¹⁶ E.A. Schultz & R.H. Lavenda, Cultural Anthropology (California: Manyfield, 1998), p. 147.
- ¹⁷ Dutta, Op. cit., p. 142
- ¹⁸ Schultz, Op. cit., p. 145.
- ¹⁹ Dutta, Op. cit., p. 143.
- ²⁰ This is one of the festivals of the Nocte, celebrated in the month of March every year to start sowing paddy in the field.
- ²¹ Dutta, Op. cit., p. 144.