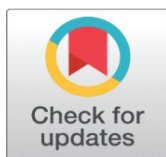


A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO ERADICATE BONDED LABOR IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the historical underpinnings of bonded labor in India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, with a strong focus on government initiatives to combat this issue. It discusses the legislative framework, particularly the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976, and the subsequent efforts of the government in surveying and liberating bonded laborers in Arunachal Pradesh. The highlights the recommendations of the High-Power Committee on Bonded Labor and emphasizes the role of government actions in empowering marginalized communities, such as the Puroik community.

Keywords: Bonded Labor, India, Government Initiatives, Liberation, Social Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

The historical roots of bonded laborers in India can be traced back to the caste system and the feudal structure prevalent in Indian society. In earlier eras, Indian society was divided into four distinct categories: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Due to a lack of arable land and the need for financial resources to meet their social and basic needs, lower-caste individuals often found themselves in debt to higher-caste individuals. With nothing to offer as collateral except their labor, creditors would demand labor in return for settling the debt and interest. Moneylenders primarily aimed to secure a consistent source of inexpensive labor

over an extended period. It's important to note that such a caste system is not practiced by the indigenous people in Arunachal Pradesh. Nevertheless, individuals in this region could still fall into slavery or bonded labor through methods like raids, forceful capture, purchase, indebtedness, or even by being born to enslaved parents. The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 called for the eradication of slave labor and acknowledged the presence of slavery and exploitative labor practices worldwide. Article 1 of the UDHR affirms that all humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights, while Article 4(3) explicitly declares that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude. In alignment with this declaration, the Republic of India incorporated specific principles into its constitution. Article 23 of the Indian constitution prohibits debt bondage and various forms of slavery, whether contemporary or historical, in the country.

Therefore, to honor the principles of the Indian constitution and address the prevalence of a considerable number of exploited laborers, particularly bonded laborers across the nation, the central government enacted the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act in 1976. This law calls for the complete elimination of bonded labor, the identification and rehabilitation of bonded laborers, and the release of any property attachment related to bonded laborers from the date of the law's enforcement. The act also mandates the establishment of Vigilance Committees at the district and sub-divisional levels, headed by District Magistrates, to identify, release, and rehabilitate bonded laborers. It defines bonded labor as any form of labor or service rendered under the bonded labor system, involving laborers who have accrued, or are assumed to have incurred, a bonded debt. In 1978, the Ministry of Labour, Government of India initiated a program offering a "rehabilitation allowance," with the central government contributing half of the allowance to state governments for the rehabilitation of liberated bonded laborers. Initially, the allowance was fixed at Rs 4,000 for each bonded laborer, but in the 1994-1995 annual report, the Ministry of Labour proposed an increase in rehabilitation assistance funds from Rs 6,250 to Rs 10,000 for each bonded laborer.

In order to enhance these endeavours, the Supreme Court, the highest court in India issued directives in 1982 and 1985 aimed at ensuring the effective enforcement of the provisions outlined in the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976. Upon receiving reports from various states in India that indicated a shortfall in the efforts to eradicate bonded labor, the Supreme Court of India took further action on March 13, 1994, concerning the case involving the Union Public of Civil Liberties Vs. State of Tamil Nadu and Organizations, among others. In this ruling, the court expressed its apprehensions about the inadequate progress made by relevant authorities and their apparent lack of enthusiasm in addressing this critical issue. In response, the court decided to issue specific instructions to compel all state governments to promptly comply through their administrative machinery. The court's directives included the following essential points:

- 1) Identifying and maintaining an updated list of bonded laborers, as well as identifying the regions where this practice remains prevalent.
- 2) Identifying the employers who exploit bonded laborers and initiating suitable legal actions against them.
- 3) Eliminating or discharging existing debts and bonded obligations as a means to secure the livelihood of those affected.
- 4) Appointing an impartial entity, like a local non-political social action group, to gather information and details about the prevalence of exploitative practices involving bonded labor, and the employers or their agents who intentionally violate the law by promoting and aiding bonded labor.

