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Traditional Ideas and Institutions of Democracy in India's North East

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Abstract

This article explores the traditional ideas and practices of indigenous democracy among the tribal communities in North East India. Traditional institutions of governance in the region are repudiated today as autocratic and authoritarian, or at best oligarchic. This oversight is imminent unless their cultures and customs, which are closely linked to their institutions of governance, are examined. In most traditional tribal institutions at the grassroot level, there is either a direct participation of all adult male or a representative system in which each clan or sub-clan is represented in the village council. Thus, one finds pre-modern roots of direct and representative democracy in the traditional polity of indigenous communities in the North East. The article identifies 'consensus' as the heart of tribal democracy and argues for the strengthening of indigenous democracy for deepening democracy in India. However, more democratic reforms of the traditional institutions are needed to particularly include women and the 'others'. The findings contribute to the growing literature on the pre-modern roots of modern democracy.

Keywords

Democracy, traditional ideas and institutions, indigenous democracy, North East India

Introduction

Democracy is commonly seen as a Western concept which originated in the Greek city states, while modern democracy is traced to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, in which constitutional monarchy was established and to be later replaced by democracy. It has emerged as the commonly acceptable form of governance in the past century for the people in Asia and Africa when they liberated themselves from the shackles of colonialism. As Sen (1999, p. 3) remarked: 'It was in the twentieth century, however, that the idea of democracy became established as the "normal" form of government to which any nation is entitled—whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa'.

India adopted parliamentary form of democracy and has not only survived but also thrived for the past 70 years defying the odds that were inherent with it initially. Recognizing cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity of its people, different democratic mechanisms were applied to accommodate different sets of people and society in the country. The asymmetrically federal provisions in the constitution have kept the country stable, and in the past 70 years, India 'has shown itself able to evolve institutionally in response

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to the pressures of nation- and state-building, and has thereby played a critical role in democratic consolidation' (Tillin, 2017, p. 73).

The North-Eastern region of India is a home to many ethnic nationalities, who claimed to have migrated to their present habitat from different parts of China and Southeast Asia during various points of history. It has been a linguistic paradise and a sociological and anthropological minefield. Except for the Kuki-Chin and Khasi-Jaintia tribes, which each tribe is culturally and linguistically related to one another, every ethnic group is distinct from others. This distinctiveness of each social group necessitates outsiders to understand the traditional ways of life in order to govern them. Although the Western concept of democracy, as such, was not understood or known to the so-called 'primitive tribes' of the region, the idea as a traditional practice in some areas of traditional local governance has always been present in such societies. Osik (1992, p. 11) views that 'The tribal administrative institutions are as old as the Greek democracy'.

Some of the earliest ethnographies of prominent tribes of the region were written at a time when there was minimal social change and influence of the British administration. These works, along with the works of scholars in the post-independence period, will be looked into to derive the democratic ideas and practices in the traditional institutions of communities. The traditional institutions and authority systems of tribal societies in the North East vary. They range from the hereditary and near-despotic chiefs to the system of councils with extreme democracy. While the near-despotic hereditary chiefs are found in very few societies, most of them have nominal chief with a strong village council represented by all adult male or unanimously chosen men. However, when major decisions are to be made, all members of village take part in the meeting where the opinions of women, especially elderly women, are respected. The institutions of governance in most of these societies can be called traditional Westminster system, where the chief is the head of the village, while the council members decide all matters pertaining to the village. In one of his volumes *Democracy in NEFA* (Elwin, 1965), Verrier Elwin 'explored the concept of democracy in tribal context that takes into account the functioning of tribal institutions as non-state actors'. Regarding this volume, Biswas and Suklabaidya (2008, p. 147) made a succinct observation:

> Elwin commended that the traditional tribal institutions like tribal councils have great potentialities. These institutions are supported by social and religious sanctions and are expressions of co-operative and communal temperament. He opined that such institutions can not only support the law and order machinery of the state, but can work as agencies of development and progress.

