

The Buliang: The Traditional Political Institution of Apatani Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh

Miss Dani Yami

TGT Govt. Higher Secondary School, Ganga, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh.

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i12.045 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i12.045>

Received: 25 October 2025 / Accepted: 20 November 2025 / Published: 30 December 2025

ABSTRACT

The Buliang is the traditional political and judicial institution of the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Among Apatani people, the Buliang functions as village council. It is a customary body made up of respected elders who are chosen based on experience, social status and knowledge of traditional laws. They play a vital role in settling disputes within the village, maintain social order and customary laws, makes decision on community matters. They also conduct trials and imposes traditional punishments or fines. Organizes social and religious activities.

Keywords: Buliang as village council

Introduction

In traditional society, there is no formal political organization, no legal and no formal administration. Yet they manage to maintain social order and unity. In such a society, political control that exists is largely expressed through the representatives. The violation of the mores is ordinarily met by restitution and punitive requirements. The nonpolitical controls are also involved in large to induce the offender to make proper amends.ⁱ The Apatanis, with their closely knit cooperative social system their complex economy compared to the other tribes and their close proximity to one another developed their own system of government. The traditional village administration and enforcement of laws were the responsibility of selected persons who would be able to manage the affairs without any bias or discrimination. These persons are called the *Buliang* and have been appointed from amongst the members of family or individual person having influence in the community.ⁱⁱ *Buliang* are the representatives of phratry of a *Uru* (clan) who inhabit a particular quarter of the Apatani village.ⁱⁱⁱ They were proficient in customs, traditions, customary laws, good orators and exercise both political and judicial authority over the society.

The objectives of this paper is an attempt to understand the working of *Buliang* and its relevance. This study is historical and descriptive-analytic. It is based on both primary and secondary data.

Origin of *Buliang*

According to some priests, the *Buliang* existed from early times in the mythical land known as *Ipyo Lembiyang* and *Miido Lembiyang*. At *Ipyo Lembiyang* there was a *Buliang* known *Ipiyo Buliang*. From *Ipiyo Lembiyang*, *Ipiyo Buliang* migrated to *Miido Lembiyang*. At *Miido Lembiyang* also there was a *Buliang* known *Miido Buliang*. The *Buliang* used to mediate the disputes between *Ipiyo Lembiyang* and *Miido Lembiyang*. Along similar lines, the *Buliang* existed in *Supung Lembiyang*, in the present Apatani valley.^{iv}

According to oral literature of Apatani, there was chaos all around in Apatani world. Everyone was quarreling among themselves. Men were at war with each other, animals were at war with birds among themselves. Earth was at war with the sky. Trees were at war with stones. The fire was at war with water. Chaos prevailed everywhere. This condition compelled men to ponder upon a way out of this situation. This ultimately resulted in the establishment of the institution of *Buliang* in Apatani society. *Sango* and *Hago* became the first *Buliang* of the Apatani. In mythical land, four types of *Buliang* in the period of *Kolyung-kolo* (earliest period of evolution) for different functions in society. They are *Kiimer Buliang* (who castrate the male pig), *kiidi Buliang* (who disposes the dead body), *Miido Buliang* (who mediate with the sky God) and *Neha Buliang* (who mediate between men)^v

At present day Apatani valley the *Buliang* is divided into three tiers, namely *Akha Buliang*, *Yapa Buliang*, and *Ajang Buliang*. They were custodians of customary laws and socio-religious values. In addition, they exercised political and judicial authority over the society. They used to settle the disputes over property, family or other various social offences. *Buliangs* were generally permanent body, once a person was selected as the member of *Buliang*, he would continue until his death.^{vi}

Since the establishment of the Indian administration in 1947, all these has changed, not suddenly for certain, but by a gradual introduction of such institution as a magistrate's court, police force, *gaonbura* (village headmen) appointed by government and ultimately a system of grass-root

