

The Kebang : Aboriginal self-Government of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh

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Kebang in its connotative interpretation as a village council evolved in the long past in the Adi Society of Arunachal Pradesh. Its evolution might spread over a period from 1st to seventeenth century A. D. It may, however, be said that it has taken its present shape after their settlement in Arunachal Pradesh. For, their social situation made its existence essential and significant.

Many articles have been written on the Institution of Kebang as a self-administrative system. But no attempt has so far been made to trace the circumstance leading to the evolution of the system. In the following passages I shall make an attempt to trace this and then deal with its functions as a system.

Kebang is a term in Adi dialect with much wider connotation and socio-ethical significance than it is usually understood by the common people, especially the people from outside the Adi major tribe. Original meaning of the term 'Kebang' is an intelligent, wise-man well versed in history, tradition, knowledge mundane and spiritual. As per this connotation a Kebang is a knowledgeable man in all spheres of knowledge and wisdom prevalent in the past Adi Society tracked in the high Himalaya without the light of industrial civilisation flourished at different regions in different ages. A man with such knowledge is supposed to exert considerable influence over the society he lived in and he used to sit in high position in all aspects of the society. A council consisting of such member / members and the common people is also known as Kebang ; and it is this connotation in which Kebang is commonly understood today. One may like to stretch this connotation to the sphere of religious ethics also. In a tribal society content with the bare necessities of life such wise intelligent people were not constrained in giving justice to the common people. As such the Kebang (s) is not only formulator of socio-religious ethics, but also interpreter and executive of these for a peaceful cohesive society. It is in this sense a Kebang (the man) is 'Donyi-Polo amiko,' a man with godlike quality.

To the Adis the Kebang (the council) is invested with all these connotations. Sitting in a Kebang, the Kebang(s) (Kebang abo) behave most impartially and give justice to all within the framework of traditional laws evolved during centuries.

Background of Kebang

The Adis of Arunachal Pradesh have been nomadic in nature till recent time. Their present settlement is the result of geogra-

phical demarcation of the state that started in 1875. With the introduction of Inner Line Regulation in 1875 resulting in the State's boundary demarcation with Assam the process of shaping a new geo-political unit - now called Arunachal - began. And it took some forty years in completing the process when the McMahon Line in 1914 demarcated at least theoretically its boundary with Tibet, China and Burma. Till 1875 the nomadic nature of the tribes had some scope of their movement for better habitat and easy sustenance. The sealing of the Assam plains region for their further movement caused in them a sense of restriction in their migrating tendency. With Tibet, for instance, there might not be a definite boundary to restrict the Adis in their going back; but a strong religious wall (Buddhism in Tibet) caused a strong psychological inhibition on them for going back to Tibet. It was in fact this which made them to leave Tibet.¹ Another two factors are also responsible for discouraging their backward movement: (1) they would not like to go to a region they had already experienced as dreary and desolate; (2) in between Buddhist Tibet and non-Buddhist Arunachal there is still another more savage tribe, Mimat, notorious for their cannibalism. With China, through Zechuan Province, the rise of Chinese power seemed not to have encouraged the Adis to go back to China. Movement within the very sparsely populated no man's land sort of area is quite insignificant.

Out of this situation seemed to have grown in the Adis a strong sense of last movement to some place for permanent settlement with better habitats and easy sustenance. This explains the Padam rush in the first half of the nineteenth century (1936) to Rowing and beyond threatening the British protectorate of Khamti Sadiya. This also explains the rush of various tribes to the foot of the hills which provided perennial agricultural scope. By the turn of this century people of various clans concentrated, even at the cost of their age-old clan clashes, in the foothill areas bordering Assam leaving the higher regions less populated.

