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## **Patterns of Chieftainship with Special Reference to the Sumi Nagas of Northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

*Every society whether civilized or primitive had some kind of political organisations in order to regulate the behaviour of its members. However, the nature of political system differed from society to society. Many ethnic communities had chieftainship as the system of governance. The paper is an attempt to study the existence of traditional chieftainship of different ethnic communities with special reference to the Sumi Naga tribe. An important feature of the Sumi is the institution of chieftainship at village level. Every Sumi village has a chief who is known as 'Akukau.' Traditional Sumi chieftainship was autocratic who controlled the social, economic and political life of his subjects. This institution has survived during the British period without any modifications. It continues to be an important institution even today. This paper attempts to find out how Sumi chieftainship has adapted itself to democratic system of governance introduced in Nagaland in recent times.*

## **Introduction**

No society even the simplest one, is without a system of political organisation. Anthropologists have studied the political organisation of different societies beginning from technologically simple primitive societies to technologically complex industrialised societies. Societies have used different forms of organisation to exercise control and regulate over its members. Political system was necessary to organise group efforts for public work such as tribal hunts, agricultural production and other community works. To carry out rituals and ceremonies to control the supernatural world, for defence of one's territory, waging war against the enemy, to organise marketing and trading network for economic prosperity etc. Thus political organisation played an important role which forced the society to conform to its norms (Dash, 2004). Anthropologists identified four types of socio-political organisations: band, tribe, chiefdom and state. Of the above mentioned organisations, the first two are categorised as uncentralised organisations because political authority or power is vested in kinship, age and common interest groups. In the two organisations, leaders do not possess power to force people to comply with customs or laws, but on the other hand decisions are made in a democratic manner - consensus involving both men and women. For eg. among the Inuit bands the leaders are usually male. However men often consult their wives and women involved in hunting were more influential than those who did not. The nature of society was egalitarian. The latter two organisations are categorised as centralised political systems. Unlike the preceding two organisations, political authority and power are concentrated in a single individual - the chief, or in a body of individuals - the state (Haviland, 1999; Ember et al, 2017).

According to anthropologists, chiefdom is a regional polity in which two or more local groups are organised under a single

chief, who is at the head of a ranked hierarchy, and whose office is hereditary and primogeniture is the rule. Hence, chiefdom refers to a relatively large area within which there are several settlements or villages, wherein the chief is the authoritative figure and exercise control over them (Haviland, 1999). In the classification and definitions of socio-political organisations given by Anthropologists, chiefdom is understood as a relatively large area within which there are several settlements or villages. On the other hand, among the Sumi every village has a chief. Therefore the definition of chiefdom as given by Anthropologists may not be applicable in dealing with Sumi chiefs. Nevertheless, some of the features of chiefdoms identified by the Anthropologists can help in understanding the nature of Sumi chieftainship.

### **Chieftainship of Ethnic Communities**

Chieftainship of different types is found in ethnic communities around the world. For example, among the Mekeo group of the Western Melanesian society there are two types of chieftainship – the military and the civilian. The military chiefs are responsible for all matters relating to warfare and security of its people. They are assisted by Fai'a Lopia (war magician) who decide when and where to fight or not to fight. While the civilian chiefs are referred to as peace chiefs who are devoid of warlike virtues, but assisted by the Ungaunga (sorcerers). The Ungaunga (sorcerers) are regarded as 'chief policemen' because they reputedly enforced the authority of the chiefs and backed them (Hau'ofa, 1971).

Gluckman (1950) in his study on the organisation of the people in Zululand of South Africa points out that the Zulus owe their allegiance to a common head (king) who exercises judicial, administrative and legislative authority over his people. He performs religious ceremonies and magical acts on behalf of

the nation. According to Gluckman (1950), Zulus are divided into a large number of political groups called tribes headed by the chiefs. The tribes are subdivided into smaller groups (wards) headed by the relatives of the chiefs or men of other clans who are responsible to the chiefs. Hence, the authority of the king is expressed through the chiefs.

A similar political system is also found among the Ngwato ethnic folk of the Bechuanaland protectorate. Schapera (1950), in his article, 'The Political organization of the Ngwato of Bechuanaland Protectorate,' mentions that the chief is the central figure around whom the folk life revolves and through whom the activities of the community are ordered and controlled. He is the ruler and judge, author and guardian of its laws and director of its economic life and its leader, priest and magician. For administrative purposes, the ethnic folk is divided into wards (villages) under the leadership and authority of hereditary headmen. The village headman is the medium through whom the chief communicates with the inhabitants of the village. The authority of the chief is his birthright. Chieftainship is hereditary in the male line passing normally from father to son.

