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Dr. Chalit Sumnyan
Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
Wangcha Rajkumar
Government College, Deomali,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

Socio-political life of the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh in the realm of inter-village warfare: A study

Chalit Sumnyan

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Abstract

The Noctes constitute one of the major tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, predominantly inhabiting the Tirap district. Historically, their socio-political life was deeply influenced by frequent inter-village warfare, which shaped institutions such as chieftainship, village councils, and dormitory systems. This paper examines the socio-political status of the Noctes during the period of warfare, with special emphasis on the role of chieftainship, the institution of *pang* (dormitory), and the cultural practices associated with conflict. The main objective of the study is to understand how warfare influenced political authority, social organization, and ritual life among the Noctes, and to analyze the causes and consequences of inter-village conflicts.

The study is qualitative in nature and is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through interviews with members of the Nocte community, including elders and knowledgeable informants, while secondary data were drawn from books, journals, and ethnographic records. The research area comprises the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, with the focus restricted to Nocte-inhabited villages.

The findings reveal that inter-village warfare was a common phenomenon caused by disputes over land, water resources, salt wells, theft, assault, and injury. Warfare reinforced political authority at the village level, strengthening the institution of chieftainship and the village council, while preventing political unity at the tribal level. Chiefs played a decisive role in warfare-related matters, including decision-making, alliances, and the collection of tribute. Socially, warfare elevated the status of warriors, institutionalized rituals such as headhunting ceremonies, tattooing, war dances, and songs, and defined gender roles within the community.

The study concludes that warfare significantly shaped the traditional socio-political structure of the Noctes. Although warfare has ceased with the establishment of Indian administration, its legacy continues to influence Nocte political institutions, social customs, and cultural identity in the contemporary period.

Keywords: Noctes, inter-village warfare, chieftainship, pang (dormitory), socio-political organization, Arunachal Pradesh, tribal rituals

Introduction

The Noctes are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They reside in Tirap district of the state. The district derives its name from its principal river the *Tirap*. The literal meaning of the word Nocte is 'the village people'. The tribe is classified into five groups on the basis of dialect being spoken by them i.e. *Hawakhun*, *Phothung*, *Oloh*, *Jaro* and *Khapa*. Some of the Nocte villages like Chasa, Khwantong, Lapnan, Lothong, and Longo speak Wancho dialect ^[1]. The Noctes trace their descent from a remote ancestor named Khumbao, a chief, who had two sons, namely Khunlung and Khunlai ^[2]. There are different traditions prevalent in various Nocte villages regarding their own migration.

Before the establishment of the Indian administration the Noctes were frequently involved in inter-village warfare. During those days of warfare, the Chief and the council members handled the affairs of the warfare. The final decision on any affairs was given by the Chief after consulting the other members ^[3].

Methodology, Objective and area of study

The research work is based on primary sources and secondary sources and it is qualitative in nature. The interviews of the people belonging to the community were conducted to get the necessary information.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Chalit Sumnyan
Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
Wangcha Rajkumar
Government College, Deomali,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

The secondary sources like books and journals have also been studied. The information collected from the sources were collected and were well analyzed in detail before incorporating into the paper.

The objective of the paper is to understand the socio-political status of the Noctes during the days of warfare. The study of role of chieftainship system and *pang* has been an important objective of the paper. In the process the paper also intends to understand the causes of inter-village warfare and the rituals associated with it.

The study area for the research comprises of the Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh inhabited by Noctes and Tutsas. The study is specifically based on the Noctes. The district has an area of 2362 Sq. Km. and is bounded in the south by Burma, in the North by Assam, in the West by Nagaland and in the East by Changlang District.

The warfare was undertaken within the tribe in between different villages. There were various causes of warfare which varied as per the existing situation. The encroachment of land and water for hunting and fishing, ownership over salt well, assault, injury, theft etc. were some of the major causes of warfare. The disputed cases were first decided by the respective village councils and decision was made known to the other villages. If the other village did not agree with the decision, then the final settlement was made with a war^[4]. Warfare at times also involved more than two groups as the alliance villages also joined in the war. There were two modes of warfare adopted by the Noctes and they were open challenge warfare and surprise attacks^[5].

The situations born out of the realm of inter-village warfare of the Noctes became deeply embedded in their socio-political life as well. The institutions like that of chieftainship and dormitory system were further consolidated with the prevailing situation in the area. Political unity could be seen among the Noctes of a particular village but the same was absent among the Noctes as a tribe. Even with the discontinuation of the warfare practices and the establishment of the Indian administration the importance of the Chieftainship system still holds on. The paper tends to study the various developments both socially and politically during the period.

Political Status and Warfare

The Noctes as a tribe was not politically united as they were engrossed in warfare with each other. The Chiefs of Namsang and Borduria villages were brothers but due to family issues there was a conflict between them. Kolagaon village had conflict with Borduria. There was also a difference between Borduria and Khela village.⁶ Likewise, Lapnan had war with Tupi village^[7]. The villages of Kheti and Lazu had war with each other over encroachment of land by the later^[8]. In this way the inter-village warfare was a common scenario in the area.

