

Gender And Governance: A Study on Women's Role in Kebang Among the Adi Tribe in East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh.

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Abstract

The Adi, one of the major tribes in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, has been following a traditional political institution called kebang, since time immemorial. While kebang is regarded as one of the most democratic traditional political institutions in the state, it continues to exclude women from active participation. According to customs and conventions, women are not permitted to be involved in the decision-making process. This exclusion reflects a broader trend of low female participation not just in the traditional political institutions but also in their participation in the grassroots governance as well as in electoral politics. The present paper is a study on the intersection of gender and governance among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, focusing on the role of women in traditional and modern political institutions. It explores the socio-cultural barriers that limit women's active participation and assesses the impact of legal and political changes on their involvement in governance.

Keywords- Gender, Governance, Adi tribe, Kebang, Exclusion, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

The *Adi* tribe is one of the major tribes in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. "The word *Adi* today covers a large number of tribal groups, united by a language that in spite of dialectical variations is fundamentally everywhere the same, and by similar culture and temperament" (Elwin, 1957, p.18). The sub-tribes of *Adis* are *Minyong, Pasi, Padam, Shimong, Tangam, Bori, Bokar, Karko, Pailibos, Milling, Ashim, Panges, Bokar and Ramos*. They are settled in the East Siang, West Siang, Upper Siang and Lower Dibang Valley. The *Adi* tribe is mostly an agricultural society, and they are both patrilineal and a patriarchal society. The *Adis* follow

the rule of clan exogamy, and they worship a shamanistic kind of religion called the *Donyi-Polo*. According to the 2011 census, the total population of East Siang district stands at 9,9214, the sex ratio is 979:the total literacy rate is 73.54%, out of which the female literacy rate is 67.57% against a male literacy rate of 79.60%.

The intersections of Gender and governance have become a critical area of study within the fields of international relations, sociology, and gender studies. A report on women's leadership and political participation by UN Women (2025) has shown that as of 1 January 2025, there are 25 countries where 28 women serve as Head of State or state/government. At this rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years.

The presence of women in governance and decision-making is important for achieving gender equality, effective democracy, relevant policy priorities and better policy outcomes. Inclusion of women in governance will improve the process of governance as women are considered more cooperative and less corrupt (Agarwal, 2023). Inclusion of women in the governance process is crucial for correcting existing political inequality and injustice, particularly because it can influence policy and its outcomes (Mishra & Mishra, 2016).

Tribal women in the northeastern part of India are relatively better off than their counterparts in caste-based societies in terms of freedom of movement, absence of oppressive customs such as dowry, respect for widows and the aged, strong family and community support system; they also suffer from the disadvantage due to their gender (Nongbri, 2001, pp. 6-7).

The underrepresentation of tribal women in governance structures remains a persistent issue in India's northeastern region. Women's traditional exclusion from politics not only isolates them from the management of community affairs it also restricts their ability to gain access to the modern system of representative democracy Nongbri (2001).

Women in the *Adi* tribe do have the liberty in terms of education, choosing a life partner, and even participating in economic activities, but their role in the traditional village council, in panchayat as well as in the electoral politics is very low as compared to the male counterparts. Even in recent times, although there is 33% reservation for inclusion of women in politics across the country, women are still rarely seen as primary candidates in election campaigns in both legislative assemblies and in traditional village councils; women's roles remain limited. There is also limited participation of women in grassroots governance systems, such as the Panchayati Raj institutions.

It is at this point that it becomes crucial to understand why there is a lack of women's participation in the political processes and decision-making starting from the very indigenous form of grassroots level. This paper is an attempt to understand the barriers that hinder women's active participation in *Kebang* and what are the changes can be seen with the emergence of reservation policies for the inclusion of women as key decision-makers. It is

also to understand whether the tribal society, particularly the *Adi* tribe in the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, accepts the women's reservation policy.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the socio-cultural factors like gender roles, traditional norms, and family structures that affect the involvement of women in *Kebang*.
2. To identify the challenges and constraints on *Adi* women which hinders their participation in the political domain and decision-making process
3. To assess the impact of education and modernization in bringing gender equality as far as women's role in decision-making and political participation is concerned.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a qualitative research methodology and is descriptive in nature. It aims to explore and understand the role of women in customary governance, particularly within the institution of *kebang* in the *Adi* tribe. Primary data has been collected through semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of participants, including village elders, students, as well as working men and women, and also the key community stakeholders, both male and female, who have direct experience or knowledge of the *kebang* system. The secondary sources of data have been gathered through government census, books and articles, and previous studies on gender and governance in tribal societies and village councils in northeast India.

