



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## CHIETAINSHIP AMONG THE NOCTE TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS AHEAD

Taiwang Wangsa

Assistant Professor

Wangcha Rajkumar Govt College under Rajiv Gandhi University

### Abstract

Chieftainship institution is the oldest form of tribal administration that still works among the Nocte tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Though in many tribal areas of Northeast India Chieftainship has declined due to the introduction of democratic institution, it still functions among the Noctes society with a slight change. The respective district administration gives due respect and importance to the chiefs and their assistance were sought whenever required. The chief help the administration in maintaining law and order and assist the district administration in solving various problems related to local matters and other administration matters. In spite of the significant role played by the chieftaincy institution among the Nocte villages, the institution has come under attack as many question its relevance in modern political dispensation. This article explores the prospect and challenges of Nocte Chieftaincy institutions in the contemporary democratic set up.

**Keywords:** Chieftainship, Tribal, Nocte, Prospects, Challenges, Democratic, Village councils & Chief

### Introduction

Nocte is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh inhabited in the central part of Tirap District, having an approximate population of 35000 (Census 2011). Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh is situated on the North eastern part of India between the latitude of 26.38° N to 27.47° N and longitude of 95.40 °E to 96.16° E. The district is inhabited by Nocte, Tutsa and Ollo tribes. Noctes are found in the Patkai Hills of Tirap District and Rajanagar area in Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh. A good number of families from Namsang Village migrated to Assam in the 1814 and now live in Pontuan, Naharkatia, Assam, which 30 kilometres from the mainland. Also, a small village called Hilonigaon in Sibsagar District, Assam is inhabited by the Nocte tribe. Noctes are ethnically related to the Konyak Naga and their dialect comes under the Tibeto-Burman dialect family of language. The Nocte consist of several groups based on their origin and the past history. Most of the Nocte people have originally come from different place and settled down in present habitat.

Chieftainship is the most important institution Tribal social organization. In fact the institution of chieftainship has been prevalent among the few tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. While the Chieftainship of Noctes and Wancho is still continuing as an active and living institution, among other tribes it is either dying out or dormant. The Noctes and Wanchos are known for their well organized chieftainship systems which were in existence since time immemorial. It has played a major role in socio- economic and political development of the Noctes society. Nocte traditional form of governance is based on Chieftainship. Every village was like Greek city-states. Each village has got a chief which is generally called *Lowang*. It is hereditary. He is powerful. His rule is autocratic but not despotic. The chief is assisted by village councils popularly known as '*Ngongwang/Nagothun*' which generally consist of elderly people, advisor and Priest. Inter-village rivalry was common in the past. Everyone was enemy to each other and the stronger rule over the weak. The Nocte chieftainship has been described in a number of works (see Dutta 1978, 2003; Elwin 1959, Chowdhury 1992; Baruah 1991; Wanglat 2022 etc).

Chieftaincy is one of the oldest and most cherished of Nocte's traditional institutions, which interpret our indigenous system of governance as it has evolved through the centuries. It has remained resilient despite their exposure to democratic values under both colonial and independent government. Rather both Ahom and the British administrator maintained a cordial relation with the Nocte chieftaincy to protect their own interest. The British Administrators depended much on the two prominent chiefs of Nocte in maintaining peace in the areas adjoining Lakhimpur District and also maintaining harmony with the people living in the border area. Every Nocte village has a chief of its own who ruled over their subject with the help of his council. The entire Noctes villages come under the paramount chief of Borduria and Namsang. To this day Chieftaincy continue to represent the needs and aspiration of the people as they perceive it as their moral and divine duties.



Fig. 1. Showing Nocte inhabited areas.

### Origin of Chieftainship Institution

The institution of chieftaincy like other forms of leadership arose out of the natural instinct for self and community preservation. Among many human societies, the paramount reasons for getting together are security and protection against external enemies or aggression and the need to have leadership that inspires and

motivates the people. In the early days, an inter-village conflict was very frequent and common phenomenon among the tribal. The main causes of conflict were over the land, river, and forest. And at this juncture, no village could go against the enemy with an able leadership. 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 later on it become into hereditary institution in due course of time.