- 5) Providing employment opportunities to bonded laborers as agricultural workers at the minimum prescribed wage rate and allocating agricultural land to landless bonded laborers, thereby offering them an alternative source of income.
- 6) Ensuring the provision of adequate shelters, food, education for the children of bonded laborers, and medical services for both the bonded laborers and their families as part of a comprehensive rehabilitation package.
- 7) Enforcing regular inspections by the Labor Commissioner to oversee contractors who have previously engaged bonded laborers, establishing Vigilance Committees in each district, and creating rural credit facilities such as grameen banks and cooperatives, which provide short-term, interest-free loans without requiring collateral. This is of paramount importance since the root cause of bonded labor appears to be the unavailability of funds through an institutional network.
- 8) Commencing legal proceedings against contractors, employers, or their agents who employ bonded labor and hire children under the age of 14 without offering appropriate monetary compensation or paying wages below the minimum wage rate specified by the Minimum Wages Act.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods approach to understand how the government in Arunachal Pradesh, India, helped the Puroik people who were once in bonded labor. Interviews with government officials, community members, and NGOs were conducted to collect stories and experiences. Government documents and reports were examined to learn about the laws and policies. Surveys were given to people who were freed from bonded labor to collect facts and numbers about their lives. The data collected was analyzed to find patterns and common themes in people's experiences. Ethical rules, such as obtaining permission and maintaining confidentiality, were followed. Different sources of information were compared to ensure a clear picture. However, there were some limitations to the research, like the possibility that the people interviewed may not represent everyone. This research method helped gain insights into how the government assisted individuals who were formerly in bonded labor in Arunachal Pradesh.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) Analyse the effectiveness of government initiatives in eradicating bonded labour among the Puroik people of Arunachal Pradesh, India.
- 2) Investigate the social and economic transformation of the Puroik community after the abolishment of bonded labour practices.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Despite legislative efforts to eradicate bonded labor in India, the practice persists. This study on the historical and legal context of bonded labor serves a vital purpose by shedding light on the ongoing struggle to enforce existing legislation and achieve true social justice. By examining the historical roots of bonded labor in the caste system and the ongoing challenges faced by authorities, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding this issue.

Furthermore, this study delves into the crucial role of the Supreme Court in mandating stricter enforcement of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976. Analyzing the Court's directives offers valuable insights into potential solutions and underscores the importance of continued judicial oversight.

The findings of this research can benefit various stakeholders. Policymakers can gain valuable insights to strengthen existing legislation and improve enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, social welfare organizations working towards bonded labor eradication can benefit from a deeper understanding of the historical context and ongoing challenges. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to a comprehensive approach that effectively eliminates bonded labor and ensures the dignity and fundamental rights of all individuals in India.

5. SURVEY AND IDENTIFICATION OF BONDED LABOUR IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

On the 19th of November in 1966, the Supreme Court issued an order to all state governments, instructing them to conduct thorough surveys to determine the precise count of bonded laborers within their respective regions. In response to this directive, the government of Arunachal Pradesh directed all Deputy Commissioners and Additional Deputy Commissioners in the state to carry out comprehensive surveys with the aim of identifying any instances of bonded or indentured labor within the districts. Consequently, reports were submitted by the Deputy Commissioners of both West Kameng and East Kameng districts, collectively indicating that there were 3,542 bonded laborers within the Puroik tribal community. The survey reports from East Kameng and West Kameng districts, submitted independently by their respective Deputy Commissioners, disclosed a total of 3,542 individuals from the Puroik community who were engaged in bonded labor.