SAMPLING METHOD

The present study employed purposive sampling to identify and select participants who possess in-depth knowledge and experience related to customary governance within the *Adi* community in East Siang District. Snowball sampling was also employed, wherein initial participants recommended other knowledgeable individuals within their network. The study was conducted in the Pasighat Block in East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh, which is predominantly inhabited by the *Adi* tribe and represents both urban and rural areas.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS-

1. What is the role of *Adi* women in the *kebang*?
2. What are the factors that hinder women's participation in the *kebang*?
3. Is there any change in the present time due to education and modernization in the role of women in *kebang*?

UNDERSTANDING KEBANG AS AN INSTITUTION OF LOCAL SELF- GOVERNANCE

The word "*Kebang*" denotes the process or act of deliberation, especially on matters of importance. *Kebang* is the traditional institution of self-governance; it is the central political unit that makes important decisions regarding every aspect, whether in relation to social,

economic, political and judicial disputes in the tribal life of the *Adi* community. *Kebang* is a union of village elders who are assigned the role of caretaker or decision-making at the village level. Their decisions and words are to be taken with respect and sincerity, as it represents the community sentiments and social cohesion. The *Adi Kebang* is described as strongly democratic, as members in the *Kebang* are chosen based on their oratory skills and qualities and having vast and in-depth knowledge of customary laws and conventions of the *Adi* tribal society. Those who do not adhere to the rules and regulations set by the *Kebang* are highly condemnable and are liable to punishment.

The origin of *Kebang* as an institution of self-governance in the *Adi* tribal society is said to have existed since time immemorial. There are no written records on the *Kebang* proceedings of the olden times but it was traditionally passed on orally from generation to generation. Verrier Elwin (1957) observes, “The *Adis* are great orators and have unusual powers of memory, being able to recite interminable genealogies tracing their race back to the beginning of the world”, (p.18). In recent times, the community stakeholders are trying to revive and restore the almost withering tradition of *kebang* rules and regulations in the form of written records and codification known as “*ADI KEBANG AYON*”, Rules of *Adi* Customary Law, 2017, which are regulated by the *Kebang*, that is expected to be adhered by every individual in the *Adi* society.

In the foreword to Verrier Elwin’s book *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Jawaharlal Nehru (1957) outlines five guiding Principles for tribal development, emphasizing that tribal communities should be allowed to develop according to their own genius without external impositions. The *Kebang*, which is an indigenous form of self-government, is recognised as village authority under Section 5 of the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation Act, 1945. This institution of local self-governance is bestowed with the power to look after matters in relation to social, economic, and political as well as judicial disputes.

The members of *kebang* were called as *Milum* or *Kebang Abu*, and with the advent of the British, they were known as *Goan Bura/Burih*. They are the ones who initiate the *kebang* proceedings and are elected unanimously by the villagers in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner of the District. The members are democratically elected on the basis of their oratory skills and knowledge, and having Good character; somebody with a criminal background cannot be selected. In each village, the number of *Gaon Bura/Burih* is appointed on the basis of the number of population in the village; for instance, if there are 100 people in a village, then one *Gaon Bura/Burih* is appointed. Similarly, for 150 villagers, 2 members, for 1500 villagers 10 *Kebang* members will be appointed. The *Kebang* members are elected by the villagers in the presence of the Circle Officer. He then reports to the Deputy Commissioner/Additional Deputy Commissioner, and with their consent the members are officially appointed. The members can retire only on medical grounds and upon attaining the age of 75 years.

According to Verrier Elwin (1957), “an important feature of many *Adi* villages is the dormitory-club for boys and men, which organizes the youth of the tribe and is used for deliberations of the *Kebang* or the tribal council”; this dormitory or the community hall is known as *Dere/Moshup*, where all the important events of any *Kebang* proceedings or any festival or any rituals are conducted.

