

# LOCAL SELF-GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS OF THE TRIBAL IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: A STUDY OF THE VILLAGE AUTHORITY/COUNCIL

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**Abstract.** In the wake of India's independence from British rule, the tribal were allowed to have institutions in accordance with their traditional-customary laws and practices. This was done to preserve their cultural identities, interests and allay their fears of exploitation at the hands of the non-tribal. Therefore, a variety of institutions dominated by the traditional tribal culture with semi-autonomous and self-managing indigenous local institutions at different level exist. Changes have been introduced from time to time. In most cases, these changes have been introduced in response to the administrative needs for the various developmental policies of the state.

This paper presents an overview of continuities and changes of the local self-governing institution existing in the form of Village Authorities/Councils in the three states viz. Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland located in the north-eastern parts of India. Though known by different names –Village Council in Mizoram and Nagaland and Village Authority in Manipur, they are the only institutions in the village level that still has a traditional ethos in modern local government setting.

**Key words:** Tribal, Village Authority/Council, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland.

## 1. Introduction

North-East India comprises of eight States namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura. All these states have a remarkable number of tribal populations. Tribal populations may be grouped into plain tribal and hill tribal. To the hill tribal, a policy of minimal political interference was followed by the British. None of the political reform introduced were extended to the hill tribal of North-east India. As such, a variety of local self-governing institutions with their associated participatory structures and processes existed among the hill tribes. Tribes belonging to Kuki-Chin-Mizo and Naga groups are hill tribes mainly found in the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and hill areas of Manipur. This paper presents an overview of the continuities and changes of the local self-governing institution of these groups. For this purpose, the pre-independence scenario is laid out first followed by the various legislative acts introduced and the consequent changes along with this. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources.

## 2. The pre-independence scenario:

Before the British came, the tribal communities belonging to Kuki-Chin-Mizo and Naga groups subsisting on shifting cultivation as the dominant mode of production and livelihood lived in small groups. Each groups were organize into villages with a defined territory. This mode of living gave rise to strong regulated village governments in the form of Chieftainship and Council of Elders<sup>1</sup>. However the functioning of this institution differs from tribe to tribe. Among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups and some tribes among the

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Nagas like Semas and Konyaks, hereditary chief possessed executive, legislature and judicial powers in the village<sup>ii</sup>. His decisions were final in all matters. The chief decided both civil and criminal cases according to the customary law of the village. He was the traditional village head having authority to enact laws and at the same time executed these laws at his discretion. The chief appointed members of the council of elders to assist him in village administration. Council of elders was chosen from among the subject who possessed tact and wisdom and who was well versed with customary laws and usages of the people<sup>iii</sup>. Theoretically all powers were vested in the hands of the chief, yet in practice he would never try any case without consulting his council. A chief who govern strictly according to custom could do almost everything he liked without losing his followers, but a weak chief who tried petty tyrannies soon found himself without any subjects. The only recorded incident where people revolted against this system was in 1880 when some of the chiefs became unduly oppressive and arrogant failing to follow the traditional customary norms in the erstwhile Lushai hills<sup>iv</sup>. But this was shortly put down before it assume a large- scale nature. On the other hand, the rest of the other Naga tribes had relatively democratic village administration<sup>v</sup>. The chiefs were either selected or elected for a definite period or for lifetime. He was assisted by a council consisting of most senior male heads of the clans of the village. The council of elders occupies an important position in village administration and their function was to aid and advise the chief in the village administration. The British colonial administration formally recognized the traditional authority of villages as an effective means of administration at the grassroots level. Except for few changes, the chief and his councils continued all internal and local administration with hardly any interference from them<sup>vi</sup>.