Traditional custom and culture is something people in the North East still hold on despite the fast intrusion of modernity in everyone's life.[1] Particularly the chieftains want revival and continuation of the chieftainship system. For instance, despite the Mizo Union abolished chieftainship in 1952 and the Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chiefs' Rights) Act of 1954 entrusted the chiefs' lands to the Lushai Hills District Council (Zorema, 2007, p. 203), Mizo chieftains still claimed that they were deprived of their land illegally by the Union government when 'the chieftains were ruling the villages under them like separate kingdoms' (*The Telegraph*, 2014). The Mizo Chiefs Council, a body of 309 chiefs, has moved to the Supreme Court once again in December 2017, 'demanding the restoration of (their) hereditary absolute administrative control over ancestrally demarcated territories in Lushai Hills' (*The Times of India*, 2017). Similarly 'in Meghalaya, the most advanced of the hill states of North East India, certain sections are trying to revive virtually defunct tribal chiefdoms called Syiemships and are demanding direct funding for those institutions from the Government of India' (Baruah, 2004, p. 1). The movement for grassroots democracy in Meghalaya was linked with the worldwide campaign against climate change and seek political recognition of the traditional institutions by 'locating people's parliament in the famous sacred forest of Mawphlang', conferring 'legitimacy and authenticity on the green agenda' (Karlsson, 2011, p. 246). Among the Kukis chieftainship survives and still has a strong lobby, particularly in Manipur politics.

After independence, a debate emerged on whether simple tribal societies coexisting within the same political boundary should be 'integrated' or 'assimilated' to the larger Indian society instead of the policy of isolation. The integrationist approach was adopted towards tribal minorities in which 'securing autonomy for the tribals includes measures of granting constitutional and legal protection and incorporation of tribal customary institutions as grassroot-level institutions, and so on. Another important aspect was to introduce modern fiscal and electoral systems through the customary traditional institutions' (Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2008, p. 120). Elwin considered traditional institutions as an essential part of democracy, 'which their continuation would thereby re-centre a statist-nationalist conception of democracy in ethnocentric contexts'. And 'the functioning of tribal councils' represents 'alternative layers of democracy beyond the functioning of the state, and he construes an autonomous sphere of operation of such councils' (Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2008, p. 148).

It is these indigenous democratic practices that need to be continued and preserved for its simplicity, efficiency and effectiveness. A social worker from the Kuki-Chin community implores for unity against the sub-national state of Manipur attempts to encroach upon tribal land and culture:

> It is high time to walk on the road of political unity and resurgence for the Kuki-Chin society in order to protect their religious and social practices, customary laws and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to their customary laws, and ownership and transfer of land and its resources. (Sanga, 2013, p. 162)

In *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Verrier Elwin also remarked that 'their quality of life is better in some respects'. Both Elwin and Nehru appreciated tribal culture and governance system, which the first Prime Minister stated that 'In some respects I am quite certain their's is better', and he 'is determined to help tribal people to grow according to their own genius and tradition' by not imposing 'anything on them' (Elwin, 2009, p. 10, 11).

In 1960, the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission in its report on the 'Role of the Traditional Councils' reported:

> We feel that it is of great importance, in order that the foundations of tribal life should not be destroyed, that the tribal councils should not disappear. They should be revived where they are weak and encouraged where they are strong. They have evolved naturally out of the conditions of life in the tribal areas and they command a ready allegiance from the people, who are naturally more willing to cooperate with institutions which have an established position among them through long usage and convention.

The Commission also views that

> If the traditional tribal councils are weakened, the fabric of tribal life will also be weakened. We do not, therefore, contemplate the submerging of these traditional councils under the impact of the new panchayats. It is essential that the tribal people should decide how they will manage their own lives in social and religious matters. (quoted in Elwin, 1965, p. 52, 54)

Even in the plains of Assam, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement during the fourteenth century led to the formation of an 'Assamese' identity revolving around Sattra (a monastery) and Namghar (an extended wing of Namghar). Both Namghar and Sattra are closely associated with the socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese society. The institution of the Namghar, which has been largely democratic, provides a common forum for villagers to assemble and not only discuss collectively their common issues and problems but also resolve the local disputes of the village through locally evolved judicial procedures and methods (Dutta, 2017, p. 46).

'Consensus' as Tribal Democracy

Modern democracies today are largely representative and regarded majority rule as the principle of democracy. Majoritarian decision-making and legislations are regarded as the norm. Yet in political theory, 'the idea that consensus on fundamental principles is essential to democracy is a recurrent position' (Prothro & Grigg, 1960, p. 276). Since consensus is rarely arrived at, majority decisions are taken as one of the democratic norms today.

Traditional democracies in India's North East are grassroots democracies that are largely direct, participatory and deliberative. Each abled men of age directly participated the village council meetings, and deliberation is ensured before a decision is made. The basic idea of arriving a decision in these indigenous democracies is 'consensus'. In order to arrive at a consensus decision, village elders make persuasion to all the members. If the village council is to be represented by clans and sub-clans or other categories, it is only through consensus that the representatives are chosen. Other representatives in the village council are also consensual candidates. The council also arrived at certain decisions based on consensus of all the members present. On this clearly marked out distinction between traditional and representative democracy, Misra (2014, p. 354) pointed out: 'the major difference that marked the traditional "people's assemblies" presided over by hereditary chiefs and the rajas and the district/autonomous councils was that while the former was "consensual" in character, the latter was part of the overall process of representative democracy'. Elwin (1965, p. 21) also observed that 'The council is democratic in the sense that all vital problems of the village are freely and publicly discussed. Discussion by the members, persuasion where necessary, results in consensus'. When there is no consensus or the village council cannot arrive at a consensus decisions, no decision is taken at all. The matter has to be dropped, and perhaps to be taken up again at a later meeting.

