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Dupam: The Traditional Village Council of Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Nyishi one of the largest major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, like their other fellow tribes they too have traditional village council called Dupam which they practice and follows since time immemorial. This institution looks after socio-political and judicial affairs of the tribe and enjoy significant and strong position in socio-cultural life of the Nyishi tribe. However, over the period of time, after the introduction of modern administration drastic changes were observed in the working and status of this age-old institution.

Key word: Nyishi, traditional village council, Dupam, Changes

Introduction:

In a Tribal society there is usually a socio-political institution which is responsible for maintaining law and order, peace and harmony, solution of disputes as per traditional customary laws of the society and also to look after welfare and development activities of the village.

Arunachal Pradesh an exclusively tribal state is inhabited by 25 (twenty-five) major tribes with a number of sub-tribes. Almost all the tribes have their own village council system which effectively functioning since time immemorial. To quote: Dubey, "In the past, the tribal people of Arunachal knew no state and government, other than their village and village council. Their state was their village, which had its own natural boundary. Their government was their village council, which was all conducive to their happiness and welfare" (Dubey: 1999; 1.55). The village council is the sole authority of both development and social needs. Elwin, in Philosophy for NEFA, remarks that, "the character of the village council reflects the social, polity and psychology of its tribes". (Elwin: 1957; 154). The traditional village council is known differently in different tribes and it differs in its working from one tribe to other.

The Nyishi one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, which inhabited in the vast stretch of hilly terrains of the seven districts viz. Papum Pare, East Kameng, and Kurung-Kumey, Kradaadi, Kamle, Pakke Kessang, Keyi Panyor districts in the state.

The Nyishi like other tribes of the state are not entirely unfamiliar with self-governing system. They too follow and practice traditional self-governing institution in the form of village council at village level since time immemorial. However, they do not have an established village council; they have a system of gathering of capable village elders to settle any disputes or to discuss any matter related to village welfare and development. This council or gathering of village elders is known differently among the Nyishi of seven districts in Arunachal Pradesh with distinct nomenclature. For instance, it is known as Nele / Nyele among the Nyishi of Papum Pare and East Kameng district, Mel / Nyel in Keyi Panyor district, while Dupam among the Nyishi of Pipsorang circle under Kradaadi district and soon... However, these distinctions are merely of nomenclature and slightly in its structure and functional aspects.

Therefore, with this backdrop this paper is designed to study the traditional village council which exists in three Nyishi village of Pipsorang circle under Kradaadi district in Arunachal Pradesh. The three villages under study are mostly inhabited by Sorang Clan and include few other clans. The people of these three villages call themselves as Nyishang or Nyishi and above cited clan believe themselves belong to the Dodum group of Nyishi of Bagangphratrey. Their social system is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. Polygyny is common in practice. They prefer clan exogamy and follow Donyi-poloism and celebrate NyokumYullo and Solung every year with full gaiety and tradition.

DUPAM:

As mention earlier the Nyishi of Pipsorang under Kradaadi district in Arunachal Pradesh had self-governingsystem, which they practice date back to long past. They call their system of traditional village council as Dupam.

The word Dupam in fact is a generic term, which is derived from two local words i.e. **Du** and **Pam**. The “Du” from the word Dunam means to seat and the “Pam” from the word Apam means gathering or in group. Thus, sitting in-group or gathering collectively to discuss various matters related to village welfare and development as well as administration of justice is called Dupam. It is therefore, a gathering of village elders. This gathering is obviously adhoc in nature.

The Dupam is broadly classified into two different aspects on the basis of its nature of sitting i.e. (1) **Social Aspects** and (2) **Disputant Aspects**. The former aspects of Dupam called **TugungDupam** which basically deal with the issues of Socio-economic nature like marriage (Nyidaberik), house construction (Nam manam), clearing of jungle for cultivation (RiglungEngnam), community hunting and fishing (Kikrokrunkam/ Subokpanam), celebrations of festivals and ceremonies (YulloPanam) etc. While on the other hand, the latter aspects of Dupam known as **YallungDupam** and it dealt with all disputant issues of both civil and criminal nature like murder or homicide (Nyimegionam), theft (Dechonam), elopement (Nyimekigenam) incest, adultery (Yugionam), physical assault (Dangnam-panam) divorce or marriage related disputes (Nyimeyallung), land and property disputes (Nyoku-kidji/Kerre-lakteyallung) etc.

