

Traditional Political Organisation of the Paudi Bhuyan Tribe of Odisha: An Anthropological Analysis

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Abstract

Present paper deals with the traditional political organization of the Paudi Bhuyan tribe of Odisha. In the tribal society, political organisation plays a very crucial role in the maintenance of peace, order and tranquillity in the society. At different levels such as band, tribe as well as chieftdom, different forms of political organizations are found even today. Among the Paudi Bhuyan, political organization was regulating socio-cultural, economic, religious and local common property resources in a very effective manner. Implementation of the PRI system has brought certain changes in the traditional council. The position and status of village head (Pradhan) has degenerated over the period of time with the coming of elected ward members. The traditional political organization was instrumental in socialising the members of the society to live a dignified life by maintaining order and peace in the locality.

Key Words: Paudi Bhuyan, Darbar, Political Organisation, Punishment

Purna Chandra Baradi

Lecturer,
Department of
Anthropology,
Govt' Autonomous
College, Bhawanipatna,
Odisha, India

Introduction

The mental and physical development of human beings triggered social and cultural development which ultimately led to the evolution of human civilization. Gradually social institutions like religious, economic, cultural and political developed in different cultures. The social institutions were developed to fulfil different needs of the human beings. Over the period of time remarkable changes have taken place in these institutions which can be observed in the primitive societies and modern societies.

The traditional political organization in primitive or tribal societies is one of the important social institutions. According to Morton Fried (1967:20-21) "Political organisation comprises those portions of social organization that specifically relate to the individuals or groups that manage the affairs of public policy or seek to control the appointment or activities of those individuals or groups". This definition is less applicable to non-states where it is often difficult to find any "public policy" (Kottack, 2015:153). Elman Service (1962) has categorised four types or levels of political organization; such as band, tribe, chieftdom and state. Ethnographic and archaeological research in numbers of places indicated that there are correlations between the economy and social and political organization (Kottack, 2015:153). Morgan's 'The League of the Iroquois' (1851) is considered as the first political ethnography. He studied the political organization in relation to its social, ritual and economic aspects (Vincent, 2002:645). Henry Maine (1915) was concerned with the evolution of law and his studies of classical Roman law and village communities East and West are designed in accordance with philological rather than sociological methods.

Political organisation plays a very crucial role in the maintenance of peace, order and tranquillity in the society. At different levels such as band, tribe as well as chieftdom, different forms of political organizations are found. In India the smallest unit of tribal political organization is found at the village level. But inter village organizations are also found to exist even today. At the village level, intra-village disputes, inter-family conflicts of different kinds and other socio-economic and religious issues are managed by the functionaries of political organization. Inter-village disputes, basically related economy, land and marriage are taken care of by the inter-village council of the respective tribes.

The present study was undertaken among the Paudi Bhuyan tribe of Keonjhar district.

The Paudi Bhuyan is one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of Odisha. They are mostly found in the districts of Keonjhar, Deogarh, Sundargarh and Angul. Apart from the state of Odisha, Bhuyans are also found in large numbers in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. The Paudi

Jagannath Dash

Former Professor
Department of
Anthropology,
Utkal University
Odisha India

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Bhuyan consider themselves as the son of the soil (Bhumiputra) or owner of the land. The term 'Bhuyan' has originated from the Sanskrit word "Bhumi".

Methodology

The present study is a part of Ph.D. research which was conducted in the district of Keonjhar, Odisha. For primary data collection methods used were observation method and interview method. The key informants were Pradhan (Village Head), Dakua (Messenger), Dehury (Priest), Ward member and older members of the selected villages. Pradhan and Priest revealed the traditional structure and function of the political organization (Darbar). Through interviews, roles and responsibilities were also carved out. From ward member, recent changes were noted down. The first author of the paper belongs to the Bhuyan tribe approach was given importance, therefore the emphasis to understand the topic under study. Several meetings were observed by the first author (observer participant) by participating directly in the process of decision making. The older members of the villages were interviewed to understand the dimensions of change and its impact on the Bhuyan society.