The preceding passages give us a hypothetical picture (full historical data are collected from oral traditions of various tribes/sub-tribe regarding their temporary settlement and sojourn, their conflicts and clashes of innumerable tribes on their movement for some seventeen hundred years in this *Ajanti Muluk* or *Terra Incognita*). The picture is like this: In the process of their movement a powerful tribe/sub-tribe/clan either destroyed a lesser tribe/sub-tribe/clan or drove it away. The victorious thus established its own domain, if temporarily; the vanquished ran away and either settled in an unoccupied region thus establishing its own kingdom or drove away still lesser tribe and established its own kingdom. In this process innumerable kingdoms came into being and many became extinct. The situation is like that in ancient Greece; in ancient Greece there were many city states and in past Arunachal there were many village kingdoms. Mention may be made of the Minyong Kingdom of Riga, the Padam Kingdom of Damro, the Shimong Kingdom of Shimong and others. The clan cohesion was very strong during those days, and a clan of a major tribe had a

very strong tendency to establish its own Kingdom comprising the the sub-clans within that clan. Thus in the Adi major tribe the aforesaid Kingdoms were established on clan basis. One is to bear in mind here that once a clan had its kingdom established it became a sovereign state. For, they had already come away from the sway of Tibetan Government and the various Kings in Assam did not have any control over these hill states. Depending on the power of a sovereign state sometimes some states used to annex territory of a minor clan making it a vasaal state as the Mishings of Assam were first under the Minyongs and then under the Padams. In absence of some administrative system imposed on them by a higher authority either from Tibet or from Assam these states had to evolve some administrative system for regulating social life for peace, security and development. In all probability such life regulating social institutions the Adis originated before their migration to their present habitat. This can be deduced from the commonness of many characteristics of the Kebang prevalent amongst the Minyongs, Padams, Galongs, Shimongs and so on. Before establishment of their individual states they were together in Tibet as brethren. In their migration, in different waves, also they either had touch with each other or came to common point after a period of sojourn. Janbo-Bomdo in upper Siang, for instance, is such a point where various subgroups of the major Adi tribes met and stayed together for some time in the 11th century. Then also some common characteristics developed. Kuttik Moyong, an experienced political interpreter who had been to Tibetan border many a times, is of definite opinion that the Kebang system was there even when they were in Tibet. But the force with which this social institution has become functional today must have been from their entrance into this region as independent society.

Characteristics of Kebang and its functioning

Since there was no other organ to regulate social life for all purposes Kebang has some of the characteristics of a Government. Dalton's attempt to draw an analogy from a modern state to explain Kebang, however, is not correct. Visiting Mebo (a Padam village in Siang district) in 1855 Dalton had seen a Kebang in session. From the way the orators argued, Dalton differentiated one Bokpang as a Chairman or President, and in charge of foreign relations by the state, one Loitem as Nestor of the republic and Julong as 'war minister'.³ In fact, in Adi Kebang there is no division of charges and everybody has got the equal right to speak though the influential gams dominate deliberations. Unlike the Government of a modern state which goes on changing, making laws to suit the new situations an Adi Kebang chiefly functions as the interpreter of the existing laws already framed on the basis of traditional customs. A government however, has different organs for making laws, evolving policies, interpreting laws and executing the policies and decisions; but a Kebang interprets laws, adjudicates and then executes its own decisions/policies. As such Kebang has the three functions - (1) Administrative, (2) Judicial and (3) Executive.

1. Administrative

In its administrative area the Kebug convenes meeting, deliberates and decides the site of a village to shift to, cleaning of jungle for construction of houses, construction of Musup and Raseng (boys' and girls' dormitories respectively), cleaning of jungles for jhum cultivation, erection of a rampart around the village for security against enemy, declaration of war against enemy, date for community hunting, date for celebration of festival, date for sowing seeds, maintenance of relation with other states, maintenance of trade-relation with foreign states, reception of guests and so on. From the long list of administrative activities, and it is still not exhaustive, one may observe that the Kebug is the all embracing authority to administer traditional customs for peace, security and clan integrity, or national integrity for that matter. Father Crick, witnessing a Kebug in session, rightly says that the moshup is "a council house in which all political questions and topics of the day were discussed."⁴ In fact, the Kebug is the life-force of the Adi society wherefrom emanates all activities starting from day to day social affairs to the highest political matters concerning the security and integrity of the state.