Functions of *Buliang*

Buliangs are collectively upholders of community laws. Though they do not have absolute power, they act primarily as the spokesman of their clan or group and not as a village headman invested with absolute authority. Their duties are those of arbiters rather than judges. They do not take action unless they are requested to intervene or the dispute has become a public issue,

which must be dealt with by the community as a whole either by mediation or by use of force. *Buliang* can use absolute power when dispute or problems disturb the peace of society as a whole. It acts as the judicial body in the settlement of disputes. In addition to it, certain social and welfare functions are also taken up by the *Buliang* providing social security to the people and minimum social-political needs to the individual member. The modern government initiated in development and administration perspective in the development and administration perspective has limited the role of the *Buliang* to some extent. But still, the *Buliang* plays a role of socio-religious aspect in a greater way. Functions of the *Buliangs* can be categorized into three (a) Political-Judicial (b) Religious and (c) Social-Welfare.

a) Politico-Judicial:

The *Buliang* has the power to regular society and individual life according to a set of conducts and punish those who transgress the codes. They derive this power and authority from age-old customs and traditions. The Apatanis are great individualists. Though the Apatani does not have centralized authority, the *Buliang* act as a court of justice. It interprets and adjudicates cases as per the customary laws. All disputes between clans, families, groups, and individual over encroachment of property, divorce, adultery, robbery, theft, murder, etc. are settled by the *Buliang*, if it affects the community as a whole or a party to the disputed appeal to the *Buliang*. The level of punishment and fine are awarded to the wrongdoers according to the nature and gravity of crimes.

When the dispute comes to the *Buliang*, first the *Buliang* of the village tries to settle the dispute and usually, the disputant agrees to the settlement. When the *Buliangs* of disputants' village fails to settle the dispute and feel that it may disturb the peace and tranquility of society in future, will enlist the support of *Buliangs* of other villages.

When the dispute arises between a family or clan of a village with a family or clan of another village over certain rights like hunting and trapping or grazing lands, it invariably tends to disturb the peace of Apatani as a whole. In this kind of dispute also, the *Buliang* takes initiatives to settle the dispute.

Another type of dispute is when a village has some grudge against another village. There was a system called *Gyambo Sonii* (armed demonstration) by the aggrieved party. In the *Gyambo Sonii*, a fully armed man of an aggrieved village demonstrates tactics of war as if they are fighting a war with enemy. This demonstration was done in the paddy field near the village against with whom they have a grudge. This was usually done in the summer, in the month of May or June when millet and paddy sapling have grown. Due to this *Gyambo Sonii*, half of grown crops of millet, paddy sapling and bamboo groves got destroyed. As a result, it affected the economic

power of the enemy village. Therefore, the *Buliang* may initiate to stop such destruction of economic power as village economic was fully dependent on agriculture. Destruction of paddy and millet may lead to a food shortage for whole village. Hence, *Buliangs* ensures the food security and stable economy of the village. Invariably, the decision of the *Buliangs* are accepted as just and equitable. However, when a party to the dispute is stubborn and do not accept the decision, the *Buliang* resort to *Dapo* (instrument of *Buliang*) to enforce.

b) Religious Function

Another function of the *Buliang* is religious or ritualistic. In rituals like *Subu*, *Murung* and *Myoko*, the *Buliang* has a specific role without which the rituals cannot take place. The *Subu* ritual, which is performed by an individual and joined in festivities by whole clans and relatives. In this ritual, the *Buliangs* of the *Subu* performing clan or clan group are invited to the house of the performer. They are entertained with “o” (rice beer) along with a piece of *Alo Tpio* (traditional salt), *Tai Dilang* or *Yallang* (a piece of raw meat) and *Heyih* (a small piece of slaughtered *Mithun*). They are also given rupees one hundred as *Buliang Amang* (a gift or offering). Earlier *Amang* was paid in kinds like bacon. But nowadays they are given in cash.

