Comment

Traditional Village Government of the Tribal Societies of the North-east

One of the important features of the tribal society in North-east region is their traditional form of village government. Each tribe has its own pattern of village government. In some cases, the variations are found even within a single tribe. Needless to say that this institution has been evolved out of the people’s own experiences about the needs of different kinds such as production of food, defence of village against hostile forces, and management of inter-village relationship. The continuation of the traditional system also provides a sense of security. The villages follow a Constitution of the village government. It is not a written Constitution, but it is passed on orally from generation to generation.
This institution is still alive in case of most tribes of the region. If due care is not taken, it may start weakening and may even disappear. Such a situation must be avoided. The coherence and the solidarity of villages are sustained through the administration of the village governments. Most important of all, through the functioning of traditional village governments, the autonomy of the village is maintained; this gives emotional satisfaction to every villager. Moreover, a feeling is maintained that their village is free to function in the manner it has been functioning for many generations. The continuation of this institution will mean the preservation of a vital component of the ethnic identity. My observation of life in Naga villages leads me to believe that the disappearance of this important institution of village government may also mean the loss of ethnic identity. I find that it is in the interest of the tribal societies as well as in the interest of the country as a whole that these vital institutions are preserved.

With the change of times, certain changes are bound to take place in the functioning of the traditional institution. But this has to be a natural and gradual process. One important new acquisition by the tribes in the region is literacy. The educational level of most of the tribes is at a high mark. The educated section of each tribe should understand the essence of different traditional institutions and motivate the community to adopt desirable changes at a desirable pace. In fact some very good changes have taken place in case of Nagaland. I would like to share my observation about these changes in the later portion of this write-up.

I would also like to draw attention to the manner in which the British regime administered the tribal societies of the North-east. Since I am familiar with the Nagaland situation, I am mentioning a few important characteristics of the administration in Nagaland evolved during the British regime. Many features of this old pattern were relevant and suitable for the Naga villages. These were evolved out of experience derived through dealing by the district administration.

One important feature of the British approach was that they avoided interference in the traditional village government. No taxation was levied on the Naga villages, except a token house tax from each household in a village once in a year. The tax collectors in each village were designated as Gaon Burahs (GBs). Each Gaon Burah used to be issued with a red woollen blanket as a mark of authority. There used to be a number of Gaon Burahs in each village; the number depending upon: 1. The population of the village, and 2. On the number of clans in the village. The GBs were also paid a certain percentage of the tax collected by them from the village. That was the only remuneration received by them once a year. It was equally divided between all the Gaon Burahs of a village. Though the GBs were government agents, and they carried a badge of authority, they were not supposed to participate in or interfere with the
functioning of the traditional government. A tendency is noticed on the part of village government these days to nominate a person to act as the Gaon Burah from amongst the fellow members. The institution of Gaon Burahs has been continued till date. It is a step in the right direction. It is also gratifying to note that the old practice of collecting the household tax only is being followed even now.

Besides the GBs, another limb of British Administration was to appoint interpreters designated as Dobashis (DBs). One of the main tasks of the DBs was to interpret a villager’s say before the subdivisional or district head into Assamese. The language adopted for district administration was a simple form of Assamese (now known as Nagamese). Naga Hills District during British days consisted of two sub-divisions, namely Kohima and Mokokchung. The HQs of the district was Kohima and it was the seat of the Deputy Commissioner. The sub-division of Mokokchung used to be headed by a Sub-divisional Officer. The officers appointed were all Britishers, but they had to master simple Assamese. If I am not wrong, they had to pass examination of Assamese language.

The DBs though designated as Dobashis were in fact like political assistants. There used to be one head Dobashi (the head Dobashi these days is also designated as political assistant to D.C.). The selection of DBs used to be done very carefully. He used to be picked up from one of the important clans of the tribe and was expected to be well-versed with the history and traditions of the tribe and also well-versed in all aspects of the functioning of the traditional village government. The district or the administrative head obtained the knowledge of the tribe and the villages under his jurisdiction from the DBs.