To draw the institutional characteristics of the pre-modern political structures, certain indigenous groups are studied—the Monpas and Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, the Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, the Angami and Lotha Nagas of Nagaland, and the Kuki-Chins of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. Let us examine some of the select traditional institutions in the hills of India's North East with the objective of tracing the democratic practices in their traditional tribal governance.

The Monpa Councils and Kebangs in Land of the Dawn-lit Mountains

Writing for *Yojana*, an official magazine of the Government of India, the then Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh Thungon (1977, p. 99) wrote in 1977 that 'Traditional democratic institutions are an integral part of the socio-cultural heritage of the people of Arunachal Pradesh' which gives them 'a sense of democratic thinking'. He continues: 'The people of this far-flung area located along India's North-Eastern border have inherited these traditions of democratic life through generations', and despite being ignorant about democratic practices elsewhere they 'are familiar with democratic practices strongly entrenched in tradition'. von Fürer-Haimendorf (1982, p. 98), a renowned ethnologist of the tribes in India, describes the highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh:

> The traditional authority systems of the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh varied greatly in character and effectiveness. They ranged from the role of hereditary and autocratic chiefs among the Wanchus to the system of councils known as kebang prevailing among most of the Adi tribes.

Writing a foreword to Verrier Elwin's *Democracy in NEFA*, P. N. Luthra (1965, pp. ix–x), who was the then adviser to the Governor of Assam, also notes some of the indigenous democracy among the tribes of present-day Arunachal Pradesh:

> The daily humdrum of life in NEFA is by and large, managed by its own people who over the past centuries have come to evolve their own codes and customary laws to adjudicate over disputes and the sharing Nature's resources available to them. Research has shown that there is a wide measure of indigenous democracy in the prevailing patterns of social customs and laws of the people.

It is clearly evident from these writings that traces of democratic ethos and practices are abundantly seen among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh; while few societies are undemocratic, others are democratic to the core.

The unit of administration of an Arunachali tribe is village. In most villages, a council is formed by all men and women of age, except 'Anyone, unless he is excommunicated, can attend and speak, though there are some tribes, such as the Daflas, who do not allow their women to do so'. These village councils have social and supernatural sanctions which 'They all derive their authority from ancient times and the fact that they are the expression of the will and power of the whole people' (Elwin, 1965, p. 18). Among the various communities in Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpas and Adi tribes have one of the most democratic indigenous practices in their village governance system.

The Monpas are one of the ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh and mainly settle in the Kameng region—western districts of Tawang and West Kameng. They are also found in Bhutan and Tibet, and they are one of the recognized ethnic groups in China. Today, they number 60,545 in population in the 2011 Indian census. The Monpas of Kameng have a well-developed village of self-governing institutions at least for the past thousand years (Elwin, 1965, p. 56). The village council exercises power in a very democratic manner.

It was during the eleventh century AD that the Monpas began to establish a system of democratically elected village chiefs with decentralized self-governing councils in the Tawang valley. The earliest sociopolitical organization with the khyes, or the noble descendants of Prince Rupati, ruling the community was given up. Each Monpa village elects a leader who not only represented the people but was also directly responsible to the people and to the khyes. Thus, the khyes eventually become a titular head of the Monpas and also the protector of the community from any external attack. The elected tsobla was the contact person for any events for the community as a whole. He is also given the responsibility of supervising the shrines and ensures that religious ceremonies are held. With the expansion of the population in the sixteenth century, the task of the tsoblas was taken over by the tsorgens with larger jurisdiction than the tsoblas. The tsorgens were in charge of very large village or a group of small villages, while tsoblas look after a small settlement. The power exercised by the Monpa councils as well as their democratic nature compare very favourably with the kebangs among the Adis.