During *Murung* rites, *Buliangs* are given special recognition and status. The another ritual in which *Buliangs* plays important role is *Myoko* which performs in the month of March every year. In this particular ritual also, without inauguration by *Buliang* which is known as *Khiibo Amang*, *Myoko* ritual cannot commence. *Khiibo Amang* is a procession of *Buliang* and young men who are well versed in Apatani folklores. They are led by a well attired priest known as *Byai Mibya* (a priest who leads the procession). A *khiibo Amang* led by a *Byai Mibya* comes in procession from a village that is not performing *Myoko* ritual to a village one who is performing a *Myoko* ritual belonging to the same political alliance. They are received in the house of a *Buliang* of host. They select two particular *Buliang*'s house for *riichcha* (to welcome) and *riilo* (to send off) of *Khiibo Amang*. The selection of the house is confirmed through examination of omen.

c) Social and welfare function

Another function of the *Buliang* is a social and welfare. When a family suffers too much from an illness affecting every member of the family very frequently, which neither response to the traditional rituals nor modern medications, then the *Buliang* are invited. They are served well with “o” (rice beer) with meat and cooked rice. Along with these, a piece of bacon is roasted and given to *Buliang*. This custom is known as *Gensi*. The belief behind this is that feasting the *Buliangs* and getting their blessings will ward off all the evil spirit affecting the family due to which they underwent all sorts of sufferings.

Sometimes a barren couple also invites the *Buliang* and give them sumptuous feast. Here, it is believed that the blessings of *Buliang* will make the barren couple to get offspring.

Buliangs also has important function of welfare during the time of *dolli-piili* (epidemic and famine). *Buliang* along with *Nyibu* (priest) and *Gorra* (community ritual organizer) perform certain rituals at *leyu* (entrance of village) to ward off the evil spirits who cause the epidemic. The *Buliang* do not have much developmental function. The construction of *Lapang* (traditional platform), drainage, bridge, community fencing, etc. is done by clan group or group of village or clan sharing common boundary or place for religious ceremonies and sacrifices.

Relevance

The *Buliangs* have been very strong and often acted sometimes like sovereign bodies deciding all internal matters relating to village or community. Therefore, it is not only a political organization but also a social agency that regulates the social behavior of the community as a whole. Again as a center of social agencies, it also plays a vital role in the transmission of cultural heritage and learning civic duties. These traditional institutions regulate and control all aspects of life. It also plays an integrated role with state or government officials and statutory Panchayat bodies to implement government welfare programs and schemes. Indeed, *Buliang* has a limited role the developmental functions. But *Buliang* are an effective and strong in dispensing justice. But due to the introduction of modern socio, political and legal institutions the *Buliang* role is diminishing in many instances. However, the role of *Buliang* in socio religious is still present without changes. Thus, as an institutional framework, these councils act as social control purpose. This indigenous way of control agent creates trust towards others and enhances their capacity to join together in collective action to resolve the common problem. This facilitates conditions conducive to social stability and coherence in society as a whole.^{vii}

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is found that before the introduction of modern government system like Panchayat Raj Institution, modern administration and party politics in Arunachal, the *Buliang* was an indigenous government of the Apatani tribe. Even at present day the relevance of *Buliang* are reflected in their day today socio-religious practices of the Apatanis.

References

ⁱ Punyo Yarang, "working of Indigenous Governing Institution a Study on Apatani Tribe" in *International Journal of creative Research thought (IJCRT)*, An international Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Referred Journal, vol., no.2, Delhi, July 2008, p.1

- ii Deepak Pandey, *History of Arunachal Pradesh (Earliest Time to 1972 A.D.)* Bani Mandir Publication, Pasighat, 2012.p.219
- iii Gyati Rana, *A Fine Flake of Miji-Migung from the Sachet of Popi-Sarming-2*, AG Design & Publication, Itanagar, p. 5.
- iv Mihin Kaning, *The Rising Culture of the Apatani Tribe*, Himalayan Publication, Itanagar, 2008 p.141.
- v Punyo Yarang, “working of Indigenous Governing Institution a Study on Apatani Tribe” in *International Journal of creative Research thought (IJCRT)*, An international Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Referred Journal, vol., no.2, Delhi, July 2008, p3
- vi Mihin Kanning, *The Rising Culture of the Apatani Tribe*, Himalayan Publication, Itanagar, 2008 p.141.
- vii Punyo Yarang, “working of Indigenous Governing Institution a Study on Apatani Tribe” in *International Journal of creative Research thought (IJCRT)*, An international Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Referred Journal, vol., no.2, Delhi, July 2008, p.6-9.