The Chief of the Nocte village Lowang is the supreme authority of the village. Each Nocte village has a chief. The institution of chieftainship has no information about its origin. It is however believed that like all other tribal societies the chieftainship among the Nocte came into existence due to some external and internal circumstances of the society. The office of the Chief follows the hereditary system and thus the authority is passed down to the eldest son. In the context of Nocte, the genesis of chieftainship is obscured. However, according some legends 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. Institution of chieftainship has been prevalent among the few tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. On other hand many common Nocte believes that the first chief of the Noctes, descended from heaven by an iron ladder. According to Dutta, Noctes are believed to be migrated to the present habitat sometime prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. Chieftainship is probably one of such traits carried by the Nocte at the time of their migration. Noctes are basically agriculturists. Jhumming is the traditional method of cultivation mostly practiced by the Noctes

The belief of the Nocte common man is that a Chief is born and not made. Hence their loyalty towards the chief remains unchanged. This belief of the Nocte is similar to the beliefs of the South African Tribes. The Tswana saying already mentioned earlier may be quoted here, "A chief is a chief because he is born to it" (Dutta, 2003). Thus, we have seen that the Nocte chieftainship is an active and living institution, continuing as such since time immemorial.

### **Chieftainship in pre & post Colonial era**

The existence of chieftainship among the Nocte is known since the days of the Ahom King. The British administrators relied much on this system in the matter of maintenance of law, order and peace in the frontier. Chieftainship is one of Nocte's oldest traditional institutions and it is inseparable part of their society. In fact, all their social and political life revolves around this aged old institution. Chieftainship is by far the most important institution as it is the hub round which the entire activities of the Noctes society revolve. It is an age-old tradition among them. It is neither monarchy nor a dictatorship. It is also not a purely democratic institution. The nearest correct nomenclature will be a blend of democracy and dictatorship. The dictatorial authority is exhibited through the medium of a semblance of democratic system in the form of a council of elders (Dutta,2003).

During colonial rule, the British government policy of 'Leave Them Alone' has kept the frontier Tribesman without much exposure to the modern governance system (Elwin,1959). The British even recognized Chieftaincy powers and hence the British administrator continues to share a cordial relation with the prominent Chiefs of the area. The colonial government in 1945 has recognized the authority of tribal village council and the system of chieftaincy in through the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945. This regulation does, in fact give the tribal councils very wide powers. As per the regulation, the policy of the administration is to accept the existing tribal village council and to strengthen the councils and work through them. After Independence, Chieftaincy system continues among the Noctes people even after the introduction of the democratic institution in the state in 1969. There is no significant change in the status, powers and function

of the chief. The existence of the system among the Nocte and Wancho, has rather helped the government in introducing/ implementing Panchayat system much more easily and without any opposition.

### **Traditional role and functions of Chief in Nocte society**

Nocte society is organized under great Chiefs, each controlling a number of villages from which he receives tribute. There are three classes, the families of the Chiefs, the proletariat and an intermediate class of the descendent of the Chiefs who have married commoners (Elwin,1957). Each Nocte village has its own chief who is the most important person and all laws are ultimately derived from him and his council. Dutta opines that without the Chief and Chieftainship, the Nocte society becomes a rudderless ship. Chief preside over the council elders 'Ngongthun' and settle disputes with the assist of his council. As the head of the village council he gives final decision on all social, political and administrative affairs of the village. They are custodians of customs and tradition, and are advocates for development in their areas. Chief is the head of the village administration. 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 neighbor 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 village council 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 honor 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. Chief also concerned to see that social tradition and customs are honored, 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 pre-independence era, the chieftaincy institution was the main system of governance and adjudication of justice known to the Nocte people. Chiefs carried out combined legislative, executive and judicial functions. However, with the advent of modern political system of governance in tribal society and its administration of justice, the chieftaincy institution now plays a subordinating role to the modern state.