Composition of Political Organization

Every society has developed rules and regulations to control the behaviour of individuals and maintain order in the society. Bhuyan tribe has also traditional political organization to maintain social, cultural, economic and religious issues at the intra-village and inter village level. Looking at the structure and function of the Bhuyan political organization, it is very simple and smallest in nature. There are no written rules and the traditional rules and regulations are orally transmitted from one generation to another. In every Bhuyan village, there is a headman/leader/chief who was managing all the village level affairs. The meeting was held at a specified place with the participation of elderly persons which was presided over by the village headman. The Head man used to take final decisions in consultation with the elderly members of the village and accordingly fine/punishment was being imposed on. Usually the culprit had to give communal feast, food grains, chicken or goat. So no cash fine was there in the past. This was called "jhond" in the Bhuyan native term. Witnesses both direct and indirect were also taken into consideration to come to the final decisions. Oath and ordeal practices were also there in the Bhuyan political justice system.

Status of the Pradhan

Pradhan has a special identity and status in the village. Since he is the expert in terms of rules and regulation, customs and traditions, everyone gives respect to him. In the Bhuyan society, from a political, social and economic point of view he gets the highest respect in the village. Both in individual as well as social walks of life, he always gets a special place. The respect from the villagers as well as neighbours is reflected in the behaviour.

Role and Responsibility of Dehury

The Head of the political organization is called as "*Pradhan*" who is administrative head of the village. The place where the meetings are held is known as "Durbar". This place is usually located in the middle of every Bhuyan village. This is an open air platform and no roofing is done. All the important village level decisions such as related to fairs and festivals, conflict resolutions, village level worships are taken. The participation in the meetings was only by the head of every family in the village. The position of the *Pradhan* (village head) is hereditary in nature. The sacred head of the village is called "*Dehury*". So he is the religious head of the village. The priest is supposed to maintain utmost honesty, cleanliness and purity in his act and thought. The position of the village priest is also hereditary in nature. Even today, Pradhan and Dehury positions in the Bhuyan society are hereditary in nature. They have not changed in this regard. Another important respectable position in the Bhuyan village is messenger who is called "*dakua* or *dangua*". This position is occupied by the person till he is mentally and physically fit to discharge the duty.

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Remuneration for the Officials

Before India's independence, at the time of the King's rule, there was no individual ownership of land and other resources. Agricultural land was divided on mutual understanding. All the property of the village was in the name of Pradhan. At the end of each year, tax (khajana) was collected in the name of the Pradhan, deposited to Bhuyan Pati Sardar by the dakua. And that was being deposited by khajana Sardar to the King. In 1962 and 1986 Odisha Revenue Settlement was done and during that patta (land record) was given to individual ownership of those land in which they were cultivating for many years. During that time, large acres of land was named in the name of Pradhan as jageri. The Priest of the village was given the ownership of large numbers of land as part of worshiping places of village deities. It is also found from the study that common people were in favour of registering less acre of land in their name, where more in the name of Pradhan. The value of money at that time was very low. There was fear of failing to pay the tax among the people which resulted in "*Gharkharki*". The Bhuyans are the simple and peace loving people who wanted to live happily under the traditional leader. Therefore, jagir lands of the Bhuyan village are later on registered in the name of Pradhan and Dehury. If we see the current scenario, the large acres of land are in the name of Pradhan and Dehury in every Bhuyan village. During the festivals and rituals, the Priest is given new clothes (naba bastra) which constitute a dhati, baniyan, and napkin. For dakua no such land in the name of jageri is allotted, but at the end of the year during Dinamundia festival, as a part of annual subscription (bartan), he gets paddy (20 pai), grams, rice, and naba bastra(dhati, ganji, gamucha).

Structure of Darbar

In every Bhuyan village, *Darbar* (open air place) is located in the middle of every village. The Bhuyan village may consist of one or more than one Khillis (bansa) (Mohanty, 2004: 73). There is a courtyard for organization of meetings where the members sit and discuss important issues of the village. This is called "Manda Danda". In one direction of the courtyard male youth dormitory (Mandaghara) is located. In another direction, there is a chemda. Kothighar (earthen temple) is also located near the *Darbar*. In between the Manager and Kothighar, a sacred pole is fixed which is called "Basuki Khunta". This is the symbolic representation of Basuki Mata (Female deity). In Odia the term Basuki means soil. A group of villages constitute a confederation called a "Pirha". The council at this level is known as "*Pirha Panchayat*" and the secular headman of the Pirha is called the "Sardar" (Mohanty, 2004:75). Among the Santals of Odisha, the term Darbar is used for a village level meeting and inter village council is known as Pirha as it is called by the Bhuyan of Odisha (Murmur & Kanhar, 2014:86-87).