The Adi tribe in the then Siang Frontier Division, or various Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, is 'by nature are democratic' (Dutta, 1977, p. 115). They have a village council called Kebangs for hundreds of years through which the society is governed either by 'Noctes or by village elders' (Dutta, 1977, p. 119). Each village of the Adis is self-governing and an independent administration with legislative and executive powers. In each council meeting, as Father Krick who attended such meeting in 1853 described: 'There were six chiefs, gorgeously attired, who sat down in a circle, right in the circle of a spacious hall. Speeches were made and the members cast their votes: the leading men withdrew to deliberate over their decision' (cited in Elwin, 1965, p. 101). In Adi society,

> Laws are framed by the people, sanctioned by the council, and promulgated by the president. Every decision is supposed to come from the people; the chiefs have no right but to approve and enforce it. Hence, the people propose, the council sanctions, and the president promulgates. (Elwin, 1965, pp. 101–102)

This council is a daily functional council, in the sense that every evening all men of the village gather in the council room to discuss issues that matters: to inform each other of what was seen and heard, to discuss political questions put forth by one of the chiefs, and to decide what the village will do the next day.

Sachin Roy describes the administrative structure of the Adis as

> essentially democratic; autocracy in any form has not been known to them and in the absence of a distinct class of nobility, oligarchy has remained equally unknown. Theirs is, in a true sense, a government by the people for the people. The structure is very simple and effective. Every village is an independent unit by itself, and knows no extraneous authority. (Roy cited in Elwin, 1965, pp. 108–109)

Apart from being a legislative and administrative council, the Kebang of Adi also acts as a judiciary. It has a council of elders who exercises the highest legal and judicial powers, and all issue or dispute arising over social and natural resources is dealt with through the kebang (Danggen, 2003). Thus, the Kebang of the Adis is one of the most developed and the most powerful of all tribal administrative councils in Arunachal Pradesh. However, the limitation of Kebang is that it did not provide space for women in the council, as women cannot even set foot in the council room.

Syiems, Dolois and A'King Nokmas in the Abode of Clouds

The Hynñiewtrep and Achik people of Meghalaya, despite being matrilineal society, are closely akin to the village administrative systems found in other tribal societies of the region. The Syiems, Dolois and A'King Nokmas were chiefs in the traditional political institutions among the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. Yet, they had no control over the land, which the community of clans in a village largely controls it.

The traditional Khasi polity is a three-tier system. At the lowest level is the village that has a traditional council of male adults called 'dorbar shnong' presided by the Rongbah Shnong or the headman. This is the lowest level of governance and 'a village level assembly of the Khasis around which the life of the community is organised' (Hasan, 2011, p. 84). Elwin (1965, p. 3) also described about this council, for instance, in the Mairang block, that

> There is a Khasi darbar (council) of which all male adults of the village are members. Decisions of these darbars are binding on everyone living within their jurisdiction and disobedience is punishable with fines or expulsion from the village. These darbars actually direct and guide the whole social and administrative functions of the village.

As also largely evidenced from the Saipung-Darrang block, Elwin (1965, pp. 3–4) continues,

> A Democratic form of government has existed among the Khasis of this block from time immemorial. Each village has its own darbar (council) where important decisions are taken on matters affecting the general interest. A group of villages form an elaka with a dolloi as its head. The dolloi is elected on an adult franchise basis with, however, the provisions that only member of certain clans are eligible to contest as candidates.

Above the dorbar shnong is the Durbar Raid, which is presided over by an elected headman known as Basra or Lyngdoh, or Sirdar. At the apex is the Durba Hima or the State assembly presided by the Syiem.

The entire Khasi Hills is traditionally constituted into 25 Khasi states, in which each state is headed by chief's 'dorbar' or 'syiem's dorbar', who are at the top of the hierarchy. Regarding the constitution of the Khasi states, Gurdon (1914, pp. 66–67), the then commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts and honorary director of ethnography in Assam, remarked that

> it will be seen, has been formed, in more than one instance, by the voluntary association of villages, or groups of villages. The head of the Khasi State is the Siem or chief. A Khasi State is a limited monarchy, the Siem's

> powers being much circumscribed. According to custom, he can perform no act of any importance without first consulting and obtaining the approval of his durbar, upon which the state mantris sit.

Regarding election of Siems in some of the Khasi states, Gurdon (1914, p. 74) also made a vivid description:

> In the Mawiong State the ancient custom was that six *basans* appointed the Siem, subject to the approval of the people of the Siemship. In the Nobosohpoh State there are two Siem families, the 'Black' and the 'White', from either of which it has been the custom apparently for the people to select a Siem as they wished. In Mawsynram the electors of the Siem are the heads of the four principal clans in the State. On a recent occasion, the electors being equally divided regarding the appointment of a Siem, it was necessary to appeal to the people of the State.