The Sulung tribe, located in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, has historically dwelled in the shadows, primarily as a consequence of their marginalized and subjugated status. Since January 26, 1976, they have been commonly identified as "Puroiks." They inhabit a total of 106 villages scattered across the state, with a notable cluster of 56 villages in the East Kameng District, 35 in Kurung Kumey, 5 in Papumpare, 6 in Upper Subansiri (where they share their habitat with other tribal communities), and 2 villages in West Kameng. It is pertinent to note that certain villages have been excluded from official records due to depopulation brought about by outmigration or other related factors. The dietary cornerstone of the Puroiks is Rangbang, derived from the starch of the wild sago palm tree, and their traditional subsistence heavily relied on forest resources. In recent times, the availability of rice in local markets has induced a transformation in their dietary patterns. Linguistically, the Puroiks are believed to have affiliations with the Tibeto-Mongoloid language family and have cultivated a distinct local dialect, setting them apart from other tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Significant insights into the historical enslavement endured by the Puroik community in Arunachal Pradesh are afforded by historical records. Eminent scholars, including [Stonor \(1972\)](#), [Elwin \(1959\)](#), [Grewal \(1997\)](#), and [Deuri \(1982\)](#), have meticulously chronicled the servile conditions to which the Puroiks were subjected. They were frequently branded as "Sulung" or "slaves" by neighboring tribes such as the Aka, Mijis, and Nyishis. These indigenous tribes, endowed with economic advantages and dominance, effectively exploited the vulnerabilities of the Puroiks, resulting in their enslavement over an extended period. [Stonor \(1972\)](#) work, in particular, offers a substantial contribution to the historical context of this situation.

Dr. Ranbir Singh, an IAS officer who served as the Deputy Commissioner of East Kameng District and headed the High Power Committee on Bonded Labor, reported in 1997 that 791 Puroik families in East Kameng District were identified as bonded laborers. Among these, Chanyangtajo had the highest number of bonded Puroik families with 216, followed by Bameng Circle with 179, Lada Circle with 126, and Khenewa Circle with 107. In contrast, Sawa had 67, Pipu had 54, while Pakke-Kessang and Seppa headquarters each had only 1 family involved in bonded labor. However, the Seijosa area had no documented instances of bonded labor among the Bangnis (Nyishis) community. In the case of Bangni bonded families, they were locally referred to as "Nyera" for male bonded laborers and "Pagney" for female slaves. The data revealed that Seppa headquarters had the highest number of Bangni bonded families with 152, while Pipu had only 3 families. Consequently, the total number of bonded labor families in the district was 946, consisting of 791 Puroik bonded labor families and 15 Bangni bonded labor families.

The report also furnished a comprehensive breakdown of the district's bonded labor population, segmented by geographical areas. Notably, Chanyangtajo boasted the highest concentration of bonded laborers, numbering 874 individuals, closely trailed by Lada with 605, Bameng with 58, Seppa with 48, Khenewa with 419, Sawa with 313, Pipu with 148, and Pakke-Kessang with a mere 12. The cumulative tally stood at 3,517 bonded laborers within the district, of which 3,108 were Puroik bonded laborers, and 409 were Bangni bonded laborers. Among this population, 3,189 were engaged in outdoor labor, while 328 were occupied as domestic laborers. Notably, the report underlined the absence of any recorded instances of Miji bonded laborers. Before presenting this report to the highest court, the Chief Secretary of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh sought legal interpretation and clarification from the Law Department regarding whether the Puroik community qualified as bonded laborers under the purview of the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act of 1976. The Law Department unambiguously affirmed that the Puroik community fell under the Act's definition of bonded laborers. In response, on April 15, 1977, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh submitted an affidavit to the Supreme Court, attesting that they were taking appropriate actions, in strict compliance with the law and supplementary measures, to secure the release and rehabilitation of the Puroiks.

