

## Political Evolution of Arunachal Pradesh

A. C. Talukdar

The process of administrative and constitutional development of *Arunachal Pradesh*, started about a century back when the British extended their administration to certain parts of this territory. But it gained momentum only after independence. The story of the politico-administrative development of this area after independence is also a story of a search for and forging of a common personality by an assortment of people belonging to a number of tribes brought together by accident of history. At the time of independence other states and territories of India had their own identity developed through many decades or even centuries. Arunachal Pradesh, however, consisted of three artificially created administrative units, namely, the Balipara Frontier Tract, the Sadiya Frontier Tract, and the Tirap Frontier Tract. They were loosely administered by the British, before independence, as "Excluded Areas" under the Government of India Act, 1935. Each one of them was inhabited by a number of tribes or tribal groups having nothing in common except geographical proximity and ethnic similarity. Some of them were even antagonistic to each other. After independence the administration of these 'Excluded Areas' passed on to the hands of Assam Government but no change was brought in the quality of administration, except for bifurcating the Sadiya Frontier Tract into two districts of the Abor Hills and the Mishmi Hills in 1948.

Arunachal Pradesh, at the time, presented a picture of a hilly terrain devoid of developed means of communications, with a sparse population cut up into numerous isolated tribes or village communities. The people were mostly suspicious of outsiders like any other tribal people. The British had considered the area too backward and unrewarding for extending any civil administration there. The socio-political life of the tribes of the area therefore were untouched by any modernising influence and remained primitive till the early years of our Independence.

### The Traditional Political Ethos

Political life of the people, in such a society was village or tribe oriented. Every aspect of life in the village was corporate in character involving joint decision and actions. Every community had a traditional socio-political organisation which governed the life

within the community according to traditional laws. Each community evolved its own political organisation and functioned as a little independent state. Thus every tribe had its own type of village council or village organisation. The Monpas had their Mang Zomsa ; the Sherdukpens, jungthang ; the Akas Melo, the Apatanis Buliang ; the Nishis Gindung, the Adis Kebang and the Idu-Mishmis, the Abbala the Nocte Ngothun and the Khamtis also had their own type of village councils<sup>1</sup>. These organisations were mainly of five types: 1. The Adi republican type where the village solidarity was stronger than clan or tribal loyalty. They were democratic in character ; 2. The Nocte and Wancho type with a hierarchical social and political structure. Here one paramount chief had a number of villages with subordinate chiefs under him. They were Chieftaincies with autocratic characteristics ; 3. The individualistic Mishmi type where the house-hold and the clan formed the basis of cohesion ; 4. The theocratic Monpa type where a number of villages, autonomous in internal affairs, were knit together under one theocratic government of a monastic authority. They were gerentocratic in character ; and 5. The Apatani type where a large village was segmented into clan sectors, each administered by its own oligarchic clan council. They were, to some extent, federal in character.

The jurisdiction of these bodies was confined to their respective village or tribe. The political perspective of each community was limited to the village or community. Thus politically, Arunachal Pradesh was a conglomeration of innumerable autonomous communities with varying socio-political ideas and institutions. It was not a single unit, politically, administratively or culturally.

### **Political Development After Independence**

A new era of political change and development dawned in Arunachal Pradesh with the adoption of our Constitution in 1950 which provided for special provisions for these areas. The national leaders took keen interest in these areas and enunciated a carefully formulated policy of socio-economic and socio-political development. This policy evolved by our great leaders like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and others sought to bring progress and development to these areas with the least interference to the traditional socio-political life of the tribes. The politico-administrative change and development of the area was therefore, slow and cautious in the beginning but strident and rapid once it caught the imagination of the local people.

The first major administrative change in the area was effected in 1954 when the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was created bringing all the areas of Arunachal Pradesh under one administrative authority thus giving them a common political identity.

The NEFA Administration meticulously followed the policies laid down by the national leaders. It did not allow free flow of outside influences into the area and allowed the hill tribes of Arunachal to continue with their traditional socio-political life. It even encouraged the traditional village councils to develop further. Politics and plans were formulated at the Agency level but their implementation was cut out for each community, locality or smallest administrative unit. Popular participation in the administration was extremely limited and confined to village level. Beyond the village level the channels of association were at Gaon Burahs and Interpreters and "as the names suggest they were local links not joined into a chain." The administration therefore remained, physically and psychologically distant from the people.<sup>2</sup> Each tribe or community still continued to think and work for itself. Their political outlook still remained village or tribe oriented. The Agency was one single unit at the level of administration only.

The Administration with a philanthropic approach tried to identify itself with the people and establish mutual trust and understanding. Nothing was done in a hurry, nothing was imposed or enforced. Old traditions, concepts and institutions were respected. New ideas and ideals were held up only when the people realised their desirability and themselves adopted them. This patience and perseverance paid great dividends in terms of transforming a number of assorted tribal communities into a comparatively cohesive political unit. In due course a new consciousness for change and progress was generated. The hills started changing although each part and community separately. They marched towards the same goal at varying paces.