From the above ethnographic works of Elwin and Gurdon, it can be drawn that the Khasis were largely oligarchic where the chiefs are appointed from a particular clan only. However, the powers of the chiefs are circumscribed by the village council, in which all adult male of the village are members of the council and all important matters are discussed and decided. Srikanth (2005, p. 3987) also argued that,

> Although several British scholars and Khasi intellectuals argued that the traditional Khasi society was classless and casteless and their traditional institutions of dorbar and 'syiemship' were more democratic than modern democracies, in reality, these 'Khasi States' were basically oligarchic republics wherein a certain privileged clans monopolised the political power at the top'.

Similarly, in Jaintia Hills, the 12 Dolois ruled over their people, who are 'usually elected from among the adult male members of the original or founding clan or clans (*Kurls*) of the *Elka* or Province' (Gassah, 1998, p. 20). The Dolois are in fact at the middle of the three-tier system similar to the Khasis, with Raja having the highest political authority of the Jaintia kingdom, and the Waheh Shnong or the village headman at the bottom. All decisions have to be democratically approved by all the people.

The administration of a Garo village also closely exhibits the characteristic features of other tribes. Each Garo village is an autonomous political unit, with Nokma as head of the village, holding sociopolitical authority. However, the Nokma's power is circumscribed by the village council. Before the advent of the British, Garo Hills was divided into hundreds of A'Kings, each a small kingdom of 10–15 villages. The lands were owned by A'King Nokmas or the clan chiefs and administered by the chief and his council of elders, in which the administrations were carried in accordance with customs and traditions. Regarding land, the first ethnographic work on the Garos by Playfair (1909, p. 73) records:

> Land is subject to the ordinary laws of inheritance, and really belongs to the wife of the nokma or headman of each village. He, however, is always thought of and spoken of as the proprietor. Land may be, and frequently is, sold by a nokma, but can only be so disposed of with the permission of his wife and her machong or motherhood.

Village is the main traditional unit of administration in which the village council, which consists of all the senior male villagers, governs the village. All cases were tried by the Nokma (chief) and his council of elders in an open assembly (Sangma, 2013, p. 140). Describing tribal governance in the *Dambuk-Aga* area in the Garo Hills, Elwin (1965, p. 2) observes: 'Under existing conditions and circumstances the traditional tribal way of administration by Tribal councils in each Garo village, which deal with all disputes and differences among the people, is very simple and effective and checks wastage of money and property in litigation'.

'Extreme Democracy' in the Naga Hills

Writing on the life and culture of the tribes of the then Naga Hills district of Assam, Elwin (1961, pp. 6–7) notes:

> Naga society presents a varied pattern of near-dictatorship and extreme democracy. There is a system of hereditary chieftainship among the Semas and Changs. The Konyaks have very powerful chiefs or Angs who are regarded as sacred and whose word is law; before the greatest of them no commoner may stand upright.

Hutton (1922, p. xxxiii), the then honorary director of ethnography of Assam, also describes the feudalistic nature of hereditary chiefs prevailing among the Konyak and particularly the Sema chiefs, in which 'each chief having an almost feudal position as lord of the manor of his village'. Among the Naga tribes having chieftainship system, the chief is the head of the village and he enjoyed certain privileges and special status. However despite having the highest authority in the village, the people's obedience and the authority he enjoyed is subjected to conformity to the well-established customs and traditions and the consent of the village council. Yonuo (1974, p. 16) elucidates:

> He can also be very easily deposed by the whole village by a decision arrived at by the village council only when he seriously violates the forbidden things and customs even after having been warned. In such case the deposed willingly steps down without any complaint.

Irrespective of the forms of governance, a Naga man freely follows his own heart. To quote Captain Butler: 'Every (Naga) man follows the dictates of his own will, a form of the purest democracy which it is very difficult to conceive of as existing even for a single day and yet that it does exist here is an undeniable fact' (Quoted in Hutton, 1921, p. 143). Even during the earlier days when law and order was not established, chieftainship was largely seen as leadership ability to protect the village. Mills (1922, p. 96) explains:

> In the days when villages were constantly at war each village was ruled by a chief (ekyung) assisted by an informal council of elders. The chieftainship was hereditary in the family of the man who originally founded the village, but did not at all necessarily pass from father to son. The most suitable man became chief by force of character. His main function was that of a leader in war, and his perquisite all the spoils brought home from raids.

Mackenzie (1884, p. 86) also writes about the western Nagas:

> Chiefs they do have, but they are merely the nominal heads of each clan, men who by dint of their personal qualities have become leaders of Public opinion, but without the least particle of power beyond that given them by the *vox populi* and that only *pro tem*. The government of every Naga tribe with whom I have had intercourse is purely democratic one, and whenever anything of public importance has to be undertaken, all the chiefs meet together in solemn conclave, and then discuss and decide upon the action to be taken, and even then it often happens that the minority will not be bound by either the wish or act of the majority; and as to say one single chief exercising absolute control over his people, the thing is un heard of.