The ensuing task for the Government of Arunachal Pradesh was to craft a comprehensive action plan for the release and rehabilitation of the Puroik community, as identified in the affidavit. Concurrently, administrators endeavored to implement resolute and well-considered measures, cognizant of past shortcomings of various welfare and relief programs aimed at liberating the Puroiks. In 1964, the Arunachal Pradesh administration launched a liberation policy, which entailed offering Rs 500 as compensation to masters for each adult Puroik, with the aim of abolishing the servitude status of this community. The period between 1978 and 1980 witnessed a substantial number of Puroik families benefiting from a resettlement program, effectively emancipating them from their previous masters. This program also extended nominal financial assistance to Puroik families for the construction of residences and granaries. Nonetheless, despite these efforts, recurrent setbacks among the Puroiks persisted, possibly due to the enduring influence of their former masters and the inherent vulnerability of the Puroiks within their society. The misappropriation of economic packages by erstwhile masters and their persistent influence on the Puroiks contributed to these setbacks. There was a firm conviction that the eradication of the slavery system and bonded labor should remain a perpetual objective, in accordance with the directives of the nation's highest court. Consequently, district administrators, functioning as

Chairpersons of the Vigilance Committees at the district level under the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act of 1976, recommended the formation of a High Power Committee by the state government to ensure the effective implementation of anti-slavery policies. As a result, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh established various committees, including the Ministerial Committee on Resettlement of Puroik Families, under the leadership of Shri R.K. Khirmey, which submitted its report in 1994. Two other High Power Committees were appointed: the High Power Committee on Bonded Labor on August 19, 1977, presided over by Shri Anand Prakash, IAS (then Commissioner, Personnel, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh), and the High Power Committee on the Status of Puroiks on July 12, 2011, led by Shri Hage Bat, IAS (then Secretary, Social Welfare, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh).

6. HIGH-POWER COMMITTEE ON BONDED LABOUR

A High-Power Committee on Bonded Labor was established by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, in compliance with directives from the Supreme Court of India, as per Government Order No. LAB (W)-2297, dated March 19, 1997. The committee was composed of the following members:

- 1) Shri Anand Prakash, IAS, who held the position of Commissioner (Personnel) at the time, was appointed as the Chairman.
- 2) Shri M. Kumar, Director of Agriculture, was designated as a member.
- 3) Shri S.S. Mishra, who was then the Director of Agriculture, also served as a member.
- 4) Shri D.Y. Perme, who was the Director of Land Records at the time, was another member.
- 5) Shri K. Riba, the Director of Rehabilitation and Resettlement at the time, was included as a member.
- 6) Shri Morge Ete, who was the Labor Commissioner at the time, was designated as a member.

The committee's primary responsibility was to present its findings and recommendations to the Government within three months from the date of the official notification establishing the committee. The committee had the following objectives:

- 1) To examine the feasibility, methods, and strategies for the rehabilitation and relocation of the Puroiks to a model village situated outside the East Kameng District. The committee was also tasked with specifying the necessary provisions in such a model village for the Puroiks.
- 2) To evaluate and formulate a reservation policy to enhance employment opportunities within the government for the Puroiks.
- 3) To investigate the potential necessity for legislation or other measures intended to protect the rights and cultural identity of the Puroiks.

The committee met its deadline by delivering a report containing eight recommendations. These recommendations take into account the social, economic, cultural, and political factors impacting the Puroik people. The primary recommendations are outlined below:

1) Liberation of Puroiks and Other Bonded Laborers:

The committee suggested the Deputy Commissioner of East Kameng District should issue an order under the relevant section of the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976. This order would grant freedom to Puroiks and other bonded laborers, relieving them of their obligations to their masters, provided they secure necessary assurances from their masters. To support their transition after liberation, each Puroik should receive a reasonable financial assistance. The initial non-recurring expenses for this endeavor can be covered by the Directorate of Relief, Rehabilitation, and Settlement through a request for grants-in-aid from the Union Labor Ministry's labor welfare programs.

