

Significance of Buliang and the needs for its Re-vitalization in the socio-cultural milieu of the Apatanis

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ABSTRACT: *The Apatanis has developed a well organized system of government ministered by the representatives of clans – The Buliangs – constitute a village council (Buliang) that has been functioning as an effective village government, supported by social and religious sanctions. This council regulates and administers the community mostly at the village level. However, the limit of Buliangs lies in that they do not handle the cases involving two or few individuals unless it reaches the clan or community level. Their functions and effectiveness is strengthened by the major elements or driving forces of peace, respect, and mutual relations which brings harmony to the Apatani society. Nevertheless, due to the influence of other external agencies, this institution may be subjected to further re-shaping and re-structuring of its better kind and should be carefully preserved and passed through generations, no matter what kind of modifications it might go through in future.*

KEY WORDS: *Political Organization; Re-vitalization; Social control; Society; Village council;*

I. INTRODUCTION

The most remarkable feature of tribal life in North East India and more specifically Arunachal Pradesh is the political organization. Here, *Political Organization* may be defined as ‘that part of a culture which functions explicitly to direct activities of the members of a society towards community goals or public affairs’. Many studies have revealed that most of the tribal communities of this region have their own system of political organization, a kind of judicial machinery to deal with disputes, breaches of peace and social offences at the village level (Furer-Haimendorf, 1946, 1947, 1955, 1962; Elwin, 1959, 1988; Vidyarthi & Rai, 1967). The mechanism functions through its officers who are known by different designations (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1967) and which reflects the indigenous administrative set-up of the people in their own type, nature, and needs. The Apatanis, one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, is no less exception. This tribal group has developed a well organized system of government - a village council that has been functioning as effective village government, supported by social and religious sanctions, since times immemorial (Dubey, 1998). This local government is run by a council of representatives from the clans and has some social control over its people. The representatives of the clans, who in their plurality constitute a kind of village government, are the *Buliangs* (Elwin, 1959). According to Kani (1993), the term *Buliang* stands for the clan or village representative who meditates among mankind. Traditionally, there are four types of Buliang, viz. *Neha Buliang*, *Kiimer Buliang*, *Kiidi Buliang* and *Muddo Buliang*. *Neha Buliang* is highest authority and upholder of unwritten code of customary laws. *Kiimer Buliang*, a woman mainly responsible for work of castration of male boars. *Kiidi Buliang* assists the priest at the time of rituals and funeral ceremonies; whereas, *Muddo Buliang* is a priest who holds the charge of conducting the agricultural ceremonies and other religious functions for plague and epidemics (Kani, 1993). However, our emphasis here will be mainly on *Neha Buliang*. In other words, in the context of this paper the term *Buliang* refers to *Neha Buliang* who is mainly responsible for regulation and administration of norms and sanctions in the society. A diagrammatic presentation of the different types of *Buliang* is given in Figure 1.

The Apatanis are the native settlers of the Ziro valley (which is nearly 1058 km²), Lower Subansiri District in the central western part of Arunachal Pradesh, India between 26° 55' - 28° 21' N and 92° 40' - 94° 21' E; with an approximate elevation of 5000 feet above the mean sea level. The word *Apatani* is composed of two words viz. *Apa* and *Tani*. According to the local language, *Apa* means ‘display of affection’ and *Tani* stands for ‘human race’. The Apatanis belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock and speaks their own dialect that falls under the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. The Apatani society spreads between seven villages of Hari, Bulla, Hija, Mudang Tage, Bamin-Michi, Dutta, and Hong, divided into two groups of villages viz. *Diibo Asso* and *Tinii Asso*. The former group constitutes Bamin-michi, Mudang tage, Dutta, Hari, and Bulla (Tailyang-Kalung) villages and the later comprises of Hija, Hong, and Bulla (Reru-Tajang) villages. The purpose of this division is

most probably for political and socio-religious integration (Kani, 1993). Each village constitutes number of clans belonging to a particular social class which are made up of families or households formed by individuals. Thus, according to Dube's (1971) opinion of Indian tribes, Apatani society may be considered of comprising six levels of social organization viz. Individual, Family, Clan, Social Class, Village, and Tribe. Most Apatanis have their own traditional system of indigenous belief called *Donyi Polo* though the trend has slightly changed in the recent years due to rapid influence of other religions. They are patriarchal in social system.