The eligibility criteria for the selection of members of *Kebang* are laid down in the *Adi Kebang Ayon*, in Section XXII, which is as follows-

1. A man and women who wants to become *Goan Bura/Burih* should be a resident of their village at least for the last 25 years.
2. Should have been an active participant in the *kebang* proceedings and be willing to commit to doing social service for the society.
3. Someone who can read or write and somebody with having vast knowledge about the customary laws and practices is most desirable.
4. Should have attained the age of 35 years and should not have attained the age of 60.
5. Should be of moral character.

Those who are not eligible-

1. Those who are directly or indirectly involved in political parties.
2. Residents of the village for less than 10 years.
3. Less than 35 years of age.
4. Those people who are disabled in any form.
5. Those who are drug addicts or someone who is not of good character or moral values.

The role and responsibility of the *Kebang Abu* and *Ane* or the *Gaon Bura/Burih* is to solve any disputes regarding marriage and divorce, inheritance, land and property and even act as a judicial custodian in the *Adi* community to take care of criminal cases, for instance, rape, murder, accident, theft, etc. It is said that an individual, on any ground, must consult the *kebang* first on any case, and if the *kebang* proceedings are not satisfactory or do not come to a conclusion, then they can carry forward with the Indian legal or judicial system.

A point to be noted here is that the role and responsibilities of the traditional village council and the form of grassroots governance called Panchayati Raj Institutions are not to be mistaken as similar. Both institutions are different from each other, as the traditional village council called *kebang* is concerned with the customary laws and practices, dealing especially with social issues, and it is basically an institution to preserve and maintain the age-old practices of the *Adi* tribe. The Panchayati Raj Institution, on the other hand, is established by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1997; it is a decentralised form of governance aimed at looking after the developmental works funded by the central government, ensuring grassroots development across various sectors.

The structure of *Kebang* is set into four units or stages; they are as follows-

1. *DU: SUM KEBANG*- the word "*Dusum*" itself denotes a small gathering at home. It is the smallest unit of *Kebang*, which deals with matters concerning marital issues, theft, adultery, and family disputes regarding land and property. The *Dusum Kebang* can be conducted at the house of the concerned individual. It is the unit of the *Kebang*, under the purview of which the disputes within the family, clan or neighbourhood are solved.
2. *DO: LUNG KEBANG*- The word "*Dolung*" denotes village. This unit of *kebang* is at the village level, and this is conducted at the *Dere/Musup* (community hall). The *Dolung kebang* mainly deals with matters related to land and property disputes within the village.
3. *BANGO KEBANG*- the word "*Bango*" denotes a cluster of villages. This unit of *Kebang* deals with matters at the inter-village level. All the matters which involve more than one village or are concerns between two villages are solved by the *Banggo Kebang*.
4. *BOGUM BOKANG KEBANG*- According to *Adi Kebang Ayon* (the *Adi* Customary Law book), the *Bogum Bokang Kebang* is the highest court of appeal, and it encompasses all the above-mentioned *kebang* or the villages. It deals with the entire deviant and criminal activities like murder, rape, inter-village disputes, etc. All the cases which cannot be settled in the above-mentioned *kebang* are brought to *Bogum Bokang Kebang*.

In addition to the village-level *kebang*, there exists a broader apex body known as *Adi Bane Kebang* (ABK), This is an organisation which represents the entire *Adi* community. The *Adi Bane Kebang* also includes a dedicated women's wing called *Adi Bane Kebang Women's Wing* (ABKWW). This women's wing has been actively involved in various forms of social service, particularly addressing issues affecting the youths such as drugs, HIV and AIDS, prostitution etc.

The general principle of *kebang* is to first give a patient hearing to the grievances of the aggrieved party, followed by the defence presented by the accused and the arguments from both sides. Typically, the accused rarely speaks unless lacking strong support, in which case he must defend himself. Contending parties backed by vocal supporters present their cases before the *kebang* in traditional, loud and gesticulated speeches. Both parties must agree to the conclusion reached through discussions (Modi, 2000, pp.92-93).

When human reasoning fails, supernatural guidance is sought through oaths and ordeals. Unsolved cases may be referred to a higher *kebang* such as *Bogum Bokang Kebang* or to the administrative officers or courts, especially in matters involving social, judicial or

developmental issues. When the disputes cannot be resolved through ordinary arguments and inquiries, the parties must turn to oaths and ordeals as a means of establishing the truth. These practices however, are not imposed by the *kebang*: instead, both sides voluntarily request permission to undertake them in pursuit of a final verdict. This approach provides a dignified exit for any party reluctant to face divine judgment, allowing them to preserve their honour and reputation. Among the *Adi*, such oaths and ordeals are referred to as *PEKISINAM*, *DOKKISINAM* AND *AMKISINAM*, with the oath sworn in the name of *DONYIPOLO*, considered the most sacred and binding (Modi, 2000, pp.95-96).