2) Land for the Relocation of Puroiks:

The committee advised the elimination of baseless claims made by masters regarding traditionally cultivated Puroik land. The government should perform a thorough survey of land presently under their possession or control. Following this, the Deputy Commissioner should issue restoration or possession certificates to the Puroiks. Land disputes should not be resolved between Puroiks and their masters.

Furthermore, the committee recognized that the government should allocate specific areas of land within the Seppa township for Puroiks to engage in business activities. This would facilitate their shift from remote forest areas, often inaccessible and controlled by their masters. A policy should be crafted to prioritize Puroiks in land allocation within the township, ensuring that the land is exclusively designated for their use. Additionally, the committee recommended the identification of a piece of land in the Seijosa-Nomara region in East Kameng District, an area previously suggested by Puroik community representatives in their discussions with the High-Power Committee. A survey should be undertaken by the government's Land Record Department to assess the availability of land in this area. If feasible, the authorities should take the necessary steps to establish a consolidated and permanent settlement for the Puroiks in the proposed location.

3) Housing Facilities:

The committee's report underscored that some Puroiks led a nomadic lifestyle, frequently shifting their living arrangements. This nomadic way of life hampered their ability to keep pace with the broader population and obstructed personal and community development. As a result, many Puroiks lacked a permanent residence. To tackle this issue, the committee recommended providing Puroik families with housing through the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), whether they were in their current locations or resettled areas. To ensure the proper utilization of housing materials, the committee emphasized the need for vigilant monitoring by the Deputy Commissioner. This vigilance was crucial because there had been reports of misappropriation and misuse of construction materials and other benefits intended for Puroiks under various schemes, often by the sons or masters themselves.

4) Employment Opportunities:

In the report, the committee disclosed that out of 3542 identified Puroiks in the district, only 4 or 5 held clerical positions. They attributed this scarcity to the unavailability of educational institutions in Puroik areas to prepare them for competitive jobs. Puroiks were also discouraged by their masters from pursuing government employment, and their uncertain prospects in reforestation and other occupations were linked to their isolated and excluded existence. Given their challenging circumstances, the committee recommended that the government should guarantee employment for one person per Puroik family, ideally within three months of emancipation, in a suitable job. Recognizing the limited number of

educated Puroiks and their lack of educational opportunities, the committee further suggested that Puroik graduates be directly considered for roles like E.A.C. or similar positions in government and semi-government departments. A Class III-passed student should be eligible for positions like the present Circle Officer or equivalent. The committee's objective was to uplift the morale of the Puroik community. The committee also encouraged eligible Puroik candidates to pursue employment opportunities in central and state government roles, especially in the armed forces, paramilitary forces, police, and forestry. Educational requirements should be relaxed for Puroik candidates, and to facilitate this, the Labor and Employment Department served as the coordinating body for Puroik job openings in government departments and semi-government organizations at the state level, with Deputy Commissioners overseeing this at the district level. If the government could not provide a job to a member of a Puroik family as recommended by the committee, they would receive a monthly allowance of Rs. 1,000 until they secured suitable employment. Promoting self-employment among Puroiks was also advised, with government support and guarantees. Banks and other planning institutions received appropriate guidance in this regard.

5) Educational Facilities:

In the field of education, the High-Power Committee reported that various challenges, including economic, social, and physical obstacles, prevented Puroik families from sending their children to school. To address these issues, the committee proposed offering cost-free and equitable education to Puroik children. Additionally, the government established special schools exclusively for Puroik children, up to the secondary level, both in new settlement areas and their original habitats, ensuring these schools were predominantly attended by Puroik students and offered residential facilities. Furthermore, the committee suggested the state government to instruct all residential schools, whether government or semi-government, to admit at least 5-10 Puroik children annually for comprehensive and free education up to Class XI. In the case of private or government-aided schools, fees for Puroik students were minimal, with the state government covering the entire cost. It also suggested that the government also guarantee and provide free higher education in residential colleges outside the state for Puroik students. The committee believed that these measures eliminated the sense of inferiority Puroik students might have felt when studying alongside their masters' children. It also challenged the perceived dominance and imposition of the masters and their children on Puroik students. Additionally, provisions were also suggested to be made for Puroik students in professional colleges and technical institutions, such as medical, agriculture, engineering, etc., provided they met the colleges' admission criteria. Qualified Puroik individuals in these fields could contribute to changing perceptions about the Puroik community.