2. Judicial

The Kebug has got the power of a law court to adjudicate justice to the agrieved party on the interpretation of law based on mythology and traditional history. As in any law court, all preceding cases are recorded in the memory of the Abey speakers, advocate in a broader sense, for guidance in tribal of a particular case. Peculiarity of a Kebug is that unlike in a law court there is no judge sitting to hear the arguments of the advocates from the contending parties to form his own judgement as per clause of the law : in an Adi Kebug all are advocates for one or the other party and they would go on arguing always invoking their forefathers and making references to all preceding cases. It is a sort of Greek catechism through which a consensus is arrived at for reward or punishment to the contending parties. In judicial matters the Kebug is the supreme authority to give verdict as per the customary laws.

Opinion, however varies regarding judicial power of the Kebug. Dalton commented on the judicial power of the Kebug - "There is no power vested in the community to take life or inflict corporal punishment on a freeborn citizen, but slaves may be put to death".⁵ Dalton here seems to have been wrongly informed by his informer in his first visit to and short stay in the Adi tribal area. Ogom Dai, a well versed gam of Balek (Pasighat) says that in the past the Kebug passed death-sentences to even a free-man if he is an incorrible, habitual criminal and his clan is fed up with payment of fines for his crimes. A girl, engaged in her childhood in marriage with somebody, who refuses to go to her husband was punished with the sanction of the Kebug and kept tying in her husband's house. Sachin Roy comes nearer the point when he says about the Padam-

Minyong society, "In former days, inability to pay the compensation resulted in the selling of the guilty of murder as a slave and the money derived from the sale was paid to the family of the deceased as compensation".⁶ The tradition is that for a crime committed by a particular man the fine is to be paid by his clan. But a habitual criminal may go on committing crime, and the clan may be fed up with paying compensation. Then the **Kebang** might give verdict for excommunication of the criminal or selling him as slave. If he reappears even after that the **Kebang** gave the verdict to tie his hands and feet and to throw to the river for drowning. It is the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation of 1945 which curtailed the judicial power of **Kebang** for giving capital and corporal punishment. Verier Elwin has rightly said, "Girls may still have their hair cut for immorality, but they are no longer stripped naked and beaten. Offenders are no longer buried alive, rolled over cliffs or pushed into river to drown."⁷ Though this is a general remark on the aboriginal tribal councils of Arunachal Pradesh it is very much applicable to **Adi Kebang** also.

The **Kebang** is the only court in the **Adi** society to try both civil and criminal cases. And in both respects it has got the maximum authority of the state to impose penalty on the offenders. Authority it must have, for **Kebang** is the body of the whole community (state) and it must see the welfare of the state. They use all possible means to check violation of their traditional custom for the sake of peace and integrity of the state. Another aspect the **Kebang** uses to see is that they cannot allow the wrath of God to come to the whole community for somebody's crime.

3. Executive

As has already been noticed in the preceding para the **Kebang** is the body of the whole community, it has no other organ to execute the policies, decisions and verdicts of it. The **Kebang** itself executes its decisions. Since it is the decision of the whole state there is none to refuse to follow the order or violate a decision. Father Crick visited Mebo in 1853 and saw a **Kebang** in session and wrote about the executive aspect of the **Kebang** thus: "There injunctions are obeyed to the letter, for this people is as law-abiding, and respectful to the power that be, as it is proud of its liberty".⁸ And Sachin Roy writes, "The carrying out of the **Kebang** decision and verdict is automatic and few ever challenge it. So, there is no necessity for special executive body for the implementation of its injunctions. In fact, till the introduction of the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation 1945 this aspect of **Kebang** was intact; involvement of the political officer in the administrative system made some waver from the tradition. Introduction of Panchayati Raj system in 1969, with the introduction of Panchayat members who have the tendency to carry things to the political office, the executive aspect of the **Kebang** has suffered another setback. Otherwise this people's body had the supreme power to administer themselves for betterment of the state.

