

WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL POLITY; BULIANG OF APATANI

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ABSTRACT

In most of the tribal Societies of Arunachal Pradesh in India, there are village councils that work as a mechanism for ensuring peace and harmony in the society. These village councils have existed since time immemorial and are known by different names in different communities. This paper presents the detailed study undertaken on Buliang-the village council of Apatani community of Arunachal Pradesh. Like any other patriarchal society where women do not enjoy a significant role in the decision- making process, Buliang in Apatani has always been a male- dominated institution where the women folks were never included in the traditional village council; where all the important decision pertaining to the community was taken. This paper is an outcome of a sincere effort made to understand the native's views for not including women in Buliang, also an effort has been made to incorporate the exclusive voices of women folk over their resentment and contentment for not including or inducting women in the institution of Buliang.

KEYWORDS: *Apatani, Buliang, Ceremony, Contribution, Village Council*

INTRODUCTION

To ensure peace and harmony in the society, there must be an instrument through which this can be managed or carried out. The tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh have their own distinctive self-governing councils that ensure peace and harmony in their society. Dubey (1998) states that, a village council that has been functioning as effective village government; supported by social and religious sanctions, since time immemorial. Perhaps this could be the reason for peaceful co-existence of all the communities in this part of India; Arunachal Pradesh. These village councils are known by different names in different communities and in *Apatani* community of Arunachal Pradesh, the village council is known as *Buliang*. The representatives of the clans, who in their plurality constitute a kind of village government, are the *Buliangs* (Elwin 1959).

Apatani are the inhabitant of Lower Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh in India and are considered as one of the advanced tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The *Apatani* belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock and trace their descent from legendary ancestor the *Abotani*. The *Apatani* dialect is classified under Tibeto-Burman language Group and does not have a script of their own. Traditionally, they had settled in seven villages – *Hong, Hari, Biila (Reru, Tajang, and Kalung) Dutta, Hija, Mudang-Tage and Michi Bamin*. Besides these original villages, in order to accommodate the growing population, some more villages came up, namely *Siiro, maniipolyang, and hakhe tare* of *Hong, Lempya of Tajang, Biirii of MudangTage, Nenchayang of Dutta and Hija, and Siibe of Bamin*.

Buliang the village council of *Apatani* has been an important topic of interest for writers and research scholars alike. Hemendorf (1962) *Buliangis* men of character and ability, drawn from among the members of a lineage which, owing to its wealth and status, always chosen on account of their personal standing in the community. Kani (1993) said the members of the *Buliang* are not ordinary people; they are the man of wealth, statesmen, a man of ability, capability, and expert in tribal laws or customary laws. So, people respect them and do not quarrel with them. On the contrary, they honor their decisions; however, they have no absolute power to do arbitration and do not take any action unless a dispute of public or individual has become a public issue. But when they take action people must honor their decisions. So, *Buliang* is an administration by the people, for the people and of the people. *Buliang* are the representative of the clan, village, and community who arbitrate on behalf of them with the truth and without bias. Therefore *Buliangis* considered important and are respected greatly by the people and the institution of *Buliang* is male-dominated. The post of *Buliangis* hereditary, where the father nominates son for the post. Generally, the eldest son is nominated. However, there is no hard rule in *Apatani* customary laws that his eldest son only should be nominated because the nomination depends upon the willingness of the father and the capability of his son. So even the youngest son can hold this post if he has the ability and expertise in tribal laws. If one has no male child his immediate cousin who is capable is nominated to this post. But nowhere in the oral literature talks about women *Buliang*, if suppose one has no male child but has a girl child even in that case daughter is never nominated to the post of *Buliang* but her immediate male cousin is appointed as a *Buliang*. So in the history of *Apatani*, there has never been a woman *Buliang*. Here it is worth mentioning that, there are good numbers of books and articles on this topic but never tried to inquire women, which would enlighten the resentment and the contentment over the system or for that matter patriarchal practice in their society.