Leach (1954) has made a comparative study on the Gumsa chiefs among the Kachins and found that the Gumsa chiefs were autocratic in nature and had slaves who were the property of the chiefs. Among the Gumsa the youngest son succeeds his father.

### **Chieftainship in North East India**

In the North East, not all but several cultural communities of the region followed the system of chieftainship. However, chieftainship underwent changes during the British period. After India's Independence and the introduction of democratic form of governance most of the cultural communities of the North East have adapted to the modern democratic system than their traditional system of governance. Nevertheless, the institution

of chieftdom among the hill communities of the region continues to be a common feature, which is still prevailing among many cultural communities of the region, in spite of the colonial power and influence. On the basis of the powers and functions held by the chiefs of numerous tribes of the region, chieftdoms can be classified into diverse categories depending upon the extent of power entrusted or held by them (Gassah, 1998.). According to Kumar (1998) chieftainship in the North East can be classified into three types viz: a) Where the chief is the political and religious head of the community; b) Who has political and economic powers; c) Democratically controlled chieftainship.

Dutta (2003) has done a comparative study on the chieftainship among four tribes of Arunachal Pradesh- Wanchos, Noctes, Tangsas and the Singphos. While, there is similarity in the chieftainship of Nocte and Wancho in matters of succession, marriage, functions, powers and privileges, there is no such similarity with that of the Tangsa and Singhpho chieftains, as they do not have powers and privileges like the Nocte and Wancho chiefs. The status, powers and functions of the chiefs remain the same even after the introduction of Panchayati Raj system among the Wanchos and Noctes. The only difference is that during the traditional days it was the duty of the chief to formulate work schemes but after the introduction of Panchayati Raj system it is done by the Government and other agencies. The chief's work is limited to supervision. However for any kind of village developmental work the village Chief is always consulted and no work how beneficial it might for the people it be can never be carried out without his consent. In fact the existence of chieftainship has helped the Government to introduce Panchayati Raj into their community without much difficulty. However in the other two communities the institution of chieftain is losing its importance. Among the Tangsa's the



institution of chieftainship has been replaced by the council of elders. The council of elders consists of a leader and members. The leader is selected from among a particular clan who is wealthy and intelligent and the members are selected from various clans based on their experience and knowledge about the customary rules and practices. In the case of Singpho's when chieftainship was active there was a well constituted village council headed by the chief. The village council decided all the affairs of the village. However with the passage of time the system has changed. Now they do not have a well organised village council. In case of settlement of dispute at the village level they constitute a sort of village panchayat consisting of the old members of the village and a Gaon Bura which is a government nominee. However case of inter village dispute it is settled by the chief though the chief does not hold any power over the people.

Chieftainship existed among the Mizos. The institution of chieftainship among the Mizo is autocratic, with power completely concentrated in the hands of the chief. After the annexation of the Lushai Hills (Mizoram) in 1890, the British recognised this institution and introduced the hereditary chieftainship, and made the chiefs as the intermediaries between the villages and the British officials. However, due to the autocratic nature of the institution of chieftainship people resented and revolted against. Hence, after India's Independence, the institution of chieftainship was abolished under the Assam-Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chief's Rights) Act of 1955 with a provision to pay compensation to the chiefs (Prasad, 1998).

Among the Kuki ethnic communities, the institution of chieftainship is the perennial source of Kuki customs, traditions and identity, which nothing can replace it. The chieftainship of the Kuki goes by hereditary succession where the eldest son succeeds his father. However, if the chief dies without a male successor,

the succession passes on to the nearest male member of the eldest surviving brother of the deceased. In any case, a daughter cannot become heir to the father. The Kuki chief enjoys enormous powers - executive, legislative, judicial and military powers. His word is law within his chieftdom and his decision is final. He owns the land within his boundaries. He is entitled to receive customary title and tributary privileges. After India's independence, the Acquisition of Chiefs Rights Act 1967 aimed at abolishing the rights of the chiefs over land. However, this Act received wide scale protest and despite various attempts to abolish the institution of chieftainship among the Kuki, the Kuki chieftainship unlike the Mizo and the cultural communities of Arunachal Pradesh still stand strong and have mass support (George, 2009).