The other Naga tribes are to a large extent more democratic in their internal organization in the village. Hutton (1922, p. xxxiii) writes about them:

> On the other hand, the Ao and Tangkhul villages are governed by bodies of elders representing the principal kindreds in the village, while the Angami, Rengma and Lhota and apparently Sangtam villages are run on lines of democracy, a democracy so extreme in the case of the Angami that, in view of his peculiar independence of

> character, it is difficult to comprehend how his villages held together at all before they were subject to the British Government.

A local writer raves about Naga traditional society that it 'has been democratic from the very beginning. It is casteless and classless. The untouchables are non-existent and unknown in Naga society. Among the numerous Naga tribes, the political power rests with the people. It is republic in character in most of Naga tribal societies' (Sema, 1986, p. 167). Thus, the traditional political institution of the Naga society has been the sovereign village-state which has different forms of government. While the Semas, Konyaks and Maos have hereditary chiefs, among them the Konyak kings (Angs) have greater powers whose words are followed by the people as laws; the Aos have republican form of government in which a sizeable council of elected headmen called 'Tartars' rules with limited authority. The Angamis, Lothas, Rengmas and so on practice a peculiar type of democracy with little variation in the nature of composition (Yonuo, 1974, p. 15).

In Naga society, the authority of village council plays an important role in the village administration. Some Naga tribes practice indigenous direct democracy, in which

> The members of the village council come together and take all the important measures or decisions for a course of action in the public affairs of the village by a show of hands in the open ground or in a hall of justice which is found in the case of some tribes. Their decisions on certain matters become the law binding on the villagers since these are looked upon as the will of the people…. It decides even civil and criminal disputes. (Yonuo, 1974, p. 17)

The polity and internal organization of the Lhota and Angami villages are democratic and have a similar exogamous system. In Naga polity, as Shimray (1985, p. 58) discussed,

> What was important and unique was the participation of the general public in the deliberations on any public issue, giving a chance to every one to have a say. This was direct democracy, the true and pure democracy in reality and in practice. This system of direct democracy was prevalent among the Lothas and Rengma Nagas also although with some slight variations. As in the case of Angamis where there is no village council at all but every villager joined in the discussion and has the right to speak.

In most Naga society, the idea of 'consensus' is largely practiced in electing their leaders and village council members. Chasie (2005, p. 257) describes this practice:

> Nagas did not elect leaders; they recognised their leaders, and accepted them, either by heredity or through an informal but very stringent and transparent process. Respect and authority, especially in the latter case, were in-built in the making of leaders. Today, we elect leaders who may or may not enjoy respect of their people. Traditionally, a person who demanded that others should recognise and accept him as leader would not only be given the bamboo but in all likelihood also socially ostracised. Thus, we have the new ways independently and, often, at the cost of the old ways. There is no fusion.

Chasie (2005, p. 255) also lamented about the profound changes to traditional leadership and institutions with the establishment of British rule in Naga Hills, in which

> Traditional institutions were sought to be integrated into the larger colonial political framework. Thus, the independence of the Naga village-state effectively disappeared. But worse was to follow in the post-independence period when, in the name of fighting insurgency, all traditional institutions and symbols of authority were mindlessly destroyed. As a result, while the traditional authority system has been effectively destroyed, the system of parliamentary elections has failed as a replacement.

Autocratic (?) yet Democratic: Chieftainship among the Kuki-Chins

The Kuki-Chin people were known for their strong, despotic and hereditary chiefs, who ruled over their people. Their institution of chieftainship was generally viewed as autocratic. For instance, Haokip (2017a, p. 21) describes the institution of chieftainship:

> The chief is patriarchal and feudal. He retains absolute authority over village land and the villagers. The relationship between him and the villagers is symmetrical to feudal relations seen between landlords and tenants. His words are law. Villagers could settle in the village so long as they please the chief. This system is considered antithetical to the practice of democracy. In short, villagers have no freedom. Their fate is decided by the chief.