Therefore, it would be interesting to note the role played by women if any, in the institution of *Buliang*, perhaps this is the main objective of this paper. An effort has been made to unfold the contribution of women folk in *Buliang* and tried to know the reasons as to why women were never inducted as *Buliang*, it also incorporates the exclusive views of women; their resentment and contentment over non-inclusion of women in *Buliang*.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study of the universe is the *Apatani* Valley or the Ziro, headquarter of Lower Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh inhabited by the *Apatanis*. The sources of the data are both primary and secondary. The primary data for this paper have been collected during fieldwork in the Ziro valley during which, interview and audio-visual technique have been employed. Interviews have taken to include the priest, members of village councils (*Buliang*), panchayati Raj members, gaonburas and gaonburis, village elders both men and women and randomly selected villagers. A questionnaire cum interview schedule was used in administering the respondents. The secondary sources of data are those which have been collected from the official records of the *Buliang* organization, books and papers on related topics from different authors both published as well as unpublished.

POWER AND FUNCTIONS OF BULIANG

The *Buliang* of *Apatani* has a responsibility of maintaining law and order in the society and are believed to be the upholder of unrecorded code and conduct of the people based on traditional customary laws.

The administration of justice was looked after by the *Buliang*. Both internal and external peace and harmony were established in their society during those days due to the existence of *Buliang*. However, they do not have absolute power for arbitration unless a dispute affects the public at large or individual appealed to them for justice. *Apatani* society provides for the enforcement of laws through the *Buliang* acting as the representatives of public opinion. The power of the *Buliang*, no doubt, is limited and they neither constitute a tribal government nor do they function in the manner of judges in a court of law (Hamendrofop.cit., p.100).

But since last few decades, the judicial and administrative power and function of *Buliang* has been reduced to some extent due to the introduction of Indian penal code and its administration in the *Apatani* Valley. Though *Buliang*'s functions are reduced in certain areas it does not lose its importance in *Apatani* society, *Buliang* still plays an important role in the socio-religious life of the *Apatanis*. For example the three important religious ceremonies of *Apatani* viz. *Myoko*, *subutaning* and *Murung* festivals. Perhaps this is the major function of *Buliang* these days. Ursula (1953) also wrote a chapter on *Murung* festival but did not mention the role played by *Buliang* in this ceremony. These are the main festivals celebrated by the *Apatanis* and these ceremonies cannot be celebrated or performed without the involvement of *Buliang*. *Myoko* is the annual festival of the *Apatani* celebrated in the month of March, this festival is celebrated by the whole community, in turn, wise, where the whole community is divided into three village groups and these three village groups celebrate *Myoko* on rotation basis; *Hari*, *Biila* (*Tajang*, *Reru*, and *Kalung*) constitute one group, *Bamin-Michi*, *MudangTage*, *Dutta* and *Hija* constitute another group and *Hong* make another group. This festival starts or begins when *Buliang* from other guest village arrives in the *Myoko* hosting village, they come in a procession called *KhwboAmang*, consist of the priest who leads the procession followed by *Buliang* and young men well versed in *Apatani* oral literature and sometimes even young boys of their village accompany them. It is important to note that women folk be it wives or daughters of *Buliang* were not allowed to accompany in this procession. The guests are then served with *O* (rice beer), meat, *tapyo* (local salt) and rice and meat for the children. The priest then chants hymn called '*langur*' a prayer of revoking all the unseen danger and misfortune and hence protection for the clan, village in particular and community as a whole are sought. Meanwhile remaining *Buliang* guest goes to all the *Buliang*'s house of that village to collect *tapyo* (local salt) this ritual is known as *tapyokhaning*. In this ritual (*tapyokhaning*) all the wives of *Buliang* receive the guest at their respective houses and offer them with the ceremonial gifts of *tapyo* and serve them '*O*' (rice beer). In the same way *Murung* and in *Subu-Taning* ceremonies too, *Buliang* plays an important role. *Murung* and *SubuTaning* are performed by an individual family for the well being of the family members. In these ceremonies too *Buliang* are invited for a feast and ceremonial gift, called *Amangare* presented. Unlike *Myoko* festival where *Buliang* from other village are invited, here in this two ceremonies; *Murung* and *Subu-Taning*, *Buliang* of own village are invited for the feast and ceremonial gifts. One thing is common in all these ceremonies viz. *Myoko*, *Murung*, *Subu-Taning* that whenever *Buliang* gets a ceremonial gift in the form of meat, salt and money (*apu*), they never take it to their own respective house rather they gather in one of the houses of the *Buliang*. There all the *Buliang* get together and the wife of the house owner prepares rice and rest of the *Buliang* wives bring one jar of *O* (rice beer) each, one plate of meat salad each and *tapyo* and have a good time together along with their children, feasting with delicacies brought as gifts from ceremonies and also from the wives of respective *Buliang*. And the *apu* (money) they received in the ceremony is kept as a fund for the *Buliang*. In this way, *Buliang* played an important role in all socio-religious life of *Apatani* and perhaps it was the *Buliang* who bind all the villages of the *Apatani* valley in one roof *Tanw*.