This paper is an attempt to portray the political organization, role and functions of *Buliang* and thereby to understand the cultural significance of this polity in maintaining social control within the society. An attempt has been also made to discuss the changes that have taken place in the traditional village council of the Apatanis due to the influences of external socio-political agencies and the needs for the re-vitalization of this unique and indigenous political organization of the Apatani society. All the information was collected by the authors through unstructured interview with the elder members of the Apatani society, those who are well-versed and could provide the relevant information regarding *Buliang*. Information from secondary sources was also used.

Political Organization:

The Apatanis, with their closely knit co-operative social system, and villages in close proximity to one another, have developed a highly organized system of government (Furer-Haimendorf, 1946), in the form of a village council where, the representative of the clans constitute a village government – *The Buliangs*. The traditional village council, which regulates and administers the community, consists of three bodies viz. *Akha Buliangs*, *Yapa Buliangs*, and *Ajang Buliangs* (Elwin, 1959). In each of these institutions, has one or more persons represents from each clan depending on the size of a clan. For example, *Buru* clan is one of the smallest clan in the society and has only one *Buliang*. Originally, the council of *Buliangs* consists of clan representatives that are collectively known as *Neha Buliang*. However, the three forms of *Buliang* were adopted in due course of evolution of the society based on the situation and needs of the Society. Kani (1993) clarified that *Ajang Buliang* was a newly adopted *Buliang* which was nominated during the time of reliance of *Buliang* due to hostility among the Apatanis in the 19040s and *Yapa Buliangs* were the elder assistances during crisis of village affairs. Each *Buliang* (who is an informal agency of clan representatives) is a time honored institution respected by the clans and had been able to maintain peace and harmony in the society. The position of *Buliang* is normally heredity within the clan. However, a man's position in the community is largely dependent on the strength of his character, intelligence and wealth. Persons of integrity, ability, status, social reputation, energy and wisdom are drawn to represent their clans in the village council. They are arbiters of tribal law and provide leadership in dealing with neighboring tribes.

According to Elwin (1959), the *Akha Buliangs*, has permanent members who happen to be wise, aged, and experienced and can take a very active part in the conduct of village affairs but with whom lies the ultimate decision in all important matters. They are invariably consulted on all occasions in their role as advisors. *Yapa Buliangs*, consists of the middle aged persons who carry on negotiations and sit in the village councils and who keep the *Akha Buliangs* informed of developments and place agreed settlements and disputes before them for sanction. On the other hand, *Ajang Buliangs*, young persons who are employed as messengers, go-betweens and assistants of the *Yapa Buliangs*, and act as the leaders of the young generation. However, in practice, this division of duties is not always clear-cut, and some of the older *Ajang Buliang* assumes gradually the function of *Yapa Buliang*. Membership to the council is purely on the basis of merit and virtue. Every clan offers one experienced and elderly *Buliang* (*Akha Buliang*). The middle age *Buliang* (*Yapa*) and the young *Buliang* (*Ajang*) gets promoted to *Akha Buliang* in due course. The ways for selection and promotion of *Buliang* within a clan rests with *Akha Buliang*. The *Akha Buliang* appoint the *Ajang Buliang* from amongst the ranks of eligible young men, and in making this selection, the *Akha Buliang* does not necessarily give preference to members of his own clan, but sees to that his clan-group is represented by mean of talent and efficiency. Usually, *Yapa Buliang* does not become *Akha Buliang* until the death of the *Akha Buliang* representing his group of clans (Elwin, 1988).