### **The relation between chieftaincy and Modern Institutions**

Contrary to the expectations of many theorists of the modernization school, chieftaincy as an institution survived various political challenges under both colonial and Independence government. Though discredited by events that modernization theorists were convinced that chieftaincy structures would wither away with time. The Post colonial India has witnessed a phenomenal expansion in the community development program across the length and breadth of India. Subsequently, the Government of India launched a three-tier structure Panchayati Raj Institution for rural development through local self government. However, Arunachal Praesh was kept outside the purview of a regular administration owing to 'slow go policy' of the then government. Hence, all the Tribal indigenous governance system including Chieftainship institutions among the Noctes continued to functions effectively without much administrative interference even after the introduction of Panchayati Raj institution in Arunachal Pradesh in 1969. With the advent of modern democratic political governance system and its adjunct administration of justice, the institution of chieftaincy including its authority



and power has largely been taken away by the state. Thus, the institution has come under attack as many question its relevance in modern political dispensation.

The village councils were the basic political units of the people of Arunachal Pradesh till the introduction of Panchayati Raj institutions in 1969. Even today these village councils exist side by side the statutory Panchayats and continue to discharge their function and command authority in the village. Each tribe of Arunachal Pradesh has its own council system reflecting its communal nature and requirements. The political organization of the tribal community is based on traditional way in which society recognizes the exercises of authority. The authority may be vested in a single individual acting as the headmen of the villager or it may be entrusted to few chosen representatives of the community whose confidence they may command.

The village council is known by different local names in different tribes. It is called *Kebang* among the *Adis*, *Mangmajombana* among the *Monpas*, *Buliang* among the *Apatanis*, *Ngothum* among the *Noctes* and *Ngoawang* among the *Wanchos* etc. These councils administer justice in case of disputes and conflicts and also directs developmental and welfare activities within their respective villages. Even today all these village councils continue to carry out combined legislative, executive and judicial responsibilities and also assist the elected leaders in discharging various developmental activities in the village. Even though the Panchayat Raj system has been introduced now, there is no significant change in the status, powers and function of the chief. In many cases chiefs and their family were the first to get elected and bestowed with modern political power under the democratic set up in the district. This reflected that people had a faith in the leadership of the chiefs and which is why even today most of the chiefs are partly or fully involved in local politics and beyond.

### **The Prospects:**

Today the respective district administrations give due respect and importance to the chiefs and their assistance were sought whenever required. The chiefs help the administration in maintaining law and order and assist the district administration in solving various problems related to land matter and other administrative matters. Thus, the chieftainship system would continue to be an affective medium of communication and link between the administration and the villages.

In this era of global democratization, chieftaincy as a symbol of pre-modern politics and non-democratic governance, may still serve as a valuable adjunct to the process of development. Such as:

*Linkage Role:* Chieftaincy is instrumental in serving as intermediaries between government and populace. It has the direct connection with the people on the ground.

*Custodian of Customary Law:* Chieftaincy is the custodian of tribal law and plays a pivotal role in preserving traditional customs and practices.

*Head of the Village:* Chief is the fountain head of the village administration that holds all responsibilities of village welfare and developments.

*The Chieftaincy's for Community Unity:* Chieftaincy perceives itself as non-partisan to political parties and thus appropriate for facilitating the unity among the people within their community.

*Traditional rulers for peace & security:* Chiefs and his council serve an invaluable role as conflict gatekeeper. The people still perceive chiefs as custodians of law and security providers to the community.

*Functions of the Chief as Ombudsman:* The chiefs see themselves to be more legitimate than the elected representatives and hence keep a constant watch over the development activities carried forward within his jurisdiction.

*Capability of the Chieftaincy to resolve conflicts amicably:* Chieftaincy sees itself as representing the identity of the people. They are capable in solving many disputes of civil in nature both at individual and inter-village level.

## The Challenges:

In spite of the significant role played by the chieftaincy institution in the lives of the people the aged old institution has come under attack as many people felt that the practice of traditional chieftainship system is a sharp contrast to the democratic system in rest of the country. The endemic nature of power tussle between traditional village council and Panchayati leaders and their implications for socio-economic development in the region has been seen and felt over the years. Currently, the institution of the chieftainship in its present form is in a state of decadence and has become obsolete. It is against this background that the institution of the chieftainship is facing a numerous challenges in the contemporary Nocte society.