### **3. The Legislative Acts and the continuities and changes:**

Various acts have been passed regarding the village Governments after India gained independence from the British rule. This is followed by legislative recognition by most of the states. Various Acts were passed in this regard. Some of them are Lushai Hill District (village council) Act, 1953; Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1978; Nagaland Village and Area Council Rules, 1979; Manipur State Hill People's Regulation Act 1947; Manipur Village Authorities (in Hill Areas) Act, 1956. These Acts provides the village authority/councils with a varied and well defined powers, responsibilities and more statutory cognizance than before. While some functionary and socio-political functions were either abolished or co-opted and incorporated under these acts, some functions have also been added. The institution of Chieftainship was totally abolished in Mizoram when the village councils took over the new system of village administration on 16 August, 1953 with the passing of Lushai Hill District (village councils) Act, 1953. For some tribal living in Nagaland and Manipur who previously had hereditary chiefs, it is still a continuing process. The hereditary chief becomes ex-officio members or chairman of the village authority.

The composition of members for the village councils/authority envisage under the different acts accorded due emphasis to traditional customary practices and usages. Members for village council are chosen in different ways depending upon the acts and existing customary laws and practice. They may be directly elected by the people or by clan members and also nominated by the chief or deputy commissioner or clan members<sup>vii</sup>. The changes do not happened over a single act. For example in Manipur, the first act in 1947 gave the chiefs the right to nominate the members of the village authority/council while the subsequent act in 1956 tried to impose restrictions on this power by introducing the provision for election of the members, if not to be nominated by the Deputy Commissioner of the District.

The new acts also provide a separate administrative, judicial and developmental role for the village authority/council. In addition to the general administration of the village according to customary laws like settlement of land disputes, management of community and forest land, fixation and allocation of jhum sites, developmental functions are entrusted to the Village Authority/Council by the various acts. In Manipur, a Notification for village authority, 1971 entrusted village authorities to identify and select beneficiaries under poverty alleviation schemes<sup>viii</sup>. They are also entrusted to review all the developmental works within the village and report to the Block Development Officer. Developmental role of village council in Nagaland is more pronounced than that of the village authority in Manipur. Along with their role in the identification of beneficiaries for development programmes, they are to formulate and supervise village developmental scheme; help government agencies in carrying out developmental works in the village, receive grant-in-aid,

donations, subsidies from the government or any other agencies; to provide security for due payment of loan by any permanent resident of the village from the government, bank or financial institutions, to lend money from its fund to the deserving villagers; to enter into any loan agreement with the government, bank or any financial institutions. Another important function of village council is to constitute Village Development Board (VDB), a statutory body to assist the village council in executing development policy programs. In Mizoram, one peculiar functions entrusted to the village council is enforcing *Hnatlang*<sup>ix</sup>, where all able bodied of villagers are supposed to offer their services for the welfare of the village. They also assist Local Area Department (LAD) in conducting elections to village council. It is also their duty to report to the government about paddy harvest in the village and the needs of the villagers like school, post-office and, construction of inter-village path. Through their membership in the Village Development Committee (VDC), they oversee the identification and selection of beneficiaries under the various schemes meant for rural development and ensured proper implementation of various programmes of the central and state governments<sup>x</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion:

The extant local self-governing institutions – Village Authority/ Council – of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo and Nagas have evolved from traditional institutions which were primarily geared to maintaining social cohesion, security and spirituality of the community. No notable economic functions were found in the traditional institutions, whereas the village Authority/Council has very important economic functions besides its normal socio-political functions, though its religious function is no more significant. Village Council plays an important part in economic planning and implementations of policy programs at the grass-root level. However, it is very important to note that since time immemorial the women folks are not given opportunity to participate in the functioning of village governments and till date such discrimination continues to exist in the Village Authority/Council. Therefore, to effectively pursue the various powers and functions of Local Self-governing Institutions, there is an urgent need to include women in such institutions through amending the existing laws.

#### 5. Endnotes:

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- [9] *Hnatlang* is a form of cooperative labour and can be seen as a forced labour called upon the village communities either by the chiefs, village councils or the youth leaders called *val upa*. It is practiced by all tribes of Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups.
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