Selection of the Functionaries of Political Organization

The selection of personals is done in the last festival of the year known as "Dhi Bandana". A village level meeting is organized during this festival. This is also called "Dinmundia parba". This falls in the last part of December. All the village level issues are discussed vividly. Everyone is given a chance to express their grievances or problems before the council. The post of Pradhan and Dehury are hereditary as mentioned earlier. Therefore, the eldest male members of the clan are nominated. Usually the eldest son inherits the position of Pradhan and Priest respectively. If the nominated son does not wish to take the charge or is unable to discharge the duty in the opinion of the villagers, then the next son is nominated for the position. If the son of the priest or headman is not adult (Below the age to be a priest or pradhan), then the younger brother of the priest is given the temporary charge till the son of the priest attains adulthood. If the Pradhan does not have a brother, then an under age son is given the position as per hereditary rule and he discharges the duty under the direct supervision of older members of the village. In this way the hereditary position of priest and Pradhan are continuing till today.

On the other hand, the "Dangua/ Dakua" position is given to that person unanimously who is interested and has a social work mindset. When the *dangua* does not want to continue, his son is offered the position. If his son denies the offer, another eligible person with the above mentioned quality is nominated by the majority. The question is why the son of the existing "Dangua" is offered first? It is because this particular position is held by one person for a very long period of

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time. On the humanity ground, his son is offered first, and then others are taken into consideration.

Role and Responsibility of the Members

Pradhan

“Pradhan” is the administrative head of the village. The Pradhan is expected to have leadership and decision making ability. He is authorised to punish the culprit and handle intra-village and inter village issues effectively. He settles the conflicts of different kinds between individuals and families, controls anti-social activities, issues related to thief and burglary and other indiscipline acts are controlled by the Pradhan. Apart from that, he is also responsible for the law and order situation in the village, to maintain unity in the village, help out people during crisis, protection of communal property and maintain good political relationship with other neighbouring villages. He also monitors the issues related to village boundary, protection of natural resources and also monitors the situations during festivals and rituals in the village. He also expected to actively involve himself in the socio-cultural, political, and economic development of the village. He should identify the actual culprit on the basis of evidence and witnesses in presence of the elders and direct “dangua” to make the final announcement with the fine (Jhand) to be imposed. He plays a crucial role to bring the deviant individuals of the village to the mainstream of the village social life. He ensures that the victims be given adequate empathy and financial support from the village fund. The village fund is directly supervised by the Pradhan and also works towards its collection, growth and redistribution as and when required. The interest rate of the village fund is also finalized by the Pradhan in consultation with the senior members of the village.

Dehury is the religious head of the village. The main work of the priest is to propitiate all the deities of the village to maintain the well being of the villagers. He prays for the villagers in terms of good health, economic development, protection of domesticated animals, agricultural activities, time adequate rain, availability of fruits and roots, to avoid natural disasters and protection of lives. During the festivals and rituals he worships all the deities for disease free life of the villagers, evil spirits should not enter into the village boundary, protection of crops from wild animals, insects and worms etc. He is also responsible for the preservation and maintenance of the place of worship. He ensures that polluted individuals should not enter into the places of worship. The persons or family considered polluted as per the cultural traditions are the family who have not performed purificatory rituals for death and birth, individual married by elopement and “teldia’ ritual not performed, individual who killed a cow, marriage with scheduled caste, women during menstruation are prohibited to enter into the sacred place of worship. If someone pollutes the places of worship, he or she has to pay the cost of purification and sometimes communal feast given by the culprit. Therefore, the priest’s responsibility is to keep all the sacred places of worship clean and pure. In the Bhuyan society, every household has a place of ancestor worship which is called *Mul Ghar* or *Bhitar Ghar*. The priest also has a separate sacred room where he worships the ancestors and keeps all the sacred instruments of the village level worship. This place is prohibited for other clan members and also for the individuals who are in the state of pollution.

Function of Political Organization

Bhuyans live an independent life in a limited geographical area. With the help of traditional political organization, they have developed social-cultural, economic, and political institutions to lead a healthy, simple and disciplined life. Therefore different social institutions came into existence.

In the Bhuyan society, the social activities are very much controlled by the political organization. Through the institution of Darbar, the individuals are socialised to lead the disciplined and respectable life, equal access to common property resources, and social interaction with mutual respect and to create a beautiful and ordered environment. The mindsets of the villagers are moulded to maintain village unity, brotherhood, and interpersonal cooperation in the locality. For that, the values through informal education, freedom, justice and rights are inculcated in the individual minds. The protection and preservation of language, customs and traditions, division of labour on the basis age and sex are also ensured by the political organization.