The *Buliang* of the entire *Apatani* community are classified into two broad groups called *Buliang Asso*, they are:

- *Talyang-Hao* and *Twnw-Dwbo* comprised of *Hari*, *Kalung*, *Dutta*, *Mudang-Tage*, and *BaminMichi* villages.
- *Niichi-Niitii*, *Reru-Tajang*, and *Diire-HijaBuliang*: comprising of *Reru*, *Tajang*, *Hija* and *Hong* villages.

For the better coordination among all the *Buliangs* of different villages an apex body of *Buliang* was founded in the year 2012, called 'SupungBuliang Council'. Following are the village wise distribution of the *Buliangs*.

Table: 1 Village Wise Distributions of Buliang

Sl. No.	Name of the Village	Numbers of Buliang
1	<i>Niitii</i>	16
2	<i>Niichi</i>	11
3	<i>Reru</i>	23
4	<i>Tajang</i>	20
5	<i>Diire</i>	10
6	<i>Dija</i>	14
7	<i>TalyangKalung</i>	11
8	<i>HaoBuliang (Hage)</i>	17
9	<i>Pato</i>	6
10	<i>Dutta</i>	9
11	<i>TaduTage</i>	12
12	<i>BaminMichi</i>	10
Total		159

Source: compiled by the researcher based on By-Law and Constitution, SupungBuliang Council- 2015 and data are collected by the researcher during a field study at Ziro.

According to Table 1, the total number of *Buliangs* are 159, and as per the information gathered during the field study, out of total 159 *Buliangs*, 5 of them are dead and hence their 4 widows and 1 daughter are the custodian of the post-*Buliang*, because their sons and brothers are still young.

WOMEN'S ROLE AND SPACE IN BULIANG

Like any other patriarchal society, where women do not enjoy a good position in the decision making process, *Apatani* women were never included in any of the decision -making bodies. In those days *Buliang* being a powerful mechanism through which all the important decision pertaining to community, be it a social, religious and judicial were made by them and it has always been a male- dominated institution. TakheRibia chairman of 'SupungBuliang Council' (Apex body of *Buliang*) replied to a question, what are the roles or duties of the wives of the *Buliangs*? "Their (wives of *Buliangs*) only duty is to prepare and serve food and rice beer in any *Buliang* gathering and also in other ceremonies where they as a wife of *Buliang* are obliged to take 'O', *tapyo* (local salt) and *Yokagi* (meat salad). The same question has been asked to DusuKopiyang, an elderly women of Hari village, wife of Lt. DusuHaliang who was a *Buliang*; what is your role as a wife of *Buliang*? She replied "I think as a wife of *Buliang* I too played an important role along with my husband. Wives of *Buliang* had an extra duty to be maintained, especially during winter season because those are the season for *Myoko*, *murungandsudu-taning* festival of *Apatani*, for instance other women in the village had a choice of their own, whether to keep 'O' (rice beer) and *tapyo* at their houses and therefore were not compulsory for them, but for the wives of *Buliang* we make it a point to keep at least some 'O' (rice beer) and *tapyo* at our houses, because in these ceremonies visiting of *Buliang* and other guests from other villages at the *Buliang*'s house were very common. And if we are not ready

with that necessary stuff, it would be a disgrace to our *Buliang* husband and we never wanted that to happen, therefore we were extra careful in this regard. We enjoyed doing our duty and never felt burdened.” Another role as a wife of the *Buliang* is as custodian of the post -*Buliang*, this happens when *Buliang* dies whose sons are young, in such case, wife of the *Buliang* becomes the custodian of the husband’s post and it does not give her a permanent membership or make her *Buliang*. When her son attends the age of maturity, mother automatically passes the legacy of *Buliang* to her son. For the time being the mother represent her son in any meeting conducted by the *Buliang* but her presence in the meeting does not show her importance because she is never consulted on any matter nor she gives any opinion in any regard. In this regard question had been put forward to TakheRibia, chairman of ‘SupungBuliang Council’ whether the *Buliangs* invite or inform the widows of *Buliangs* to a meeting conducted by them and do they allow women folk to share their views, he replied “of course we do inform and invite them to any meeting we conduct and women are not restricted from sharing their views, they too can share their opinion in any matter that is being discussed but women hardly do that and rather they prefer to lend their hands in preparing food, rice beer and in serving them.” It is important to note that the space of *Apatani* women in the institution of *Buliang* is just of a custodian; she cannot become *Buliang* in her lifetime. Beyond this what remains with women is just simply the name tag as ‘wife’, ‘widow’ and ‘mother’ of *Buliang*, an essence of patriarchal society.

Here question arises as to why women were never included in *Buliang*? To know the views of not inducting women in the Institution of *Buliang*. A questionnaire was prepared to assist their ideas for the same. There were 90 respondents, consisting both male and female in equal numbers who were aged between 30 years to 60 years. The composition of the sample was; 10 *Buliang* members, 3 priests, 4 *Gaon Buras*, 3 *Gaon Buris*, 35 Panchayati Raj members and 35 villagers. All these respondents have been randomly selected from the *Apatani* villages. And their responses have been categorized into three basic reasons cited by the respondents. Below is the table showing the numbers of the respondents in different categories of response.

Table: 2 Why Women were never Inducted in *Buliang*?

Reasons	No. of the Respondents		Total	
	Male	Female	No.	%
Birthplace; women are not a permanent member of any clan.	25	24	49	54.4 %
Incapable; women are physically weaker than men.	12	10	22	24.4 %
Division of work; women are busy in a feminine job.	8	11	19	21.2 %
Total No.	45	45	90	100%

Source: Data collected by the researcher, during field study 2016.

Above Table 2 shows the different reasons that respondents assume for the non-inclusion of women in *Buliang*. They also shared their views while substantiating their responses. Following are the analysis made on the basis of their reasons they have cited.

- The first reason was supported by 49 respondents of which 25 were male and 24 were female, that makes 54.4 % of the total respondents. According to them, *Buliangs* are a permanent member of a clan. But, women are not the permanent member of a clan where she is born. She changes her clan forever when she gets married. These respondents would love to quote very popular proverb of the *Apatani* “*Nyimw mi Nyibo pa, sanw mi kwdi pa.*” which means “women are for other as she gets married leaving her own family and clan and leaves are for the soil, as leaves of a tree is bound to fall down on the ground.

- Therefore women were not included in the institution of *Buliang*.
- The second reasons cited by the 22 respondents of which 12 are men and 10 are women, making 24.4 % of the total respondents is that ‘women are physically weaker than men’ for those respondents men are physically stronger than women ‘*pinwsi milo bomitamoyado pa putw*’ meaning God has created men to be stronger than women and so role of *Buliang* involves negotiation, arbitration in hostilities between individual, villages and even some time between communities, so it is not possible for women to handle such situation for women are physically weaker than men. Therefore women were never inducted as *Buliang*.
- And the third reason being ‘Division of labor’ believes in feminine and masculine work. 19 respondents are in favor of this category, of which 8 were men and 11 were women that constitute 21.2 % of the total respondents. According to them women stay busy whole day in managing domestic as well as agricultural work, hence could not spare a time for community service. And that could be the reason why women were not in the *Buliang*.