FORMATION OF DUPAM:

Dupam is a collective body of the village. It is constituted of all the adult members of the village, but usually village elder's i.e. Nampamgatechebu capable of arguing and judging effectively participates in the Dupam. There are no criteria or qualification or any code of conduct for the membership in the Dupam. But age, sex, experience in social affairs, knowledge in traditional customs is given importance for effectiveness in deliberation in Dupam. Earlier in YallungDupam, especially in cases related to incest (Bermeyyugionam), murder (Nyimegionam) women and children are not allowed to attend in the proceeding of Dupam. Since, the Nyishis considered such act as heinous crime and they therefore, debarred their women and children from attending such Dupam so that, the evil influence or effects of such crime may not infect them. Besides, women folk were also not allowed to participate because they are considered inferior to men. Moreover, the women folk were always busy with their household responsibilities. Therefore, women did not have the privilege to take part in the process of decisionmaking. However, in some cases they are allowed to sit and witness the proceeding of Dupam but they had no right to participate in discussion or decision making. They may be present as nonmember. Their role was confined to giving evidence and lodging complains and rendering service in serving food and drinks during the proceeding of the Dupam. Nevertheless, in TugungDupam, the participation of the women is accepted. Therefore, in TugungDupam, the women get opportunity to share their views and opinion and actively participate in deliberation as their male counterpart.

There is no fixed term of the office for the Dupam and its members. No status or rank is involved in its membership. They work collectively as equal. However, they pay heed to the advice of the most experience person. The membership of Dupam is not hereditary. Any individual capable of presenting a case better can become its member. Only the disable (Pecha) and the people having mental ailments (Surukbu) are not allowed to become its members. The meeting place or time of Dupam is not fixed. Its

members meet any time at any place whenever necessary arises. If a case arises, they discuss continuously for the entire day or for a number of days till it is settled.

The Dupam, according to its nature of sitting held at two distinct venues. Yallung Dupam generally held at open place or in open air called ZikoZarin. Because, as per their belief if such Dupam held in inside or confinement of house it would bring some adverse effect on the member of that house or in other word, the evil influence of such crime might be infected upon the member of that house. While on the other hand, Tugung Dupam held within the confinement of house, or inside the house called Namra. Thus, the venue of the Dupam of the study area is associated with some socio-religious sanctions. Besides with every conclusion of Dupam i.e. Settlement of any disputes (Yallung) or any issue is mark by performing of a ceremony called Pahi-Pader or Pahi by killing Mithun (Sebe) or Pig (Erik) or fowls (Puruk) by the priest called Nyibuk.

It is noteworthy to mention that, in organizing Dupam the agents or inter-mediator popularly known as Gedung, Peko or Potam play very significant role. The Peko or Potam serve as negotiator or mediator in all business related and matrimonial cases. While, Gedung is employed as negotiator or mediator in, cases of civil and criminal nature. And their service the Gedung, Peko, Potam gets rewards (Bejo) in the form of Lampe from their respective clients. It is quite often observed that the institution of Gedung /Gindung has been misquoted as traditional village council among Nyishi. In fact, the gedung is not a council in itself rather it is a part of a council i.e. Dupam (Nyele / Nele/ Mel by others) who serves as an agent to organize the Dupam proceeding and help in resolving any matter or issues of both civil and criminal nature amicably. The Gedung may be of individual or group of individuals appointed by the people among them who are skill enough to negotiate and to settle any issue amicably.