This may lead one to the form of administration and its origins. An Adi Kebang is a democratic form of administration in origin. Over the centuries the elements of democracy of an Adi Kebang attained near perfection to fit in the Rousseuvian concept of democracy. It is the eighteenth century French philanthropist Rousseau who advocated emancipation of every individual irrespective of class, creed, colour and sex, and inspired the French Revolution. This resulted in the emergence of a new democracy involving humanity as a whole.

Even before the new concept evolved in the later eighteenth century the Adi group of tribes in Arunachal evolved and practised a similar democracy. I would like to throw some light on the probable background of this evolution. It appears from their nomadic nature that the Adis did not welcome the kingship concept even when they were in Tibet. As nomads these people did not come under the spell of any Chief or king; they might, perhaps, be under the wider canopy of some authority without any tangible impact. When they had to leave Tibet to escape the dictatorial imposition of a Tibetan King they developed a natural antipathy towards kingship. They would rather have a system of administration involving all the people. Thus they evolved the village council for judicial purpose first. The state being a village state consisting of a few hundred souls the involvement of all the people was no problem. Over the centuries the village council and the inter-village council emerged as a well-knit self-administrative institution amongst the Adis of the Tani group.

In growth the Adi village council, known as Kebang, in their dialect, is democratic. "All the bonafide members of the village are the members of the Kebang of the village" says Katang Borang, an Administrative Officer of Arunachal Pradesh from the Adi Society, in a paper presented in a Seminar organised by the Research Deptt., Arunachal Pradesh. By 'bonafide members' he may mean the adult members of the village. Attainment of adulthood by a member was criteria. One should not be stupid, dumb, insane, and when one grows up he is to take responsibility. The age factor is based on the attainment of horse-riding age. At that age a boy is considered to have understood his responsibility by the aboriginal Tibetans. Amongst the Adis it is a process, rather than attainment of a particular age through which adulthood is decided. The process starts at the age of about seven in the Musup, the boy is to perform the Mutup duties like collection of firewood, lighting fire in the Musup hearth, announcing the Kebang minutes in the village, guarding the village at night, driving out the evil spirit of a Nipong death (Nipong is a spirit causing trouble and death to particularly, a pregnant woman) and so on. The boy who can show his adult behaviour in these is considered an adult member of the society. Mr. B. Banerjee appears to have been confused when he says "Membership to the Kebang almost begins with one's birth in the village and as age proceeding atleast when one attains the age reason, a man automatically finds himself involved in the affairs of the Kebang as a member." His membership to the

Musup/Dere seems to have been confused with 'membership to the Kebang' for a boy is a Musup-member along with his birth and not a Kebang member.

Another salient feature of Kebang makes it more so : it is the system of selecting the leader of the Kebang. Right for all the adult members to participate in the Kebang deliberations does not mean the tribal council is a chaotic body without a controlling authority : it has an authority known as Kebang Abo(s) gams the controlling officer that conducts the council meeting. The gamship is not a hereditary institution, though the son of a gam stands a better chance of becoming a gam. A consensus selection of a man as a clan gam depends on the worth of the man himself. To get oneself selected one should be a Kebang expert. A Kebang expert is one who is well-versed in the tribe's mythology, customary laws and traditional history of the tribe. The more expert one is in these the better is the chance for one. Mere knowledge of all these, however, may not help him at all if he is not expert orator in traditional way in a convincing tone. By his art of oratory he must carry the Kebang with him. Another term used for Kebang-abo in the past is Mikok, a man who can speak in a dominating tone like the leader cock in the herd of fowls. Such a man is the consensus gam. The village gams conduct the Kebang in the deliberation of which all the adult members have the absolute right to speak and participate.

Another democratic element in the Adi Kebang is the process of arriving at a consensus decision. The process followed in the Adi Kebang is such that truth is ultimately established and it meets the end of justice. The decision is never based on majority votes, in which there is scope for injustice meted out to the minority ; it is always a consensus decision based on truth arrived at through dialectical method of through Greek Catechism.

One feature of (a) Kebang may, however be pointed out that inspite of all these characteristics of a democratic institution it falls short of Rousseavian democracy. Like the limited democracy of ancient Greece and Rome the Kebang is also a limited democracy it precludes women and slaves. Conceptually this is identical with the Greek idea of common people as things : the Greeks precluded the things with the notion that they are devoid of reason and judgement which are pre requisites of administration. The Adis preclude women and slaves with the notion that 'woman is a lower animal without any judgement' and slaves, originally cowards and criminals, are devoid of reason and judgement. The tribal sense is so clear in this that these two classes of people are not involved, even by mistake, in Kebang deliberations, though in other social aspects indiscrimination prevails to a great extent.

As a well-developed administrative, judicial and developmental institution the same structure and principles of this village council (Dolung Kebang) were extended to cover more than one village. This extension is done to two stages : (1) When it comprises more than one village inhabited by different clans of the same sub-group it is called Bungo Kebang ; and (2) When it covers an extensive

area with many villages inhabited by more than one sub-group is called Bogum Bokang. There is another difference between the Bungo Kebang and Bogum Bokang: whereas the former comprises 4/5 villages within a small area the later comprises many more villages in an extensive area. In the past they had to resort to these to maintain friendly relations among the tribal village states. This may again differentiate a village Kebang from a Bungo Kebang or a Bogum Bokang: whereas the first one was concerned with administrative, judicial and developmental matters the other two were mostly concerned with judicial matters. Like a league of nations the Bogum Bokang took steps to maintain peace in the world of the tribal states. This was necessitated by the frequent internecine conflicts in the past. In absence of a supreme intervening authority such conflict tended to crush the tribal states, and the Bogum Bokang served a good purpose. Sachin Roy's opinion that Inter-Bango disputes are settled by a superior body called Bogum Bokang, introduced by the Administration seems not correct.⁹ Bogum Bokang was there much before outside administration came into Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, Dr. A. C. Talukdar's opinion that "Bungo Kebang and Bogum Bokang are of recent origin"¹⁰ appears here misleading. For the inter-state relationship the Adis developed these some ten centuries back and its base is still at Bomdo-Janbo area in the higher region. Till today that area is known as Bogum Bokang; and it is the area where the Minyongs, Padams, Galongs and even some Shimongs lived together. Its functioning was suspended for a few centuries due perhaps to gradual spreading of the people over an extensive area of inaccessible nature during those days of nil communication facilities. After the British occupation of Pasighat in 1912 and gradual penetration since into the interior of Abor Hills the system was revived for the convenience of checking inter-tribal conflicts, of administration and development.

In this regard Dalton's view "sometimes great councils of the different settlements are convened and then, if they agree, they act together as confederate of states....."¹¹ seems plausible. He wrote in 1855 when British administration did not penetrate into present Arunachal Pradesh.

Notes & References

1. J. Nath, Migration of the Adis of Arunachal", *Souvenir*, Arunachal University, 1990
2. A. Machenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, p. 35.
3. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, p. 23.
4. Referred by G. S. Guha in his *Moshu Abang*, p. 1 .
5. *Tribal History of Eastern India*, p. 24.
6. S. Roy, *Aspects of Padam Minyong Culture*, p. 228.
7. Verier Elwin, *Democracy in N. E. F. A.*, p. 21.
8. *Resarun*, Spring-Inter issue, 1987, p. 38.
9. *Aspects of Padam Minyong Culture*, p. 222.
10. *Political Transitions in the grass-roots in Tribal India*, p. 49.
11. *Tribal History of Eastern India*, p. 22.