The institution of Chieftainship as discussed has always been an important feature of Nocte political life. The chiefs had a major role in the warfare. They had to maintain the territorial integrity and unity of their respective village against the threats from other villages^[9]. He was the supreme commander in war though he did not himself lead any operation. For any action, offensive or defensive the Chief was the final authority^[10].

The system of paying tribute to the paramount chief also emerged with the inter-village warfare. The chiefs of the two villages of Namsang and Borduria respectively were

considered the paramount chiefs by some of the Nocte villages. The annual tribute known as *se or soksa* was paid in kind by the villagers under the control of respective paramount chiefs. Some villages paid tribute to more than one chief, though each village maintained its chief and council to manage its own internal affairs and local administration. The heads of enemy, *raan kho* that was brought by the warriors were also given as tribute to the chief^[11]. Poahang Socia informs that the tribute given to the superior Chiefs also consisted of grains and other agricultural products. The tributes to the victorious parties as reparation consisted of a buffalo and gong^[12].

The prevailing situation due to warfare also enhanced the importance of the village council comprising of Ngowa, Ramwa, Tanwa and some other elderly persons as members. The disputes arising in between two villages belonging to the same group or owing allegiance to the same chief were as a rule heard by the same chief in which both the parties were to be present^[13]. Thus, the council along with taking up responsibility of internal affairs of the village was equally involved with the chief in the matters of warfare.

Society and warfare

The social customs and rituals based on warfare were practiced enormously during the days of warfare. The continuous warfare led to the rise in the importance of the warriors in the society. The warriors, specifically who could bring the heads of enemy were admired by the villagers and were known for their bravery. They were referred to as *Ahang* or *Hang* which means 'the brave one'. He was to perform a ritual called *Kho-sub* in which he had to arrange a grand feast for the whole village^[14].

The warriors were tattooed, and a sizeable metal bell was awarded by the village chief. He was entitled to retain the hair of the victim termed as *Raan khacho*^[15]. Tattooing among the Noctes was closely associated with warfare. Tattoos of different parts of the body had different names; that on the face is *thun hu*, on the chest *kha hu*, on the neck *ding hu* or *chakhu hu*, on the back *tock hu*, on the umbilicus *chung hu* or *chum hu*, on the thigh *betam hu* and on the calf *chichin hu*. Man got tattooed on the face, neck, chest, and back. The warrior had a special design on the face and body as mark of bravery^[16].



Fig 1: Raan khacho (hair of enemy) used in headgear



Fig 2: Raen khacho

The heads of the enemy that were brought by the warriors were given utmost respect. Khamsoam Pongtey informs that the Noctes believed that the heads brought should be kept with respect as it belonged to a warrior. There were songs sung in praise of the head. It was believed that if the heads were not kept properly or were disrespected, then the concerned village will be unsuccessful in the future wars and the warrior who brought the head will die in the war ^[17]. The dormitory known as *pang* played important role in the warfare days. They were like a guard house where young bachelors mounted guard day and night, well equipped with all the weapons of war. The *pangs* were constructed by the entrance of the village, to provide a better visibility of the approach of the enemy. There was no fixed age for admission into the *pang*. The *pang* was also venue of village council and other gathering of the villagers ^[18].

The women and children were given protection by the male members of the village. The entire village was always alert as there was a chance to be attacked by the enemy at anytime. Women had to take care of the domestic economy while men looked after the security of the village. It gradually became a custom that the women should cultivate the field while the men prepare for a fight in the war ^[19]. In the modern period also women are found to be more involved in the agricultural field than the men. In the days of warfare even for nature's call, a space was made at the back of the house for women and children ^[20].



Fig 3: Ran kho (head of enemy) kept in Pang (Dormitory) of Kheti village

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There were many rituals and customs practiced during the period. They became part and parcel of the social life of the Noctes. Omens were taken by the village priest to foresee the outcome of the war. If they were good the expedition started, otherwise not ^[21]. In order to predict the result of a war, *wo-sok* (ritual with chicken) was done. On the other hand, to select a leader to lead the war *wa-sok* or *wa-poak* (ritual with bamboo) was done ^[22].

War dance and songs were part of the social life of the Noctes. In the Nocte war dance known as *Raanvan buong* both men and women participated. Women dance in an inner circle while the men dance holding up their weapons in their hands dance around them ^[23]. War song of the Noctes is in *Khapa* dialect which differs slightly from the other dialects of the tribe. The dialect is spoken by the villagers of Noksa, Tupi, Pullung etc and the term *Khapa* itself refers to 'singer'. The song was sung in praise of the head of the enemy that was brought by warriors ^[24]. In this way it proved to be a festive moment in which tribute was paid to the warriors of both sides.

Conclusion

The warfare definitely had an impact on the social and political life of Noctes before the establishment of Indian administration. The chieftainship continues to be practiced and the duties of the Chiefs continue to be the same with some modifications to adjudicate with the modern world. The days of warfare were filled with violence and instability but there being part of the history of the tribe cannot be ignored. The *pang* in the modern period has become interest of the tourist in the area as the *raen kho* are still kept there. But in some villages, they are found in pathetic condition.

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