CHANGES:

The introduction of Assam Frontier (Administration of justice) Regulation Act of 1945, IPC and CrPc had made certain changes in the power of the Dupam. The regulation although recognized the importance of the Dupam but at the same time it debarred it from dealing heinous crimes as classified under IPC and CrPc. However, it empowers the Dupam to try petty cases like theft, assault etc. within their jurisdiction and can imposed fine not exceeding Rs.50/= as well as to award payment in compensation to the extent of the injury sustained. While, before the introduction of this regulation the Dupam was only highest judicial body for settlement of all the cases in the village. There was no alternative other than Dupam and any extraneous influence or interferences in its working. Its decision was final and binding. But the introduction of this regulation deprived Dupams competence to deal with cases of serious and heinous crimes. Further the section 24 of the regulation also changes the mechanism of seeking redress. According to this, the party against any penalty by way of compensation or restitution has been awarded, can have the right to appeal to Political Officer or Assistant Political Officer now called Deputy Commissioner or Extra Assistant Commissioner against the decisions of the Dupam (village council). Thus, it provides opportunity to the people to approach the court of law if they are not satisfied with the judgments of Dupam, approach can also be made directly to court without any intimation to the Dupam by an individual, if he desire. Changes are also occurred in leadership patterns of Dupam. Since, the regulation I of 1945 relieved Dupam of the responsibilities of the security and maintenance of law and order in the village. These functions have been entrusted to the Administrative Officers like Circle Officer (C.O), EAC or SDO etc. with the help of police force. Besides, it has brought changes in the composition and leadership of the Dupam. Earlier, the village elders and the adult members of the village who are well verse in traditional customs and customary laws were the member of the Dupam, and they were entrusted with the responsibilities of Dupam proceedings, but these were also dominated by GaonBura (GB) a new institution of village leadership. These GaonBuras were appointed by the government to assist the Dupam in its working. For that they were conferred red coat as an insignia of their authority. They discharge their duty as the representative of the administration, headmen of the village and chairman of the Dupam. Thus, become more powerful in dealing various cases of civil and criminal nature in the village. Besides, GB Political interpreter (PI) is yet another important government agent who also play significance role in this direction.

The introduction of Panchayat Raj in the state further restricted the role of Dupam. In the spheres of developmental activities, the Dupam is virtually left with no say. The planning and implementation of various schemes for village welfare and development are carried out by the government agencies in consultation with the Panchayat leaders. These new guards of the village i.e Gram Panchayat Member (GPM), Anchal Samiti Member (ASM), Zilla Parishad Member (ZPM) including Gaon Bura (GB) and Political Interpreter (PI), because of their linkage with administration and high-level politicians, they get respects from the villagers in spite of their comparative young age and lack of knowledge in customary laws. They play a pivotal role in decision making, maintaining peace and harmony and dispensing justice in the village under their jurisdiction.

Even the women who were not allowed to be a member of Dupam earlier, were also appointed as GB and get due representation in Panchayat bodies in various capacities and play an important role in Dupam proceeding and deliberation as member and actively participates and share opinion in the decision-making process as similar to their male counterpart. To sum up, the work of the Dupam with these changes now seem to be confine to the social and religious affairs and settle minor disputes in the village while, developmental activities were controlled by the administration and the Panchayat bodies. Henceforth the Dupam of the study area lost its status as enjoyed in early days. As a result, this age-old institution of self-governing system is at the verge of extinction.

CONCLUSION:

However, despite these changes owing to regular interference of administration and its appointed agents viz. GB, PI etc. does not succeed to bring any drastic or significance changes altogether in the status and the working of the Dupam and the people's attitude and confidence towards their age-old village council in resolving confrontation. Dupam still holds vital place among the Nyishi of study area. Even the people showed their keen enthusiastic to settle their dispute in Dupam prior to bring it before the court of law. And the intention is to avoid legal technicalities and official formalities. Thus, Dupam still play important role in dispensing justice, it tries all case of both civil and criminal nature according in conformity with their traditional customary laws. Till date it has successfully solved many of such cases of complex nature in the study area.

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