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As mentioned in the previous sections, the important function of the political organization is to control the behaviour of the individuals. Therefore different types of conflicts are resolved in the Darbar. Punishments for the culprit are seriously imposed. As a result of which they will not repeat the unacceptable behaviours. Sometimes due to absence of evidence and witness, the culprit does not get punishment. In this situation, the accused is asked to take an oath by taking a certain amount of soil. They worshipped a stone in the name of the accused and cursed it. If the accused lies in his/her statement, then supernatural punishment will be inflicted upon this may lead to his/her death. He is asked to say by holding the soil in his hand "if I lie then I will die in near future and I shall be immersed in the soil". But in other cases, the accused accepts the mistake that he has done even in the event of absence of evidence and witness, certain relaxation is allowed in terms of punishment. A certain amount of punishment money is used for communal feast and remaining amount is deposited in the village common fund.

Role and Responsibility of Dangua/Dakua

Dangua or dakua also plays a very important role in the village activities of the Bhuyan village. Dakua acts as the assistant and also the messenger of both the Priest and Pradhan. All the information relating to forthcoming meetings are spread to each and every household by the dakua. Apart from intra-village activities, information related to inter-village meetings or other issues are coordinated by the dakua. He stands in between the village Priest and Pradhan and the villagers. At the village level, dangua is the most active individual. He loudly calls out the information on the forthcoming meeting from the place of Darbar. He assists the Pradhan in terms of maintenance, protection and distribution of village common property resources. He is also instrumental in bringing the accused and deviant individuals before the Darbar. He also ensures the fine amount has been collected from the culprit. As mentioned earlier the Bhuyan village has a common fund, which is managed by the Pradhan with the assistance of dangua. He is always ready to shoulder up the duty towards maintaining social, cultural, economic and political order in the village. Therefore, the status of the dakua is also very high in the Bhuyan village. Without his help, it is very difficult to carry out meetings at the Darbar.

Process of Removal from the Positions

The removal of Pradhan and Dehury in the Bhuyan society is hardly seen and found. Since these positions are hereditary in nature, they are considered permanent. Due to old age or incapability to continue mentally and physically or death, his elder son inherits the position temporarily. On the last festival, "Di Bandana" he is declared as the permanent Pradhan or Priest respectively. If the son who acquires the position is found to be drunkard and liar, who accepts the food from lower caste groups as well as beaten up for some reasons by the others is punished as per the rule. Usually he has to pay for the purification of deities and communal feasts. He should not repeat these activities in the future. But if someone has consumed cooked food or water from a lower caste or beaten up by lower caste people, a proper purification ceremony is organised and shaves the head by a barber. He bears all the cost of all the activities required for purification. This rule is applicable for all the male members of the society. If he repeats the mistake again and again, he is declared as ineligible and his eldest son is given the responsibility. If he has a minor son, in that case one of the brothers is given the temporary position till the minor son attains adulthood. If he does not have brothers, an eldest male member of the clan (Bansa) is given the responsibility. Women of the clan are not at all nominated as the priest or Pradhan. When no male members are present in the clan, in that case a priest or Pradhan is brought from neighbouring Bhuyan village and given the status of villagers.

Economic Life and Political Organization

The Paudi Bhuyan tribe has several traditional cultural traits and complexes. They cultivate adopting traditional technology. Rice is the staple food of the community. Geographical locations have been forcing them to practise shifting cultivation for survival. They also supplement their food with local forest produce. Traditionally they used to practice hunting and pastoralism. The role of the political organization comes while distribution of land for shifting cultivation takes place. In this regard they have to obey the decision of the political organization. The protection and preservation of forest economy, grazing land, land for burial ground

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is also done by Darbar. All the communal property of the village is managed by the political organization. Establishment of village funds as well as proper utilization of the fund during crisis is also coordinated by the traditional council. The Growth of the fund position by timely collection of prescribed fees from the individuals is also in the purview of council. The individual takes out loans during crises caused by drought, flood, and sudden damage of house, marriage, death rituals, health and disease. Collections of interest as well as fixing of interest rate are also done by the council. Wages for work in the village for male and female is decided by the council. Village level expenses during festivals, worship, dance and music, purchasing and repairing musical instruments are also decided. Annual remuneration (Bartan) for barber (Barik), washer man (dhoba) and Kumbhar for their services during life cycle rituals unanimously decided in the Darbar meeting.