One of the most prominent challenges is the misunderstanding and disagreement over the succession. This is perhaps the most common issue emerging in so many Nocte villages because as per the tradition an eldest son from *Wangcha* (Queen) or of royal lineage is the heir apparent. Whereas, some section of people argued that in absent of male child from *wangcha* an eldest son from first wife (commoner) shall also be given the succession rights.

*Secondly*, the disputes between chieftaincy and the elected leaders have been a persistent problem and it has a negative impact on the socio- economic development of the village. The major factor contributing to this dispute is the quest for the power.

*Thirdly*, the involvement of Chiefs in politics is not being appreciated by many which otherwise viewed the chiefs to be a non- partisan and politically neutral. Today most of the chiefs are actively participated in local as well as state politics due to which there has also been gradual loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the their own people.

*Fourthly*, growing population of educated youth believed more on the democratic institution than the traditional system. So there has been a gradual shift of loyalty among the young educated population.

*Lastly*, there is a growing gap lack of communicationdiscontent among the against the ruling class gap between the ruling class highly influential elite from the commoner class.

Besides the above mentioned challenges, today's chieftaincy is facing multifaceted issues like Insurgency, menace of opium & drugs in the community and inter-village boundary disputes which seems to be a herculean task for the chief to address.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the expectations of several theorists belonging to the modern school, chieftaincy as a traditional institution survived various political changes under both colonial and Independent government. The postcolonial government of India, like the colonial government before, also recognized the chiefs' role in mobilizing their subjects. Notwithstanding the changing political landscape in the state and beyond, the chieftaincy institution is the most enduring establishment in Noctes and Wanchos political history and will continue to be so as long as the society itself exists. The chieftaincy institution is still largely supported by many sections of Nocte society and modern governments. Responding to a question raised by HMLA Shri Wanglin Lowangdong, who himself is the chief of Borduria village in Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu assured the Assembly on March 15<sup>th</sup> 2018 to protect the indigenous system of traditional council (chieftainship) which is instrumental in promoting harmonious integration among the people.

Today, Chiefs are expected to be more proactive in addressing the social and political problems of the people besides performing their traditional role to remain relevant in the contemporary time. Thus, it can continue to act as the channel and agent for local development program which will ultimately revive the diminishing nature of Nocte chieftaincy.

**References:**

**Dutta,P.C. 2003:** Tribal Chieftainship, Himalayan Publisher, Itanagar.

**Pandey,B.B. 1999:** Tribal village councils of Arunachal Pradesh, Directorate of Research, Itanagar, p.382.

**Dutta, P.C. 1978:** The Noctes, Directorate of Research, Shillong, p.170.

**Elwin,V. 1957:** A Philosophy for NEFA, Directorate of Research, Shillong.

**Wanglat, L. 2022:** Headhunting Naga of Arunachal Pradesh

**Chowdhury, J.N. 1997:** The Tribal Culture and History of AP, Delhi, p.170-173.

**Lowang, W. 2022:** The Native Tea, Dimapur, p.93-94.

**Baruah, S.N. 1991:** Tribes or Indo-Burma Borders, Delhi, p.96,p.303-308

**Dubey, S. 2005:** Dynamics of Local Polity and Panchayati Raj in AP, Delhi.

**Devi, L. 1968:** Ahom-Tribal Relations, Guwahati, p.24

**Lowang, W. 2006 :** The Noctes in Brief, Itanagar

**Khoisia, P. 2005 :**Oral History of the Nocte, pp-18-26

**Pandey, B.B. 1991 :** Leadership Pattern in a Tribal Society, Delhi

**Khetey, K. 2007:** Socio-Cultural Development of the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh since Independence.

**Tesia, D.2003:** The Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh with special reference to Socio-Economic Changes. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Geography, R.G.U. Doimukh.

**Sumnyan, C.2018:** The Administrative Development of Arunachal Pradesh: A Historical study of Tirap, 1826-1987.

**India Today**, 15 March, 2018 (PTI), “Chieftainship to continue in Arunachal”- <https://www.indiatoday.in>