### **Introduction of Democratic Institutions and Processes**

In due course it was realised that a time had come for a higher level of association of the people for fostering larger and wider political consciousness. The Chinese aggression of 1962 hastened this line of thinking and a sense of urgency was felt to bring Arunachal Pradesh, too, into the main-stream of national political life. A Committee to study the possibility of introducing the modern Panchayat Raj on the lines of the rest of the country was appointed

in 1964 so that an uniform political system could be introduced throughout the territory under the chairmanship of late Dr. Dying Ering, the father of modern Arunachal Pradesh. On the recommendations of this Committee and on the basis of the North East Frontier Panchayat Raj Regulation, 1967, which embodied them, a system of Panchayat Raj bodies were constituted in the entire Territory in 1969 - The Gandhi Centenary Year. An Agency Level popular body, the Agency Council, was linked with the Panchayat bodies for the first time and was inaugurated in December that year at Shillong.

This became the most important landmark in the political development of Arunachal Pradesh. For, the Panchayat Raj, the first modern popular political institution to be introduced in Arunachal Pradesh made a profound impact. It brought modern political processes to the Territory and greatly influenced the traditional political institutions of the tribal people of the area. Highlighting the change brought about by the introduction of Panchayats in the politics of the territory, Col. K. A. A. Raja, the then Chief Commissioner of Arunachal Pradesh observed : "It introduced a graded series by which village leadership could mount up through Anchal and District to the Agency level of association in policy making and planning. At the top the local leadership had to view the entire territory as one, though it was directly concerned with its own district. The indirect elections promoting leaders from the lowest and smallest to the highest level trained them to get over their limitation of localised interest and develop at least a district perspective. In the Agency Council each district had to take cognisance of the others and so think in terms of the Agency as a whole. It is at this stage that it will be noticed that tribes and communities are receiving less and less mention and district are coming into prominence in planning and deliberations and with it the realisation of the Agency as an integrated political unit and not a mere package of assorted communities".<sup>3</sup> The coming of Panchayat Raj, therefore, meant the beginning of new orientation in the politics of Arunachal Pradesh which was imbedded in the "small group" psyche. It has broadened the political horizon of the people by forcing them to look beyond their community and brought them closer to the Administration by filling the void between the Agency and the village. The political outlook of the local leaders changed and they started thinking in terms of district and the Territory instead of the village, community, or the tribe. A set of new state level leadership was created through higher level panchayat

bodies. The traditional tribal political institutions continued to function side by side but they too have undergone a change under the modernising effect of the Panchayats. They were imbibing more and more rational elements in their functions. The new concepts of election, representation, majority decisions etc. slowly started creeping into these institutions. The leadership of these traditional institutions were also undergoing a slow change and the newly emerging young educated leadership started gaining influence even in the traditional institutions. Thus the introduction of panchayats in 1969 brought about a total and far reaching change and development in the entire socio-political ethos of the territory.

Political growth of the territory following the introduction of panchayats was rapid, a number of new developments taking place in quick succession. The process of political cohesion started by the panchayats was further strengthened in 1972 when the North-East Frontier Agency was made into the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh. The defacto political individuality of Arunachal Pradesh carefully developed through all these years got the de-jure recognition among the several states and Union Territories of the country. Normal political processes of the nation, however, was yet to be extended to the area. Its apex body was still known as Territorial Council and the popular representative nearest to policy making were the councillors. The territory got its first legislative Assembly and the first council of Ministers when the existing Territorial Council was converted into the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh in 1975 and the first five member Ministry was formed by Sri P. K. Thangon. So for General Elections had not taken place in Arunachal Pradesh and the representation of Arunachal Pradesh in the Parliament was through a nominee of the President of India. The Constitution of the Legislative Assembly and the formation of a responsible ministry paved the way for extension of modern elections. In the Parliamentary Elections held in 1977, Arunachal Pradesh, too, was called upon to elect its representatives to the Lok Sabha. Thus the modern democratic processes of election, secret ballot and adult franchise, that were held back for so long in order not to upset traditional life, was introduced into the Territory. In these elections Arunachal Pradesh returned one of its representatives unopposed while, the other was elected by poll. A year later, elections for the State Legislative Assembly were held and the entire Territory went to the polls. Since then the Arunachalees have participated in three parliamentary elections and three assem-

bly elections. The Union Territory has shown enough political maturity to form popular Government thrice.

With assembly elections and popular government the modern political culture and ethos started developing in Arunachal Pradesh too. Party politics and electoral politics started gaining the upper hand in place of tribal politics. The national political parties extended their operations into the area. Political party solidarity started being reflected in grass root politics in place of old village or clan solidarity. A new set of leadership having wider political perspective and modern outlook emerged. And thus the whole socio-political life in the Territory started undergoing a process of modernisation. \*

### Conclusions

THUS ARUNACHAL PRADESH presents a case of deliberate political socialisation in a very short span of time. In a period of less than a quarter of a century a primitive tribal society consisting of a number of heterogenous tribal groups with their own traditional socio-political institutions has been transformed into a modern political personality imbibing all the characteristics of a modern participatory politics and the democratic process. The most interesting point to be noted here is that the change over is very smooth. Of course, conflicts and contradictions were not entirely unknown but they were solved without allowing them to assume any alarming proportion and to influence the process of modernisation.

\* On 20 February 1987, Arunachal was granted statehood. ed.

### Notes and References

1. P. K. Thungon, "Traditional Democratic Institutions in Arunachal Pradesh." *Yojana*, Vol. XXI/L, Jan. 26, 1977, pp. 99-102.  
For a detailed account of traditional tribal councils also see. Elwin, *Democracy in NEFA*, Shillong, 1965.
2. K.A.A. Raja, 'Arunachal, the Evolution of a Personality', *Arunachal News*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 6-7.
3. *Ibid*, p. 10.