However, in practice, each chief draw their power from the long-observed customs and traditions. Shakespear (1912, p. 43, 44) describes the tribal organizations of the Lushais: 'Among the Lushais, each village is a separate State, ruled over by its own "lal" or chief. The chief was, in theory at least, a despot; … and he was therefore constrained to govern according to custom'. He continues:

> but in reality his power was very much circumscribed, and his subjects could so easily transfer their allegiance to some rival chief, who would probably be willing, for a consideration, to champion the cause of his last recruit, that every ruler had to use tact as well as force. In fact the amount of power he wielded depended almost entirely on the personal influence of the chief. A strong ruler, who governed mainly according to custom, could do almost anything he liked without losing his followers, but a weak man who tried petty tyrannies soon found himself a king without any subjects. (Shakespear, 1912, p. 45)

Colonel McCulloch (1859, p. 61), in his account on the chiefs of 'Khongjais or Kookies', one of the first written accounts on the Kukis, mentions: 'Their Rajas have certainly a good deal of power, which is at times misused, but generally they are under the necessity of exercising it so as not to offend their villages or offending them, run the chance of being deserted by them'. Thus, among the Kuki-Chin groups of people, the power of the chiefs is otherwise much circumscribed by customs and traditions, which are the guiding principles of the village and upon which everyday life is built upon.

The Lushai chief appoints elderly men known as 'upa' to assist him. The chief along with the upas form the village council

> which discuss all matters connected with the village, and decides all disputes between people of the village, for which they receive fees termed 'salam' from the party who loses the case. These fees are the only remuneration. The chief presides over this council, which is generally held of an evening in the chief's house, while the zu horn circulates briskly. The chief receives a portion of each fine levied, a practice found to prevent undue leniency. (Shakespear, 1912, p. 44)

In the Kuki-Chin society, the elderly men are the custodians of customs and every case is decided based on the well-established customs. This leaves no room for the chief to be totally autocratic or despotic.

Among the Kukis, the village chief called *Haosa* is at the helm of the administrative structure. However, as in the case of the Lushais, the chief is not the all-powerful ruler as often misunderstood by colonial writers and even today. Hangsing (2013, p. 19) explains:

> The authority of the village Chief is limited, no more no less, to the village and the village land. Expulsion from the village was the harshest form of punishment that the Chief along with his council of co-administrators can enforce on the villagers. Even without such compulsion, the villagers are free to leave the village as and when they deemed fit or when they felt that they no longer wants to be in alliance with the chief. The supple administration based on

> allegiance to the chief promotes inter village migration of individual families…. The limited authority of the chief is so crafted to avoid the rise of a powerful ruler and the formation of any form of civilised state.

While discussing the traditional system of Kuki administration, Lunkim (2013, p. 4) identifies three levels of administrative hierarchy: the village, lhang (district) administration and gamkai (state) administration, in which members of the councils are 'democratically elected directly by all the villagers on the day of Kut, which is almost comparable to modern democratic governments' budget session'. The village chief, in whose name all the land and other immovable properties of the village is registered, has important roles to play in the village. He guides and advises the village administration in accordance with customs and traditions. As a representative in higher levels of Kuki administration, he 'represents the village in all courts, including District, State and National Government'. He is also 'under obligation to take collective advice of the village cabinet members, therefore, he needs to consult the cabinet members for all matters relating to the village administration'.

As found in some of the earliest accounts on the Kuki-Chin people, the power of the chiefs is circumscribed by powerful and well-established customs and traditions, and the chance of being deserted by villagers. Despite the chief being powerful and largely regarded as autocratic, he has no authority to stop a villager from deserting him, and every villager has the freedom to leave for his own choice of village. This is the democratic check and balances that existed between the chiefs and the people.

District Councils, Women and Traditional Institutions

With the gaining of independence by India, the future of tribals was debated, with the subsequent emergence of India's tribal policy. The policy eschews imposing anything on them and that they 'should develop along the lines of their own genius' (Nehru, 1959, p. xiii). It intends to introduce 'change without being destructive of the best values of old life' (Elwin, 1988, p. 295). To this endeavour, indirect form of governance was introduced in the hill areas of the North East. A special provision under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was made for tribals of the then hill districts of Assam with the aim of protecting their customs and culture and governing themselves under the Autonomous District Councils and Regional Councils.

However, contrary to the conception that the district councils would be the custodian of tribal culture and customs, in India's attempt to preserve traditional institutions of governance, they have largely become 'subordinates' of the councils, as seen in the conflict between the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP).[2] Unlike the Panchayati Raj system where there is participation of the village panchayats in the lowest level of the system, there is no integration between the traditional village councils and the Autonomous District Councils. Furthermore, the exclusion of marginal communities in the political space by the dominant communities is against the democratic spirit of giving tribal autonomy. There is a need to relook into the existing structures of the autonomous councils and find possibilities of creating regional councils, for instance, in Meghalaya and Assam, for marginal groups.