The analysis of the table 2 tells that both the gender agrees and cited reasons for not inducting women in *Buliang*, their responses are based on their own understanding and experience. The survey in this questionnaire made the base for another interesting question that is ‘whether, women of *Apatani* society are satisfied with the system of non-inclusion of women in *Buliang*’ this can be of worth studying in the *Apatani* patriarchal society.

Therefore, in this paper effort has also been made to know the women’s stand on how they feel for not including women as *Buliang*. To know the resentment and the contentment in this regard, a separate questionnaire was prepared and this question was administered to only women respondents of the previous question. So, there were 45 women respondents, aged between 30 to 60 years. The question put forward before them was; should women be included in *Buliang* – ‘No’ or ‘Yes’? Substantiate your answer. Below table shows their response and the number of the respondents.

Table 1.3: should Women Be Included in Buliang?

Response	Number of Women	Percentage
No	38	84.4 %
Yes	7	15.6 %
Total	45	100%

Source: Data collected by Researcher during field study 2016.

Out of 45 women, 38 women that constitute 84.4 % of the total respondents said ‘No’ and they have no resentment for not including women in *Buliang*. For instance *Tasso Opian* elderly women of Hari village, answered ‘*nyimwBuliangengo mi enkoda, udeyalu mi hunaluchiko?*’ meaning ‘if women become *Buliang*, who will do the household chores? According to the research many of the women, especially older generation feel that women should remain in the house looking after family, doing household chores and agricultural works. For these respondents, customs and tradition of their fore father, including the division of labor for men and women should be honored. They believe in *Apatani* proverb ‘*mehikekang, milo kego*’ which means ‘wife is inferior and husband is superior’ that shows their unconditional love for a husband. So they did not show any resentment or disappointment for not allowing women to be a *Buliang*. The submissive nature of the *Apatani* women can be seen here and also the deeply rooted faith in the patriarchal *Apatani* society. Out of 45, only 7 respondents that constitute 15.6 % of the total respondents are with ‘Yes’ response. According to them, women should be included in *Buliang*. For these respondents, women are equally capable in every work, and the notion that women are incapable and weaker than men is only because women have never given a chance to prove her potential. And

if given an opportunity woman can even excel men. But the respondents of this category are content because women nowadays are getting equal rights in every sphere of life, women have also started taking active part in decision making bodies at the grass root level through Panchayati Raj Institution.

CONCLUSIONS

The institution of *Buliang*; the village council of *Apatani*, the upholder of the unrecorded traditional and customary laws had always held an important position in the *Apatani* society. Though at present their judicial and administrative power and function has reduced to some extent due to the introduction of the Indian penal code and administration in the *Apatani* valley. But in the socio-religious sphere, their role still remains at the paramount. As it has been seen that, in religious ceremonies like *Murung* and *SubuTaning*, *Buliang* still plays an important role. Like in any other patriarchal society, *Apatani* women too do not enjoy the privilege of being part of the Institution of *Buliang*. though women were never seen negotiating, arbitrating in war and hostility, between the disputes cases or walking along with the *Buliang* men to a ceremony in different villages but, this study reveals the women's contribution to the cause of *Buliang*, which cannot be denied; and yes women do contribute though in a small way but significant one that always remains behind the scene; there remains a dedicated wife of a husband who caters all the efforts in her capacity so that her husband's prestige always remain at the highest, this could be understood by the way they get ready with those ceremonial gifts for the guest and maintain all the obligations as a wife of *Buliang* with all sincerity. There is a mother who protects and guides her children even in the absence of her husband, a mother who always tries to secure the future of her son as she became custodian of the post, so that someday her son could become *Buliang* and a woman who never questions the existing patriarchal system and enjoyed her world with contentment, this could be seen through the assessment of question 'Do you think women should be included in *Buliang*?' where 85% of the women feel that women should not be included in *Buliang* and only 15% of the women feel that a woman should be inducted as *Buliang*. Perhaps this study supplements the role and contribution made by women folk in a patriarchal society.

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