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Head Hunting: An Abandoned Practice Among The Nocte Tribe Of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Head hunting was a traditional mode of warfare practiced by the Nocte tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Many factors like establishment of superiority, control over land and water often led to conflict. This practice was given up after the establishment of administration in the region.

Keywords: Head hunting, Ran, Surprise raid, Ambush, Omen

Introduction:-

The Nocetes are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who are settled in Tirap district within the Patkai range in the North-east frontier of India. The district comprises 2362sqkm area which share border with Myanmar in the South, Nagaland in the West, Assam in the North and Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh in the East and is situated at an altitude ranging from 150 to 1500mtrs approximately. The Nocetes have legends of migration according to which they migrated to their present habitat much earlier than the thirteenth century; we can say they originally inhabited the Hukong Valley in then Burma. Literally 'NOC' implies village and 'TE' people. So a group of people residing in a particular place i.e. village can be described as the meaning of the word Nocte. The Nocetes are classified into different groups on the basis of the dialect spoken by them but still share common forms of socio-cultural life like chieftainship which still exist and head hunting which is abandoned.

Head Hunting and its causes:

The Nocetes had a strong tradition of head hunting in the past which make their socio-cultural life very unique from the rest of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Head Hunting was a practice that involved taking and preserving a person's head after killing them in Ran i.e. in raid or in war as a symbol of victory.

It is obscure as to how and when this practice emerged among the tribe. But it is a general belief that Head Hunting evolved because of the intention of the village chief to establish its superiority over other villages. The Nocte villages were frequently in conflict with one another. The powerful villages with superior man-power were always in a look out to attack the less powerful and bring them under control and establish their paramountcy. Disputes over land and water were the basic causes that led to inter-village feuds which used to culminate in Head Hunting.

In the olden days salt-wells were considered to be a property and to control and maintain that right villages used to fight among themselves. Namsang and Borduria the two paramount villages of Nocte area were very rich in salt-wells and they often fought with neighboring villages.

Sometimes some family affairs and feeling of revenge also resulted in feud resulting in Head Hunting.

Conflict also arose because of the Chief of a village wanting to acquire more wives.

Methods of Head Hunting:

The most common practice of Head Hunting among the Noctes was to raid a village stealthily or by ambushing. There are also cases of one village challenging the other. In the case of a challenge the information used to be sent by a messenger who carried two bamboo sticks tied together, one stick made pointed and the other blunt. The blunt stick meant the taking of head and if the people of the village to which the challenge was offered accepted they made both the sticks blunt and returned these by the messenger. Fighting began from the next day. If the sticks were returned as they were or with the blunt end made pointed this meant that the other village wanted to live as friends and had also refused the challenge, so peace.

Surprise raids were often conducted by leaders selected from among the experienced head hunters with superior strength and ability. Omens were taken by the village priest to foresee the outcome and if they were good the expedition started, otherwise not.

The Noctes rely on various methods of divination to see the omens. It can be seen on an egg, on the liver of a chicken, by bursting the node of a special kind of bamboo or by splitting the leaf of a kind of reed. In some villages, the yoke and white of an egg were thoroughly mixed and carried in a bamboo tube. The mixture was then poured on the boundary of the other village while the priest uttered an incantation which made the people remain fast asleep. Having cast this spell, the village was raided and heads of all persons irrespective of age and sex was taken away. Sometimes houses were burnt and the whole village used to be destroyed. In such surprise attacks, men were also taken as captives. There is mention in some old records that the Laju people supplied such captives for human sacrifice to the Rangpangs.

In this manner, the present Laptang village destroyed one nearby village and Soha destroyed the original inhabitants of the present Mopaya village. In raid and head hunting, the Noctes used their broad bladed dao, spears and occasionally muzzle loading guns. They also used shields of bark during the fights.

After a Raid:

After a successful raid the brave Nocte returned, dancing and singing, shouting and firing guns. Upon reaching the village they played the log-drum to proclaim their victory. Then they went round the village, dancing all the way and dragging the heads fetched. The heads were then collected in one place and one of the old men then took powdered rice and egg and threw it on the heads to drive out the hostile spirits of the dead. The heads were then hanged in a tree.

On harvesting of new paddy, a festival called Khotang was performed with great merriment, pomp and grandeur to celebrate the Head Hunting. The successful head hunters were tattooed before the festival and they were entitled to wear brass metal necklace bearing replica of human head as a mark of head hunter. The village prepared for this sufficiently ahead and brewed large quantity of rice beer where each family contributed one pig for the feast.

The heads were then boiled, cleaned properly and exhibited in one place. After the feast the head hunters and other male member danced around the heads. At the end of the festival the heads were properly kept in the village Morung or Paang.

End of Head Hunting:

The creation of separate administrative unit called Tirap Frontier Tract in 1943 brought the area under active administration of the government which helped in putting an end to the practice of head hunting among the Nocte tribe. Besides, the changes brought in the socio-cultural life of the Noctes with the spread of Vaishnavism by Bare Ghar Satra of Sasoni(Assam) and Christianity also made tremendous impact on the practice of head hunting among the Noctes. Though the practice of head hunting is abandoned but still its mementos are kept and properly maintained at Morung or Paang according to the tradition and customs of the Noctes. It is noteworthy to mention that the last head hunting took place between Borduria and Khela village in the year 1946.

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