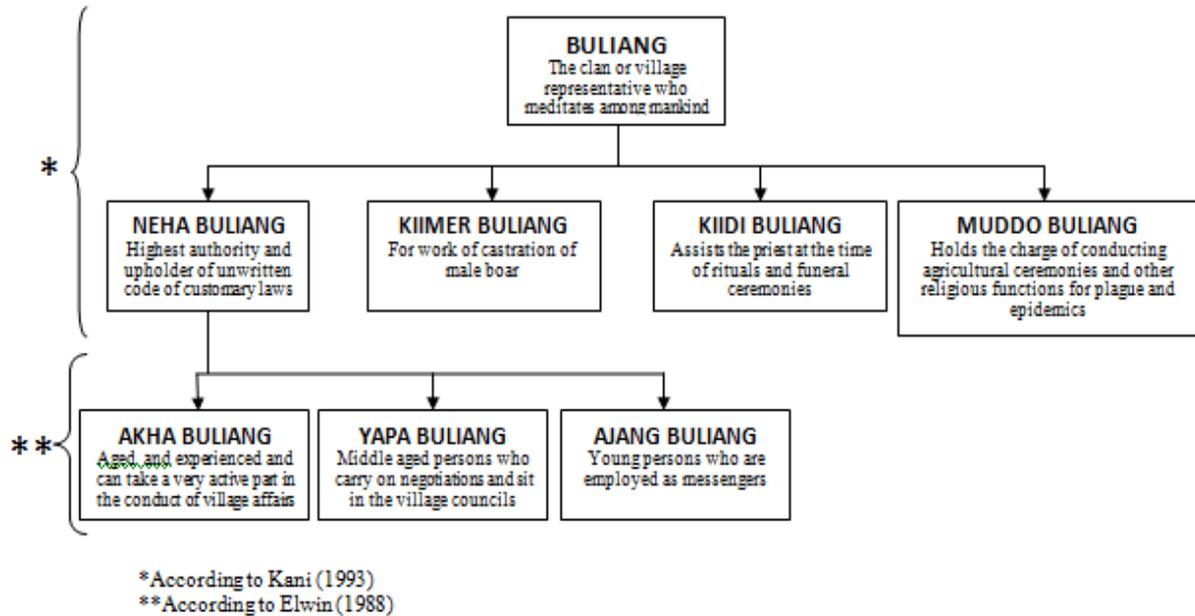


Figure 1. A schematic presentation of the different types of *Buliang*.

For the Apatanis, *Buliangs* are men of character and ability, who are appointed either from among the members of the family, which owing to its wealth and status, always furnished one or two *Buliangs*, or on account of their personal influence in the community (Elwin, 1988). They are primarily the spokesmen of their own clan or clan group and not as village headman invested with absolute authority. Earlier, the *Buliangs* had a strong control over the affairs of a society whether it was judicial, political, economic, cultural, or religious. They had a strong healing power and role of fixation of the indigenous festival timing like *Myoko* and carrying out the procession called *Khibo Indo*.

Role and Functions of *Buliang* council:

Even though the council of *Buliangs* does not have a clear-cut separation of powers of modern political organization viz. legislature, executive and judiciary; and appears to be homogenous, yet it serves as an important mechanism of maintaining law and order within the society of the Apatanis. However, in most of the cases, the functions of *Buliang* seem to be more Judicial (Elwin, 1988; Furer-Haimendorf, 1946). According to Yapa (1999), the judicial power of the council of *Buliang* is basically in dealing with two types of cases – *Civil cases* which include hunting, fishing, land, inheritance, marriage, etc. and *Criminal cases* which includes murder, thief, burglary, elopement, adultery. In both the cases however, the *Buliang* provides the enforcement of laws through public opinion since they are the representatives of the public. The decision of enforcing the sanctions and punishment depends largely on public opinion and the nature and degree of crime or misconduct. The sanction may range from negotiation, fines, compensation or even capital punishment⁴, etc. However, there is a fundamental distinction in the attitude of the people to what appears to them as common crimes and to acts of violence and high-handedness (Furer-Haimendorf, 1962). Above all, the supreme aim of this institution on the part of *Buliangs* is to preserved social harmony and equilibrium through their role in settling disputes and punishment of criminals.

Social control and cultural significance of *Buliangs*:

In anthropological usage, the concept of culture is broad and comprehensive. Each and every manifestation of human existence is culture. The numerous behaviors that govern the way of life in any society e.g. economic, political, religious, social, etc. are parts of culture. Social life as such, is the essence of human life that grows out of constant patterning of social interactions and relationships among human beings which indeed includes the political aspect of society. There seems to be no society where political activities are non-existence...even the smallest community requires some form of government (Vidarthi & Rai, 1967). Among the Apatanis, *Buliangs* are the representatives of each clan at the village council which functions as a judiciary machinery to deal with disputes, breaches of peace and social offences primarily at the village level. The council has some social control over its people. The significance of the council lies in the fact that in Apatani society, life and responsibility is so often corporate rather than individual.

The village council performs very few functions but seldom formulates laws which are generally customary (Sharma and Sharma, 1999). Customary laws in tribal society are informal and elastic, but these are well suited for maintenance of order in society and enable its members to lead their lives in peace and tranquility (Roy, 1960). The life of the Apatanis is generally regulated by customs and traditions in social, economic and political sphere. Therefore, the function of the council (*Buliangs*) is not to formulate laws but to see that customs and traditions are followed. But when they take action, the people must honor their decisions. Further, people's life is quite simple and plain and does not require control through so many rules and regulations.

This is no longer practiced now

Hence also it is not necessary that laws may be formulated. In addition, *Buliang* is a generally honored institution comprises of members respected by the clans and considered by the people to have wide powers in dealing with matters involving breaches of customary law. Though the *Buliangs* never expect any benefit in return of their service, yet the people award them with some ceremonial gifts during *Myoko* and *Murung* festival. The Apatanis have a strong belief that their customs were derived supernaturally and religious faith was the sanction behind their customs. To disobey the community custom means to insure the displeasure of the gods. Tradition, social boycott, force, fear of punishment etc. are the other allied but associated sanctions behind community laws; their rule of conduct is based upon the ethical principles of their society.

Limitations of Buliangs:

Though *Buliangs* are the arbiters of tribal law and upholders of justice in the society, their power is limited. They neither constitute a tribal government nor do they function in a manner of judges in a court of law. They meet informally and tend to take action without arranging for a formal hearing and trial. The degree of punishment depends on the types of offences. Their duties are not those of police issue which must be dealt with by the community as a whole, be it by mediation or by the use of force (Furer-Haimendorf, 1946). The limit of *Buliangs* lies in that they have no absolute power to do arbitration and do not take any action unless a dispute of public or an individual has become public issue (Kani, 1993). In other words, the *Buliangs* do not handle the cases involving two or few individuals unless it reaches the clan or community level. This great individualistic nature of the Apatanis restricts their indulgence in personal and petty disputes. Personal and petty disputes are sought to be settled within the clan on mutual understanding among the families of the disputants. In addition, there is a strong loyalty among the Apatanis to one's own clan groups (Dubey, 1998). However, despite of its limitations, the *Buliangs*, who are mainly responsible for maintaining peace not only within the village but also among other Apatani villages, will never allow the community interest as a whole to be jeopardized by clan or individual interest.

Influence of external agencies:

In the contemporary context, the power of *Buliang* has been weakened and limited due to induction and establishment of modern governance and administration in the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. The implementation of *Assam Frontier Administration of Justice Regulation 1945, section 19, section 20*; has limited the functions of the traditional *Buliang* council (Yapa, 1999). Today, the role of traditional indigenous political system as a judicial machinery has been replaced by modern political institutions to some extent. With the creation of posts of *Goan boras* who are appointed by the government settles most of the disputes at the village level thereby, clearly shifting the balance of power in settling the disputes of the villages to this institution of *Goan buras*. Many of the cases are also directly taken to the courts with the introduction of Indian legal system. Modern representative members such as MLAs and Panchayat leaders, who are popularly elected, enjoy wider supports and influence in the village affairs. This shifting of influence in favor of modern political institutions has the affect of weakening the role and influence traditional institution of *Buliang* of the Apatanis. In the cultural context, the influence of other religions like Christianity, Hinduism, etc. has also affected the institution of *Buliangs*. The earlier role of the *Buliang* in fixing the timing of the indigenous festivals like *Myoko* and carrying out the procession called *Khiibo Indo* is also on decline. Similarly, the earlier magico-religious healing power associated with the *Buliang* has been declining with the diversion of indigenous faith due to availability of modern medical facilities. The progressive society of the Apatanis also brought changes in the service sector. Many of the younger generation today are engaged in the government services and business of different types which demands lots of their time. An Apatani who is in such service and is also eligible for inheriting the charge of *Buliang* traditionally may find difficult in discharging the role of *Buliang*.

The needs for re-vitalizing the System:

From the Socio-cultural point of view, the system of traditional institution of *Buliangs* is in fact important to be considered. It is a system which saves internecine strife a community of over 20, 000 tribesmen who live crowded together in a valley of hardly 20 square miles, obviously fulfills a very valuable function in tribal life (Elwin, 1988). The need for the re-vitalizing and re-shaping the traditional institution is important to save the many of the declining traditional institutions. Re-vitalization requires re-shaping and re-organizing of

the *Buliang* institution in tune with the contemporary changes without losing its originality. In the recently conducted meeting for revitalization of *Buliang*², all the *Buliangs* of the Apatani villages agreed to propose to constitute *Supung Buliang* council. This council is supposed to be a one common council of *Buliangs* for the entire Apatani society. It is sought to be created by merging the earlier two groups viz. *Diibo Asso* and *Tinii Asso*. It was suggested that delegation of power to this *Supung Buliang* council from *Supung-Dapo* – which is the book of rules and regulations for the Apatanis can give back the some of the powers to the *Buliangs*. *Supung Buliang* council proposes to have regular sessions to decide the cases. Registration of the council so as to get recognition from the government and also to aid the government in sharing the burden of settling the disputes and internal affairs by judiciary is necessary. Therefore, reshaping of *Buliang* in this fashion can strengthen and re-vitalize the declining role of *Buliang* council.

II. DISCUSSION

The council of *Buliangs* is an essential part of Apatani political organization that has all the rights in internal affairs. Each village is the unit of administration and is self sufficient in carrying out local self-government. The main functions of the *Buliangs* can be understood in the context that they are mostly responsible in settling the disputes at the village level, though in some cases, it might reach to the inter-village or even tribe level. However, the basic aim of this council is to maintain peace and legal order within the society. It appears that among the Apatanis, peace, respect, mutual relations, are the major elements or driving forces that brings

The meeting was held on November, 11th 2012 at Bulla Farm Meeting Hall, Ziro (Arunachal Pradesh) harmony to their society. Furer-Haimendorf (1962), has rightly stated that ‘the Apatanis know very well that their complex economy and their whole pattern of living can be maintained only peace reigns in the valley, and peace is assured by formal treaties of friendship between the individual villages’. The great annual *Myoko festival*, which is celebrated rotation-wise among the villages, serves as the strongest agent in maintaining relations and integration among the people. This integration is further strengthened by the mutual *Dapo* pacts of non-aggression among the seven villages (Dubey, 1998). The *dapo* pacts between villages of the Apatani valley are fundamental parts of the political system, and their conclusion lies in so distant a past that no one remembers the circumstances which led to their formulation (Furer-Haimendorf, 1962). According to Elwin (1988), *dapo* are the formal treaties of friendship between the individual villages.

It is also important to be noted that, *Buliang* is a council of respected members of high authority in the society. Since the *Buliangs* represents their respective clans, the decision made by the council may be considered as public opinion (*Buliangs* almost never violates the voice of the people). According to Sharma and Sharma (1999), public opinion has the strength of the whole society behind it...it is not the opinion of any particular individual, or group, and therefore, all the members of the society consider it their duty to act according to it. Public opinion depends on consideration of good and evil and every member of the society wants to see that current moral principles are obeyed. In the Apatani society too, every members of the society is abiding by the *Buliang* council’s norms and sanctions which controls and directs the behaviors of the members. An individual has no power when separated from the group nor does he possess any moral views of his own. It therefore, becomes necessary to obey the rules of the society. Moral and religious aspects also cannot be ignored in this society. Political organization is closely linked with people’s attitude, knowledge, and beliefs. Therefore, morality and social norms are not two different things. To disobey the community directives means disobeying social values and reflect a strong negative impression of misconduct or misdemeanor.

Despite its importance and effectiveness in the society, however, the *Buliang* council is subjected to change due to the influence of external agencies. The implementation of *Assam Frontier Administration of Justice Regulation 1945, section 19, section 20*; Appointment of posts of *Goan boras* who are appointed by the government, introduction of Indian legal system, influence of other religions like Christianity, Hinduism, etc has altogether contributed in weakening and limiting the role and functions of *Buliangs*. Therefore, from the socio-cultural point of view, it may be suggested that there is a need for the institution of *Buliangs*, to be re-vitalized as per the needs of the changes of the situation. Furer-Haimendorf (1947) has rightly stated that with the gradual growth of collaboration and increased contacts with the outside world, the Apatanis themselves may feel the need for a more regular procedure, and they may then be persuaded to form a court consisting of selected councilors from all the seven villages, which would try all cases of serious crime. The meeting that was recently held among all the *Buliangs* of all the villages was in fact one of such major steps. The constitution of *Supung Buliang*, through its well organized policies and indigenous arbitration might also become helpful not only for the welfare and preservation of the cultural heritage of the Apatanis but also might aid helpful for the government administration in handling the internal affairs.

III. CONCLUSION

The Apatani society has developed a well effective village government that handles disputes and internal affairs mainly at the village level. Though the *Buliang* council is highly an authorized body of self-government, yet because of the influence of external agencies, this institution may be subjected to further re-shaping and re-structuring of its better kind. No doubt, as the society as a whole is never static, so also the various social institutions that falls within it are subjected to change and external influences. Therefore, the limitations, functions, and effectiveness of the *Buliangs* can be made effective only when an adjustment is made according to the needs of the situation. Furer-Haimendorf (1946), considered this system fulfilled 'a very valuable function in tribal life', and urged that government should strengthen it and 'avoid any course of action which might detract from its influence and authority'. Therefore, for a highly conservative, and endogamous, society of the Apatanis, this system of peace and legal order, should be preserved and passed through generations, no matter what kind of modifications it might go through in future.

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