6) Political Engagement and Participation:

The committee depicted the involvement of Puroiks in the political sphere not just as voters but as potential leaders, provided they ascend to positions of authority. This holds the promise of elevating their societal status and deepening their awareness of their role within society. With this context in mind, the committee recommended that the government devise a policy to select, elect, or nominate a Puroik representative to the State Legislative Assembly. This representative could either have been integrated into the existing 60 seats or added as an extra seat, with the selection, election, or nomination process being subject to government decision. Moreover, the committee stressed the significance of

grassroots political participation by reserving the ZPM position for Puroik individuals in the East Kameng and Lower Subansiri districts.

7) Additional Support and Benefits:

The committee also advocated for diverse forms of assistance from authorities for the Puroik community, encompassing provisions such as gun licenses, tree permits, trading licenses, and similar benefits, all tailored to be more accessible compared to standard requirements. The Puroiks should be entitled to gun licenses for self-defense in Markhans. Contracts and developmental projects intended for Puroiks and their inhabited regions should ideally be executed collectively by the Puroik community, ensuring equal distribution of benefits. To facilitate development in Puroik areas and create employment opportunities, the committee strongly urges relevant development departments, including Agriculture, Horticulture, Power, Rural Development, Rural Works, and Public Works, to allocate 1.5 percent of their overall departmental budgets for the progress of Puroik residents in newly established areas.

8) Oversight Mechanism:

To ensure the consistent implementation of the aforementioned recommendations, the committee further proposed that the government establish monitoring cells to oversee labor-related matters at both the state and district levels. These cells should be entrusted with monitoring welfare programs for Puroiks and should include at least two representatives from the Puroik community at each level, with the flexibility to appoint additional members as required. The state-level monitoring cell should be presided over by the Chief Secretary, while the district-level cell should be led by the Deputy Commissioner. All Deputy Commissioners and Additional Deputy Commissioners should continue to identify cases of bonded labor in their respective districts and take actions in alignment with these recommendations. The District Magistrates, Deputy Commissioners, and Additional Deputy Commissioners will retain the authority granted under the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976.

7. HIGH-LEVEL COMMITTEE ON THE PUROIK COMMUNITY'S STATUS

Addressing the socio-economic challenges confronting the Puroik community in Arunachal Pradesh, Member of the Legislative Assembly, Kariya Bagang, tabled a private member resolution during the inaugural session of the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh on March 21, 2011. This resolution received the Assembly's approval, prompting the Government of Arunachal Pradesh to establish a High-Level Committee via Government notification no. SW-0419/2011, dated July 12, 2011. The committee comprised the following members:

- 1) Shri Hage Bath, IAS, who served as the Secretary (Social Welfare) at the time, assumed the role of Chairman.
- 2) Shri Tope Bam, who held the position of Deputy Commissioner of East Kameng District.
- 3) Shri Rajiv Takuk, who was the Deputy Commissioner of Kurung Kumey District.
- 4) Shri Pige Legu, who served as the Deputy Commissioner of Papumpare District.
- 5) Shri Hage Kano, Director (Agriculture).
- 6) Shri Jambo Ratan, Director (Horticulture).

- 7) Shri Ennyo Nangkar, Director (Land Management).
- 8) Shri Ojing Darang, the then Labor Commissioner, was a member.

The eight-member High-Level Committee tasked with assessing the Puroik community's status was mandated with the following objectives:

- 1) To analyze the current socio-economic status of the Puroik community in East Kameng, