

# Social Structure in Early Sumi Naga Society

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**Abstract:-** The present study aims to explore the social structure which prevails in the early Sumi society. It attempts to identify those structures which form a society. It also attempts to find out the roles and functions of each class in Sumi society. The society which has neither caste nor class-based distinction yet there was division seen among the people based on their profession. This led to a need for historical study on the social structure of early Sumi Naga society.

**Keyword:-** Social Structure, Society, Division, Profession, Historical Study.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Sumi society in the olden days was purely community-based society where every individual worked for the welfare of the village and the village in turn worked for the interest of the individual. The villages had its own customary law and every single individual were bound together by that law. The village chief took the responsibility in guarding the law making sure everyone follows it. T. Penzu compared the government of Naga tribes to that of ancient Greek states. Alemchiba stated, "Every Naga village has been republic having its own popular village government, every citizen enjoys political stability, social justice, religious freedom. All men were equal high class or low class of people, no caste distinction, no communal feeling economically they were self-sufficient, and beggar was unknown". The Sumi Nagas like any other Naga tribes followed Patriarchal society where the father is the head of the family and the inheritance of property is only entitled to male member in the family. However, it doesn't mean the females are ignored, though they were not entitled to inherit property and have no voice in any important meetings of the village yet female enjoyed a high position in Sumi society. The women acted as an advisor to her husband in any decision making. She influenced the men to act in whatever direction she desires.

Nagas followed three types of village administration. First was the type of village which was governed by the members who are nominated by the people. The members are chosen from each clan of the village. This system is found to be the best to administer village which is found in rural India. The second type of village administration is found among the Konyak Naga tribe. There is one Angh or King who rule over one or several villages. Angh hold the power to administer the village with the help of Deputy Angh and village elders. The third type of administration is found among Sumi Naga and some other Naga tribes. The village chief or he is called Goan bora, administer the particular village. He holds the power equivalent to a Konyak Angh.

The Naga polity was democratic in nature from the very beginning, making the people sole political authority. Most of the decision rest in the hands of the village people except the Konyak tribe, which follow monarchy system. In most of the Naga tribe, the form of government is republic in nature. The Naga tribes of Konyak, Sumi and Mao had hereditary monarchy system, assisted by the council of Village Elders. Particularly the Konyak Chief called 'Angh' have greater role and possess greater powers. The Angh in Mon District have many villages with smaller Anghs under them. They exercised sovereignty over those villages and smaller Anghs. These smaller Anghs were assisted by the council of elders or Ministers in every decision. These Ministers are selected by the Anghs of various clans of the village. The Sumis also have their own rulers called 'Kukami' who rule over the village. One unique feature about the Sumis is that each village has their own ruler but have no control over the other villages. Similar to the Anghs of Konyak the Sumi rulers were also assisted by the Village Elders in decision making. The ruler appoints the elders from various clan of family in the village. Though the position of the ruler is protected and kept in high esteem, the actual decision making is done by the elders or so-called ministers, who represent the people from different clan.

The other Naga tribes like Angami, Lotha, Chakesang and Zeliangrong followed a peculiar type of democracy. The chieftain system was hereditary, but they took over the office on the basis of election system chosen among the family members. The eldest son can succeed his father, on or even before the death of his father. In most of these tribe villages, there are two or more chiefs, each over khel. These khels (unit division of the village) coordinate with each other in times of issues relating to the whole village or during emergency period. The chief can be removed from the office, if wishes so by the people. These chiefs are largely influenced by the family clan. However, the Naga Rengma tribe does not follow hereditary system to appoint chiefs but the most suitable man to lead the family's clan is chosen. The Ao's of Naga tribe followed the republic form of government, in which elected headman called 'Tatar' rule the village with limited authority. The village council consisted of elders or ministers along with chiefs' plays and important role in the administration of the Naga sovereign village states. Their decision on any matters becomes the law and bound the villages as they looked upon the will of the people. They decide all the civil and criminal disputes in the village and with different village at large.

### Akukau (Village Chief)

Traditional Sumi village followed a sort of monarchical form of government. In every village the apex political authority was vested on the village chiefs. Chieftainship in the Sumi village was a very powerful

secular institution based on kinship structure for the purpose of village administration. The Sumi Nagas are patriarchal and by tradition have the autocratic system where the chieftainship enjoyed hereditary status, an aspect of the sumi tribe which differentiated them from other Naga tribes. Chieftainship is also a form of self governing institution with political and economic powers. The Chief is generally called 'Akukau' which means 'Village Chief'. He maintains his social position not just his hereditary rights but also through his personal qualities as a person of great social standing and wealth. One source of this condition is to be found in the exclusion from the chieftainship of a man whose hereditary claims is uncontested but whose personal unfitness disqualifies him.

The sumi society has a system of administration centered on the authority of the village chief or Akukau. The administration was autocratic in the sense that the chief ruled by himself arbitrarily and his assistants were subordinates to him. Hutton confirms this view when he wrote that, "the extent to which he would consult his elders depend almost entirely on the personal character of the Chief/Akukau himself". Administration includes the act or process of administering or conducting the affairs of everyday aspects of life. Akukau/Chief as an administrator seeks to get the most appropriate and desirable solution in the view of the public interest.

Thus the duties of a Chief comprises not only of personal matters but also of public functions. He has to direct the village in war. He being the land owner decides which land is to be cultivated in each successive years. In religious matters when gennas are to be performed, it is the Chief's duty to see to it that gennas are performed according to customs and issue orders of the day in which the village performs as a whole. The chiefs also decides on matters like theft, land disputes, life and death decisions, bride-price related issue. It is the Chief who has to bear the burden of welcoming and entertaining the village guest as well as shoulder the responsibility of the poor people in his village. The chief decides on all this matters within the village and other neighbouring villages in consultation with his village elders called the 'Kukami'.

Thus all people living therein were subjects to the chief, as head of the local government and only by moving away or migration could they escape the control. Outsiders are not allowed to settle in his territory without the chief's permission. If the chiefs allowed it, the outsiders settled and became his subjects. In case they disobeyed him they were expelled. He not only regulated the distribution and use of the land but also decided the fate of his subjects on the basis of customary laws.

Each Sumi village like other Naga tribal villages pursued an independent policy and implemented its own customary laws on all walks of life for its citizens. On the one hand, administration was indigenous and independent on the other, economy was local and self-sufficient. The Naga tribes which had Kukami like the Sumis, Chieftainship certainly constituted an important element in their polity and

the village administration was carried out by the Chief assisted by his 'kukami'/ 'village elders'. The village was thus under the control of the powerful "Kukami" among the Sumis. As per the customary laws administrations of justice, enforcement of executive function, maintenance of social practices and customary law, including religious performances are the areas of village administration under the Chieftainship and his Council of Minister. In fact, traditional political life of the Sumis is deeply rooted to their customary laws in their society even today.

Law is one aspect of the system of social control which is an implicit part of every culture. The primacy of the customary laws and practices is to maintain social order while prescribing rules of conduct for each individual, age and sex-wise. Customs and customary laws are not synonymous. There may be various customs without any legal authority but whereas the customary laws have the sanctions of the bulk of the society and if not obeyed, such violator is to be punished. A society cannot get on with its day to day affairs if it permits individuals to be law unto themselves, i.e., to take law into their own hands when they feel aggrieved or have a conflict with another person or group, and so that existence of law in a society can allow the individuals to deal with the new conditions of life experienced in societies changing to other ways of life. Evans- Pritchard states that "Within a tribe there is law; there is machinery for settling dispute and a moral obligation to conclude them sooner or later." Thus, we see that customary law plays an important role in tribal society, where the society, itself acts as the enforcing agent.

It may be noted that the powers of the chief varied from tribe to tribe, and also from village to village among the Nagas, likewise, among Sumis too, the power of the Kukamis varied from village to village. Thus in some Sumi villages the Kukamis were quite liberal and in some villages they were tyrannical. Whatever be the case, the status and position of the Sumi village Kukami are indispensable overture for understanding the Sumi administrative system. The Kukami are the influential persons of most consequences in their respective villages.

The Sumis follow the patriarchy system, as such the male is considered not just the head of the family but also all village chiefs were from the male gender. They followed hereditary chieftainship as such only the descendants of the chief could claim the right to chieftainship. Another way a person could become a village chief was if the person founded the village. In the traditional Sumi society the village Chief were known to practice polygamy form of marriage, one of the reasons why they could afford two or more was because they had enough wealth to take care of both the wives and the other reason was in case the first wife is unable to conceive a child then, they could take second wife who would bear his child. However, the role of the chiefs was crucial in maintaining peace and order in the village and also maintaining friendly relations with other villages.

### **Kukami (Village Elders)**

The chief was assisted by a council of village elders called Kukami. Each clan send a person (usually an elderly) to be a member in the village council. The main responsibility of the members of the village council was to assist the chief in his day to day village administration. In every Sumi Naga villages there were a number of clans and this clan members were related to each other because they shared one common ancestor. Each clan in the village occupied an occupied an area within the village, as such these segregated areas were known as khels (village-quarters). Thus, the village was divided into a number of khels, the number of khels in the village depended upon the size of the village. Even though the village is divided into a number khels the people of a village were bounded together by social, political and religious ties. As such every individual worked for the interest of the entire village and the village in return works for the interest of the individual. The Sumi people like the other Nagas followed patriarchal and exogamous system as such they trace their lineage through the male side and marriage among the clan members are not accepted. Their loyalty and reverence towards their clan or community has knitted them very closely together. Thus, the Kukami enjoyed a high status in the village hierarchy, second only to the chief.