Religious Life and Political Organization

The Bhuyan are well known for nature worship. They worship hills and mountains, rivers, rain, lightning, water and air, sun and moon, earth (Basuki Mata), stone, trees and leaves during festivals and rituals. The sacred places of worship are preserved and maintained by the traditional political organization. In totality, the political organization ensures the purity of all the sacred places of the respective villages. It is believed that pollution of sacred places (be it intentional or accidental) leads to dissatisfaction of gods and goddesses. No one wants to dissatisfy the supernatural entities as per the Bhuyan beliefs. Therefore, those who break the rules and pollute the sacred places are punished by the council. In these types' of cases, the entire cost of the purification is borne by the individual who has committed the mistake. All the religious activities starting from festivals to life cycle rituals are observed in the direct supervision of the Pradhan who is the head of the Traditional village council.

Recent Changes and Its Impact Paudi Bhuyan Society

Change is the rule of nature and it is a continuous process. In the traditional political organization of the Bhuyan tribe, a lot of changes have taken place. The most important factor of change is the implementation of the Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) by the Government of India in the year 1973. This has brought a drastic change in the power structure at the village level. The elected representatives such as Ward Member, Sarpanch and other members of Samiti took over the planning and implementation of overall development initiatives at the village level as well as Panchayat and Block level. They became part of the planning and implementation process in their locality. Initially, in the Bhuyan areas, it was not accepted. They protested against the construction of roads and hospitals. They were of the opinion that new road connections will bring the outsiders and opening of hospitals will result in entry of patients into their locality which ultimately brings new diseases in their villages. They did not want to dilute their socio-cultural ecology. PRI initiated different awareness programmes in the remote areas where Bhuyan inhabit. Awareness on health also brought many changes in terms of mindset associated with health and diseases. And when they came to know that they would be electing representatives from their own village, acceptance to the new system gradually developed. Because, they knew that someone from their village will definitely work sincerely for the welfare of the village and the people. Gradually Pally Sabha started where all the development issues became discussed. Gradually the structure of Bhuyan villages started changing. All weather roads, schools, health services, electricity and beneficiary selection for pacca houses became visible in the village. The position and status of the Pradhan became secondary in terms of decisions related to development activities. Now all the meetings of Pally Sabha are presided over by the ward member. Though the Pradhan is a special invitee, his opinion hardly matters in these meetings. But Pradhan presides over the meetings of socio-cultural issues. As per the opinion of the people, Pradhan is less powerful than the ward member. The ward member also now takes care of the traditions and customs of the Bhuyan tribe. The role of the dakua has not changed. Now he acts as messenger of not only the traditional head (Pradhan) but also of the elected ward member.

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Objective of the Study The present study aims to understand the structure and function of the traditional political organisation of the Paudi Bhuyan tribe. Further, it tries to analyse the recent changes and its impact on the Bhuyan day to day life.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To unravel in detail the composition of political organisation and roles and responsibilities of traditional functionaries of traditional council.
2. To analyse anthropologically how traditional political organization is instrumental in managing the socio-cultural, economic and religious life of the Paudi Bhuyan.
3. Lastly, the paper explores the factors responsible for changes in the traditional council and its impact on the power dynamics in the village in general and on the status and position of traditional leaders in particular.

Conclusion In the changing scenario, the traditional political organization of the Paudi Bhuyan is also gradually changing. Traditionally all the issues of the village were being managed by the traditional council. Certain things have not changed even today. The position of Pradhan and Dehury are still hereditary. Only change that has taken place is the importance of political organization. The status and position of the village head (Pradhan) has degraded. Earlier he was given highest respect in the village. At present his status has degraded to certain extent. With the implementation of PRI system and elected representatives such as ward members in the village is one of the important factors in degradation of status of Pradhan. Now decisions on the development of the village in terms of infrastructure, education, PDS distribution, beneficiary selection, health etc are taken by the ward member. As per the need of the hour, the ward member is more sought for by the villagers to get benefit from government plans and programs. The Bhuyans are now aware of modern rules and regulations, police stations and court systems. However, the traditional political organization was instrumental in socialising the members of the society to live a dignified life by maintaining order and peace in the locality.

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