### **Traditional Form of Governance among the Nagas**

Nagaland, one of the states of North East India, is the traditional habitat of several cultural communities who are known as the Nagas. According to Elwin (1961), the Nagas belong to the Indomongoloid racial group. Arya and Arya (2004) opined that every cultural communities of the Naga have its own distinct territory, economic system, beliefs and religious practices, language and culture. An important feature of Naga cultural communities is its distinctive system of administration and governance, which differs from communities to communities. The traditional political system of the Nagas ranged from the autocratic rule of a chief to a democratic form of governance. According to Nandi (2011) before the coming of the British colonial rule every Naga village was a miniature sovereign state in itself having its own system of governance. The different types of governing system found among the Nagas are:

- 1) Chieftainship with political, administrative, military and priestly powers obtained by the Konyak Ahghs. The Konyak Ahghs were secular as well as a religious heads.

There were hierarchy among the Anghs and the powerful Anghs controlled many villages under them. Primogeniture was the rule and based purely on the purity of blood.

- 2) Chieftainship with political, administrative and military powers obtained by the Sumi chiefs. Among the Sumis the one who establishes a village becomes the chief and thus he owned all lands in his village and acted as feudal lords. He remains the most powerful man in the village. The eldest son usually succeeds the father.
- 3) Chieftainship with limited powers found among the Zeme Nagas.
- 4) Thoroughly republican government found among the Ao Nagas. Each Ao village was a small republic. The entire Ao society has been structured under the system known as *Putu Menden* (the council of elders). This body is the highest level of authority. Representative from various clans form this council. This council of elders are selected for a certain number of years.
- 5) Extremely decentralised power structure among the Angami Nagas. In the Angami society there were neither village chiefs nor council of elders for village administration. There were hereditary village priest but without power. Issues were discussed during meetings where the whole village participated and ultimately they arrive at certain decision or consensus. In spite of the absence of visible government people were well disciplined.

Among the Naga tribal communities the Sumis and the Konyaks still have a strong inclinations towards the traditional form of governance. According to Haimendorf (1969) the Konyak society was divided between the chiefs and the commoners. They had powerful chiefs called as 'Ahngs' who controlled the political, economic and social life of the people.

The Konyak chiefs form the aristocrat family. The commoners owed him allegiance. They could not even approach him in an upright position. However this high rank position comes with an obligation. The chiefs could maintain their eminent position only through preserving purity of blood. Konyak (2009) in his study of the political institution of the Konyak Naga states that the Ahng (king) is the head of the society and his importance is considered to be next to that of God alone. The Ahng had the privilege of keeping a good number of concubines. However, the Queen (Ahngya) should be from the royal family who has the same status and prestige as that of the Ahng. Only the eldest son of the queen having royal blood can succeed his father. Purity of blood is strictly maintained in matters of succession. There is also a hierarchy among the Ahngs. The Pongyin Ahng (Great Angh) exercises supreme authority and controls all the proceedings in the Konyak society. Next in the hierarchy are the deputy Ahngs, who are the Ahngs of the villages under the control of the Great Ahng. The third category of Ahngs is referred to as small Ahngs - the nominal heads. In such a system, the council of elders looked after the administration. With the advent of the British to the Konyak area, the institution of Ahngship was recognised. In spite of the advance of modern democracy, this institution is found to be more effective than the modern institutions in matters of deciding cases and taking important decisions.

### **Sumi Chieftainship**

The institution of chieftainship is a common feature of the Sumis (Sumis where formerly known as the Semas) and it plays an important role in the village polity. The Sumis of Nagaland follow the traditional system of hereditary chieftainship. He is known as the 'Akukau' (Chief). The Sumi chiefs have political, administrative, military and economic powers. They are autocratic in nature. According to Davis (1891),

The main feature in which the Semas differ from the other Naga tribes living in the Naga Hills district in the past was the existence of hereditary village chiefs. These Sumi chiefs had many privileges, i.e. their subjects cut their jhum fields and cultivated for them for nothing, they got a portion of every animal killed in the chase, and generally were in a position far superior to that of any ordinary Naga headman. These chiefs invariably have three or four wives, and usually large families. It is the custom for the sons as they grow up to start new villages on their own account. We thus find that, as a rule, Sema villages are small as compared with the villages of other Naga tribe (Elwin, 1961, pp. 372-373).

Hutton (1921) in, *The Sema Nagas*, wrote that the position of the Sumi chiefs was such that “the real pivot of the Sema society is the chief.” Chieftainship of the Sumi is hereditary (Hutton, 1921 and Assumi, 2009). Among the Semas, the chief holds a high position. Thus a Sumi chief wants his sons or daughters to marry the sons or daughters of another chief. This is not only a question of status but of alliance in times of inter-village feuds and headhunting in the days of yore. In the present time, it is a matter of prestige (Gosh, 1998). However unlike the Konyak Nagas, there is no hierarchy among the Sumi in chieftainship. All chiefs have equal status (Sema 2013).