### **Chochomi (Councillor)**

The chief also had spokesperson called Chochomi (councillor); the work of the Chochomi was to assist the chief in his daily activity and his main task was to make important announcement on behave of the chief, for example declaring the day for observing the Genna, the day for working in the fields, the day chosen for hunting and also for selecting the field to cultivate.

### **Awou (Village Priest)**

'One of the most important reason why the rich oral history was kept secret and was maintained by the practice of animism by Awou (Village Priest) and the village people practice it, was due to taboos and gennas as people were afraid that if it goes to the outsider it would be misinterpreted and so were denied to the outsiders'. In the early Sumi society, there was Awou who was entrusted with all the religious responsibilities of the village. The Sumi society was shadowed by darkness. The taboos and superstitious beliefs restricted the people from going against Awou or so-called Village Priest.

One of the chief features of the Sumi Villages is the existence of Awou or village priest. The main role of the Awou is to maintain the balance of law and order in the society as Awou was entrusted with the power to proclaim the activities of everyday life. The taboos (Chineh Chinih) are strictly maintained by the Awou and passed on from generation to generation. It can be generally understood as the person with both political and religious power.

Awou is compared to the king who gives order and usually Awou maintain helpers under him. He can also be compared to the Sadhu, as the Hindu Sadhu and Awou live a life of spiritual discipline. One of the incidents of the law

given by Awou found is that at the death of the mother during the birth or if a person died by falling off the tree the villager were not allowed to work. It is a curse to go against Awou as the early Sumi society is shadowed with superstition beliefs. Thus, it makes Awou the supreme authority in the village. He also announced all the orders of the days.

Some of the present Sumi elders called the period of Awou the period of darkness, which covered the people. Taboos over shadowed the people making them to live in darkness for long time till the invasion of period. However, there are good Taboos such serving food to the elders first and the elders were respected so much. Some of the comparison which can be found during early Naga society and now is that during Awou period the people before consuming anything they have to first to the spirit like how Christians offers their first harvest to God as thanks giving.

According to the counting of the moon Awou has to declare the festivals such as Tuluni. It is believed that if a person goes against the will of the Awou he does not live long. Awou performed all the religious duties, such as during the sowing period the servant of Awou will bring the seedlings and Awou will be the first to sow the seed by giving thanks to the spirit. It will be a day that nothing will be cut and no one will work. Even during the time of harvest Awou will be the first to harvest. Awou gives all the important days for the people and the spirit. Thus, he is considered more powerful than king. However, the powers and responsibilities of Awou differ from one Sumi area to area. For instance, Awou is considered all powerful as he decides daily activities of the village and is compared to a Chief in the eastern Sumi regions of Pughoboto areas but in the Zunheboto areas Awou is considered merely a religious leader.

### **Mighimi (the Orphans or Poor)**

In every society there is social stratification so as in the case of Sumi society, Mighimi which means orphans was considered the last in the social hierarchy. According to the olden days, the poor people were considered as orphans. The orphans were divided into various types such as Axe-u, Aqu-u, Akiwo Kishimi, Anuli Kishimi (Zhimo, 2011). The poor were compiled to seek the generosity of the rich people as they had neither land nor property of their own. Through the generosity of the rich the poor were given food, clothes, agricultural land for survival.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The origin history of the Sumi Nagas is not conclusive and is shrouded in obscurity as the history itself is not documented leading to various versions on the theory of their origin. Like the history of the Nagas, much of what is known about their history is known only through the folktales and folklore, legends etc. which were passed down from generation to generation as an oral tradition. It is of the fact that the superstitious consequences will befall upon a person responsible for altering the story when they passed down to another individual but no matter the case the oral

transmission of information cannot be fully relied upon. This is one of the main reasons why there are many inconsistencies in the story and the lack of physical evidence which adds to the confusion on origin and migration as well as social structure found in the early Sumi society. However, many contemporary scholars have put forth several theories and from them we can get a general idea about the Sumi people. The primitive Sumi people lived a life of isolation before they came into contact with the British. They lived a secular and independent life within the village, away from contact even with other tribes except during inter-tribal warfare. The main reasons for a conservative life was because all Naga villages were self-sustaining and so going outside of their territory was not required. Before the coming of western influence, the Sumi Nagas lived a primitive lifestyle and their traditional way of life was a secular one. Hereditary chief possessed the outmost power in the village. Almost all the decision regarding the villages and its function was given by the chief. I should say the Sumi Nagas followed Monarchical form of government as the chiefs possessed the highest authority and his words are Laws.

Through the advent of the British and the efforts of the Christian missionaries, the gospel of Christ was spread in almost every part of the Sumi areas. The beginning of new belief and new administration system led to a radical change in their traditional lifestyle and in most of the institution prevailing in the Sumi society. The impact of the Christianity gradually leads them to give up their traditional social system and this in turn made it possible for the process of modernization to occur. The work of the missionaries left a significant mark in the history of the Sumi tribe and has drastically changed their traditional ways of life.

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