

Traditional Chieftainship System of the Wancho Tribe

Topha Manham

Student, Himalayan University, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

The Wancho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India, holds a distinctive and resilient system of traditional governance based on chieftainship. This article explores the cultural roots, structural hierarchy, and evolving role of the Wancho chieftainship in contemporary times. It aims to preserve indigenous knowledge and highlight the significance of tribal leadership in sustaining community cohesion and identity.

KEYWORDS: *Wancho tribe, chieftainship, indigenous governance, customary law, Arunachal Pradesh*

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INTRODUCTION

The Wancho tribe, primarily inhabiting the Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh, has upheld a traditional chieftainship system that predates modern political structures. Rooted in customs, oral traditions, and communal values, this system has served as the backbone of Wancho society. In this article, I present an insider's perspective on how the chieftainship functions, the roles of Wangham (village chief), and the ways in which this system continues to shape Wancho identity.

Structure and Role of the Chieftain

At the heart of every Wancho village is the chief, traditionally known as the Wangham. The chief holds hereditary authority passed through male lineage, though wisdom, bravery, and public trust are equally valued. The chief's role is multifaceted—he is a custodian of customary law, a mediator of conflicts, a ceremonial leader, and a guardian of ancestral land and culture.

Each village may have multiple Wanghams, especially in larger settlements, forming a council of elders that collectively deliberates on important decisions. This council maintains law and order, resolves disputes, and ensures the performance of rituals and festivals

like Oriah, the prime cultural celebration of the Wanchos.

Customary Law and Justice

Justice among the Wanchos is not based on written codes but on oral tradition and consensus. The chief and his council listen to both parties in any conflict and deliver judgments grounded in fairness, community welfare, and ancestral customs. Compensation rather than punishment is emphasized, ensuring social harmony over retribution.

Leadership and Legitimacy

Leadership in the Wancho chieftainship system is legitimized by traditional inheritance, but a chief's influence largely depends on his wisdom, oratory skills, and moral standing. Chiefs are expected to lead by example, abstain from selfish gain, and represent the collective interests of the village. Their position is one of service, not domination.

Transformation in Modern Context

With the advent of democratic governance and administrative integration, the role of traditional chiefs has evolved. While formal political power now rests with elected officials, the chieftainship continues to function as a parallel moral authority. Many

government programs still rely on the cooperation of village chiefs, and their endorsement remains crucial for local acceptance.

Moreover, the youth are increasingly recognizing the importance of preserving this indigenous institution as a symbol of identity and resilience. There is a growing call to document and integrate traditional knowledge into education and policy.

Conclusion

The Wancho chieftainship system exemplifies indigenous governance rooted in community, continuity, and culture. Though challenged by modernity, it remains a vital institution that binds the Wancho people to their past and guides them into the future. As a member of this tribe, I believe preserving our chieftainship system is not just a cultural duty-it is a declaration of who we are.