### **System of Chieftainship, Migration and Emergence of New a Village**

Hutton (1921) transcribed about the migratory nature of the Sumis that it is customary for a chief’s son to establish a village of his own at a convenient distance in which his authority is paramount. On the succession of chieftainship among the Sumis, Hutton expounded that the chief’s sons are sent to establish their

own villages during his lifetime. Jacobs *et al* (1990), opines that the Semas have powerful secular chiefs. According to them, expansion of the Sema areas involves colonization or seizure of land from others. This process of colonization is associated with strengthening of chieftainship. Shikhu (2007) augment on the Sumi diaspora says that the Sumi chieftainship is hereditary, and this one of the reasons why migration takes place when a person intends to establish his authority or has a difference with the chief of the village.

According to Gosh (cited in Karotemprel, 1998), the most prominent characteristics of the Sumis are their migratory habit and the system of chieftainship. Sumis, like many other ethnic communities, live in settled villages. However, they often break away from the parent village in order to find a new one. This is one of the reasons why Sumi villages are found in the areas of other communities and emergence of new chief and village is an on-going process. Thus, for the Sumis moving out of the ancestral land and the establishment a new village is well concealed in the system of chieftainship.

### **Guardian and Custodian**

As discussed in the above passage, among the Sumis, the evolution of chieftainship is associated with the setting up of new village. In the Sumi system of setting up a new village, the founders are usually the chief's brothers or sons who wanted to be chiefs of their own villages and live independently from his father or brother's control. Thus, each Sumi village is an independent state with the chief occupying a unique position as the arbitrator. The founder of the village is the guardian and the custodian of the village with the council of elders. Explicating on the guardianship and custodian ship, Hutton (1921a) states that if the sons of the chief are unable to establish villages of their own, the eldest son succeeds his father and his brothers

become sort of satellites. The chief/the founder of the village is the legal owner of the land. Though land is given to his subjects for cultivation, the ownership belongs to the chief. The Sumi Chief is both autocratic and benevolent. He is autocratic in the sense that he ruled arbitrarily over his subjects. He is benevolent as he is considered the ‘father’ by all his subjects. Being the founder of the village, the village is named after the chief. He is the guardian of the law and owner of the village. Hence, it is his duty to help his subjects in times of adversities (Sema, 2013). In times of war and disputes, it is the chief who lead and settles the dispute that arises within the village (Assumi, 2009).

According to Nshoga (2009), Sumi polity largely rest on the chief. The entire village land belongs to the chief where he gives some portion of arable land yearly to his subject for cultivation. He also had many dependents whom they usually call him as ‘father’ in due recognition. The dependents are usually ‘mighimi’ (orphans), akiwo (runaway from other village), aquaxemi (when a poor man do not have anything and he is been provided with clothing, food, domestic animals and shelter to start a family and also the ‘ame’ bride price is being paid by the chief). In this way, a close tie is usually created between the chief and his dependents in the form of land tenure. His dependents are obliged to render free labour services by working in his fields. They also see that the chief, his family and his property are well protected. As a tribute whenever an animal is hunted a leg is given to him or if any animal is slaughtered for feasts some portion of meat is always kept for the chief.

### **Land Holding**

The chief is the most powerful person in the village, he decides on the land to be cultivated and he distributes among the villagers. In return, every household is obliged to render to him twelve days’ labour (Assumi, 2009). According to Mazumdar

(2005), being the founder of the village he usually owns the land. Chieftainship is hereditary and succession is ruled by the rule of primogeniture. The agricultural fields are the chief's property who leases out plots to the villagers. In return, they work in his field free of charge and whenever anyone of them catches fish or hunts animal, the chief will undoubtedly get his royal share. The Sumi land holding system is connected with chieftainship. In the Sumi society, the chief is the most powerful person in the village. This is because the right to possess land starts from the beginning of the establishment of village. All land belongs to the chief, being the founder of the village. The rest of the villagers depend on the chief for cultivation of land and they become permanent tenants. Every year the chief distributes the land for cultivation. No money is paid for the use of land, but in return, every household is obliged to work in his field and as a mark of respect, he is given tributes. Thus, in Sumi villages, official land records are not maintained, as the chief and his deputies know it (Sema, 1986 and Assumi, 2009).

### **Power and Authority of the Chief**

According to Kumar (1998), the Sema chiefs are the chiefs with political and economic powers because of their control over the agricultural lands and forests of their villages. Nandi (2011) further adds that the Sumi chiefs have political, administrative and military powers. According to him, the Sumi chiefs act as feudal lords and wielded absolute control over its members because the sole ownership of the land belongs to the chiefs. In social affair too, the Chiefs and their council of advisers always have an upper hand. The chiefs are the one who assign the land to individual households for cultivation, settled disputes, and punished the offenders. The authority of allocation of land to the individuals and the site for cultivation rests with the Chiefs (Raypa, 1994).



According to Prakash (2007), the Sumi chiefs not only exercise authority but also have certain responsibilities and reciprocal privileges. His main duties are to lead the village in war, decide on the land for jhum cultivation and to take decisions relating to political matters between his own and neighbouring villages. Prakash (2007) further argues that the chieftain families formed an aristocracy being physically, morally and intellectually the best among the members of their community. It is beyond doubt that the Sumi Chief has power and authority, however, what is to be noted here is that the ownership and control of land provides the chief with latent powers over his members.

### **Administration and Governance**

The Sumis, by tradition have a very strong body of village administration and governance headed by a chief. The person who establishes the village becomes the chief. The post of chief is usually hereditary and usually it goes to the eldest son. In case of settlement of dispute the chief would be assisted by his chochou (spokesman) or chochomi (plural form) and elders whom the chief selects from amongst the different clans whom the chief selects from amongst the clans who followed him during the establishment of the village. However in terms of decision making the chief took the major role. His word was final. Cases that could not be solved within the family, clan or the disputed parties were decided in the village administrative court headed by the chief (James, 2013). Hence, the real pivot of the Sumi village administration and governance is the chief. He can expel a family or a person from the village and withdraw the right to possess and use land (Srinivasan and Haloi, 1997).

### **Continuity of Sumi Chieftainship**

Like many other hill communities, Sumi chieftainship is autocratic. In comparison with other Naga communities, the Sumi

chiefs alone have monopoly over the ownership of the village land. Nevertheless, it has survived the British period without any modifications and continues to be an important institution even today. According to Sema (1992), after the British occupation of the Naga areas, the British recognised the role of the traditional chiefs in those communities where it was practised and elders or headman in some other communities as their representative for carrying out the orders of the government in their respective villages. With the gradual expansion, they also began to appoint village chiefs according to the local customs and practices. The term Gaon Bura (an elder in the village) was used to address the chiefs and elders or headman of the village. The purpose of using the term ‘Gaon Bura’ was to give recognition to the select few Naga elders, chiefs, kings for their services while also bringing about a common name to similar words used by the Nagas. Thus the institution of Gaon Bura came into existence after the coming of the Britishers to the Naga Hills. Even in the context of the Sumis the term ‘Akukua’ has been made equivalent to Gaon Bura which may actually be closer to village chief. In recognition for their services rendered a red blanket was given to them which was considered to be more valuable and useful than the medal or certificate for the Nagas in those times (submission of the committee report for appointment of GBs, 2013). Ever since among the Sumis the term GB became a common usage to refer to the akukau (chief) or kukami (chiefs). However the term GB does not refer to the actual meaning of *akukau* because as mentioned it refers to an elder in a village and they are appointed by the Government whose post is not hereditary. Therefore the Sumi Kukami Hoho (The Apex body of the Sumi Kukami) during the meeting of all Sumi GBs including its representatives from its other units like Northern Sumi Kukami Hoho, Eastern Sumi Kukami Hoho, Western Sumi Kukami Hoho, and Sumi Kukami Hoho held at Kiyezhe village Dimapur, on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017 resolved to replace the usage of the term GB with Akukau

in all Sumi villages. It was also resolved that those Sumi individuals appointed by the State Government in wards, towns, colonies, sectors etc might continue to use the title GB since their appointment was time bound and not hereditary. However GBs appointed by government cannot use the title ‘Akukau’ since it is handed down through family lineage. Sumis replace the usage of GB with Akukau (Morung Express 2017).

After the attainment of statehood and introduction of modern democratic institutions like the Village council and Village Development, the institution of chieftainship was strengthened by the new Acts of Parliament to maintain status quo. The Village Council Act 1970 protects the interests of the chiefs and empowers them to hold the post of the chairperson of the village council in addition to the post of the chief of the village. In the village he still holds a high position. He is respected and regarded by all. No major decisions are taken without his consent. He plays an important role in village administration despite the emergence of elected representatives in the form of village council. Thus chieftainship continues to carry its weight not only in the village administration but also in the state politics, and it is worth noting that no one dares to go against this institution (Sema, 2013). Hence, we may conclude that the chieftainship of the Sumi is an integral part of Sumi cultural life, and it continues to be an important part of Sumi’s identity. While we acknowledge the continuation and importance of the system of chieftainship in the Sumi society, we also submit that it is undergoing modifications or changes, especially in areas of exercise of powers, land holding, privileges and on-going establishment of new villages, which need further research.

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