Most of the judicial functions in a village were handled by the village government and disputes used to be dealt with through customary law and procedure. In short, we may conclude this description of erstwhile British administration by saying that it was a decentralized administration. The role of the DC or SDO was to function as a guardian of the people and a watchdog for the regime. A tradition was also maintained by which the administrative head used to visit and camp in every village under his charge once in a year. These visits were organized with adequate pomp and ceremony. The administrative head also used to hold a kind of court of the village elders and know from them if they had any issues or problems to place before him.

Needless to say, that this the earlier British pattern cannot be carried on in its entirety in the changed times. One new major function of the administration after India attained freedom was the function of development related programmes and activities. Yet another new major factor is the conduct of elections. The old institutions of the GBs and the DBs are still retained, and they continue to be useful limbs of the
administration. The traditional village governments have been given legal recognition by virtue of an Act of the Legislative Assembly. These traditional bodies will no doubt have to be adjusted to suit the needs of changed times. In fact, this process is already being followed in Nagaland. Two new measures in village functioning have been introduced all over the State and are yielding good results. These are: 1. Village Development Boards (VDBs) in each village, and 2. Communitization of services. Let me briefly explain their functions below.

The VDBs have been so designed that they function as a development limb of the traditional village council. It is expected to function under the guidance and control of the traditional village government. The members of the VDBs are selected by the traditional village government. One important addition in this is that two members from amongst the women of the village are also selected as members. The development funds are directly given by the government to the village for carrying out different programmes. The VDB and the traditional village government jointly plan and execute these programmes. The funds are also deposited in a bank account in the name of the village. This new institution of VDB has functioned satisfactorily for more than twenty years by now. Time and experience will suggest additions and alterations in this in a natural way. But on the whole, it is seen that the scheme has worked well and yielded good results. This is one good example which shows that the introduction of new elements in the traditional council is possible if suitably designed.

The second progressive and appropriate innovation is the Communitization of services. It was started with handing over the management of village primary schools to the education committee constituted by the village government. This committee also functions under the control and guidance of the traditional village council. The funds are provided directly to the Committee and the salaries of teachers are also paid through the committee. The community control of an institution of the village is in tune with the traditional thinking and practice in a village. Hence, these two innovations have worked well.

What is important to note is that the continuation of the traditional system in tribal societies of the North-east region is vitally important in the interest of the tribe as well as the nation as a whole. The innovations also are necessary and important. These should be designed in a manner that they are in tune with the traditional system and they add to the strength of the system. If this pattern is followed, it will provide satisfaction to the members of the village community and will also ascertain preservation of a vital component of ethnic identity of a tribe.

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About Ishani

The Sanskrit nomenclature for the North-east direction is Ishanya or Ishan-Kon. Hence anything concerning the North-east or Ishan-Kon is ISHANI. Keeping this in view, we have selected ISHANI as the name of our journal.

ISHANI will aim at presenting developments in the North-Eastern region, which may otherwise escape notice of the national media. It will also be our effort to evolve ISHANI as a window to view the fascinating, bewildering mosaic that is the North-east India. We will carry views and reflections of the people from the North-east on various issues concerning them. It will also be our attempt to highlight the good work of different voluntary action groups in the region. The life and work of prominent personalities of the North-east will also be presented.

As ISHANI is being published as the journal of Mahatma Gandhi Ishani Foundation, we will inevitably carry articles and other materials related to the life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi. This will be one of our highly cherished objectives. The publication of ISHANI has become possible through the generous donation of a donor group. It will continue to be published as a bimonthly journal for some time. ISHANI is a mission aimed at rendering service to the North-east and the rest of the country by being a communication bridge between the two regions. We seek goodwill, support, cooperation and blessings from our well-wishers.

— Editor