Critics of traditional institutions argue that traditional communitarian practice of excluding women and non-tribals is against modern liberal democratic values (Baruah, 2004, p. 7). Patricia Mukhim, a veteran journalist from Shillong, also views that

> Village republics represented by traditional institutions have always frozen women in a time warp and clearly demarcated their gender roles. Women's roles in all tribal societies are therefore clearly but surely circumscribed. Any attempt to get out of that role is viewed as a transgression. (Mukhim, 2017)

However, to generalize and argue that 'the traditional political institutions are not democratic, though they are also instruments of at least a certain kind or degree of local participation, and they may be effective means of resolving local problems of collective action' (Harriss, 2002, p. 3), based on the study of a single tribe could be another oversight. Verrier Elwin, way back in 1965, in his studies on the tribes in NEFA found various indigenous democratic elements in the traditional institutions, which in the past five decades had had numerous reforms. Today, traditional institutions have evolved and now they are 'criticized both for not being modern (enough) and not traditional (enough)' (Karlsson, 2011, p. 265). Tribalism should not be looked upon as 'culture in fixity', politicized, so that it becomes 'part of nature, fixed and unchanging' (Mamdani, 2012, p. 6). As seen on the issue of reservation of seats for women in urban local bodies in Nagaland,

> The recognition of a largely patriarchal cultural practice at a particular point of history as 'custom and tradition' and fixing it for centuries without being amenable to change is disturbing to upwardly mobile women. The perceived predicament of most tribals today is living in a fast changing world yet simultaneously holding on to fixed customary laws. (Haokip, 2017b, p. iii)

As Talukdar (1988, p. 11) assess the potentials of councils in village government: 'The centuries old popular forms of village council were evolved as an administrative mechanism of a local variety and for fulfilling purely local needs. As institutions of social evolution, the tribal councils have great potentialities'. While there are clearly potentials and advantage of traditional institutions of governance, there are also limitations to it. A social worker in Manipur rightly said: 'It is clear that traditions need re-examination from time to time with a view to modernise and refine them. Indeed institutions in all cultures evolve over time as a result of lessons garnered from experience or through interactions with other cultures' (Sanga, 2013, p. 162).

Conclusion

Democratic practices are not something new to many of the communities in the North East, which is often mistakenly thought to be brought to them from somewhere else. They have been practising variants of democracy in their own traditional system of governance which has been simple, efficient, cost-effective and largely direct. Looking into the traditional institutions of tribal communities in the North East, they can be divided into three categories: chieftainship with near-autocratic ruler; a chieftainship circumscribed by village council and well-established customs and traditions; and extremely democratic societies with unanimously chosen or elected council members. Most communities of the region had the latter two forms of governance.

As some studies have recently shown how caste in India has deepened democracy in India[3] breaking from decades' long notion of the United Nations, the continuation of different democratic traditional practices of democracy can improve Indian democracy. The United Nations suggested way back in 1951 that rapid economic progress can only be possible with painful adjustments, in which 'old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to burst…. Very few communities are willing to pay the full price of economic progress'.[4] Today, traditional communities are also considered to be good for democracy as they provided plurality. The existence of indigenous democratic institutions matters for the deepening and strengthening, as well as to show the richness of democracy, for the world's largest democracy.

However, in traditional tribal societies, women have no right on inheritance of properties nor the right to participate in the village councils. The British policy of non-interference and the Nehru-Elwin policy of minimal interference have so far kept women in the dark side of democracy. As much as the

administration was keen on stopping head-hunting, village/clan feuds and so on, it is time keen interest is also taken in removing barriers of democratic participation through certain interventions or reforms. The way forward is transforming the traditional institutions by making them more inclusive and thus allowing women to also take active role in the village councils, and making the councils more accountable and open. The change that is made today will become a tradition from today itself.

The introduction of the Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has recognized not only the unique culture and tradition but also their rights to rule themselves. Unlike the scheduled areas in other parts of the country which has a three-tier Panchayati Raj system in which village is the lowest level of the tier, however, the district council is a democratically elected single-tier system of tribal governance in which the village councils have no say in the district council. Making the district councils a tier system with the village council as the lowest level of the district councils could integrate the traditional system of governance with the modern democratic system, and the traditional village councils can influence the working of the district council.

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1. Modernity or social change came with the British, particularly along with the Christian missionaries and their efforts of providing education and healthcare to the tribals.
2. For a detailed discussion on the conflict between Autonomous District Councils and Traditional Institutions, see Chapter 5 'Indigenous Governance', Karlsson (2011), pp. 245–288.
3. Jaffrelot (2003) and the edited volume of Kohli (2001) discuss the struggle and rise of lower caste in Indian politics and the success of democracy in India.
4. The Secretary General of the United Nations appointed a Group of Experts, and the expert group submitted a report in 1951 as 'Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries'.

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