Maternal uncles of both parties traditionally serve as guardians during the administration of oaths, presenting the complainant and the accused at the designated time and place, often representing them in argument. One such instance of ordeal in *kebang* is called the *Aso Amki* practice; both the aggrieved and accused mark each other's *Mithun* (*Bos-frontalis*) and release them into the forest, invoking the spirit of *Donyipolo*. The *Mithun* of the person in the wrong is believed to die early, revealing the truth. The *Mithun* is considered sacred and serves as a witness in disputes, symbolising justice. Results usually take 2 to 5 years, depending on the animal's age. Though this practice is case-specific, it can be applied in other similar situations (Modi, 2000, p.99)

WOMEN'S ROLE AND GENDER EXCLUSION IN KEBANG

"Anthropologists have long been interested in studying the position of women across different cultures and societies" (Srinivas, 1977, p.1). The role of women as key decision makers has particularly drawn attention from scholars across disciplines in order to understand women's role and status in society. Within the *Adi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, women have traditionally been excluded from participating in *kebang* (village council) proceedings, let alone serving as members. There is an old saying, "*Sone role mumang, mime kebang lumang*" which means like a female-*Mithun* does not growl; a female likewise should refrain from speaking in the *kebang* proceedings.

"The gendered history of governance in India is marked more by women's absence than presence. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's presence in the everyday institutions of governance was rare. In fact, women are largely absent even from the writings on governance, apart from accounts of women's struggle for suffrage and a place in the legislature from the 1920s. For example, there is little indication of women's presence in customary institutions of village decision-making, such as caste and tribal council gram sabhas or village court" (Agarwal, 2023, pp.1-2).

Among the *Adi* tribe, women's participation in key decision-making was traditionally discouraged. While there was no formal written law excluding women from governance, in practice it was widely accepted that women should not take initiatives in such matters. Their role was limited to that of a witness. They could voice their grievances in the *Kebang* but not to settle disputes.

In fact, in earlier times women were not even allowed to enter the *Dere/Moshup* (village community hall), due to the belief that their presence would bring misfortune and bad luck (Radhe, 2018, p.41)

The *kebang* has traditionally been regarded as a democratic institution among the *Adi tribe*. However, this democratic character historically excluded women, who were not permitted to participate in its proceedings. In fact, during the olden days, it was said that even *Pagbos/slaves* held higher positions than women in this regard, as they could represent their masters in the *Kebang*, whereas women were barred from entering the space altogether. (Koyu & Singh, 2020, p.28).

RECENT DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, the involvement of *Adi* women in traditional village councils has seen a notable increase. This shift is largely due to national mandates promoting women's representation in local governance. In line with these norms, appointing women, referred to as *Gaon Burih*, grants them the authority to participate in decision-making processes during village council deliberations. In some cases, a village has more than one *Gaon Burih*, further enhancing women's representation. This development marks a significant departure from earlier times when women were excluded from such roles. (Radhe, 2018, P.40)

Despite the introduction of modern legal frameworks in the region, the exclusion of women from *kebang* proceedings persisted for many years. One notable milestone was the appointment of Ms. Yama Tapak from Rani Village as one of the first women *Gaon Burih* in 1998. According to her account, her participation was initially met with resistance from her male counterparts, indicating the deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes within the traditional governance system. (Koyu & Singh, 2020, p.282).

The introduction of the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act of 1997, in accordance with the 73rd constitutional amendment, which mandated 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, has further contributed to this shift, signaling a broader transformation in the gender dynamics of local governance. Women are now gradually taking part in the proceedings of the village councils; they attend meetings, and even in grassroots governance, women are getting elected as representatives. But this does not put an end to the low number of participations of women not just in the village council but even in the Gram panchayat as well as in the electoral politics of the state.

Unlike the 33% reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj system, there is no provision for reservation in the village council *Kebang*. As a result, women's participation in the village council remains limited. These traditional institutions continue to be male-dominated, and even in the 21st century, they reflect a deeply entrenched patriarchal structure with minimal emphasis on gender inclusivity. (Basar, 2023)

As mentioned earlier, the Women's Wing of the *Adi Bane Kebang* is actively involved in addressing various social issues and activities. For instance, youths today are increasingly affected by drug and alcohol abuse. According to a recent survey by the government of Arunachal Pradesh, East Siang district is among the most affected by drug use in the state. The women's wing is also engaged in initiatives related to rehabilitation centres and combating the employment of minors as domestic help.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings reveal that women did not participate in *Kebang* proceedings earlier because their opinions were not sought, and they were occupied with household responsibilities and childcare. The traditional division of labour placed men in roles outside the home, while women managed domestic duties, making it difficult for them to engage in decision-making bodies like the *Kebang*. It is said that earlier, women were not even permitted to attend the proceedings of the *Kebang* (traditional village council) due to the belief that women could bring misfortune and bad luck, and also women were discouraged from speaking and giving their opinion in important matters, saying "*mime de kebang lupe-lagimang*" meaning women should not speak in *Kebang* proceedings.

However, the present study reveals that women are now being inducted as members, even serving as *Gaon Burihs*. This marks a significant shift in societal attitudes towards women's participation in governance—both within traditional institutions like the village council and in modern democratic frameworks such as Panchayati Raj Institutions and electoral politics. This transformation can largely be attributed to the influence of modern legal frameworks and the implementation of reservation policies that promote women's political representation across the country.

Educated youths especially assert that all forms of discrimination concerning women's participation in political processes should be eliminated. This change reflects a broader transformation in community perceptions about women's role in decision-making. For instance, a *Gaon Bura* from Mongku village shared that women should be allowed to take equal partnership in decision-making processes. He acknowledged that women are capable leaders, citing the example of women serving as pilots today. He also expressed a personal sentiment, saying he values his daughter more than his son as they tend to take better care of him.

In most villages within East Siang District, the traditional village councils were predominantly composed of *Gaon Buras* with few or no *Gaon Burhis*. This gender imbalance reflects the broader pattern of male-dominated leadership structures within the traditional governance system, where men continue to be preferred as representatives and decision-makers.

Although there has been a noticeable shift in perceptions regarding women's participation in governance, decision-making processes at both the village council level and in broader

political institutions continue to be male-dominated. It is still largely men who take the initiative and occupy leadership roles within traditional bodies such as the *kebang*, even within formal structures like the Panchayati Raj Institutions and electoral politics in Arunachal Pradesh. That is, male representation significantly outweighs that of women. This indicates that while attitudes are gradually evolving, substantial progress remains to be made in ensuring meaningful and equitable participation of women in governance.

The major findings of the study is that women's role in the village council among the *Adi* tribe is negligible, which can be attributed to the following factors-

1. In many cases, women themselves do not want to get involved in governance and decision-making. They prefer to do household chores or more productive work for their sustenance rather than to do social service and be present at the *kebang* proceedings.
2. Most of the educated women in villages or in urban areas prefer more secure jobs, whether in the private or government sector, to live a fulfilling and quiet life.
3. Most of the youths, both male and female, are not even aware of the village council *kebang* and the role and function it has in the *Adi* society.
4. In many cases, women are not the preferred candidates, and preference is always given to male members of the society.
5. Even if a woman candidate is willing to take part, her role as a wife and a mother limits her participation.
6. One of the major findings is that the *Adi* tribe is a patriarchal and patrilineal society where women are not seen as potential candidates as compared to their male counterparts.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the evolving yet complex landscape of gender and governance within the traditional institutions of the *kebang* in *Adi* society. While there has been a gradual shift in perceptions and increasing acceptance of women in decision-making spaces, the process remains deeply influenced by patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. Women are beginning to participate as leaders in community affairs, but their representation is still limited, and leadership remains male-dominated.

Social and cultural barriers ranging from the division of labour to societal expectation continue to restrict women's full and meaningful participation. However, the emergence of educated and motivated women, along with changing attitudes among some male leaders, offers hope for a more inclusive future. To achieve genuine gender equity in governance both within traditional councils like *Kebang* and in formal political institutions, it is essential to challenge deep-rooted biases and create spaces where women's voices are not only heard but also valued.

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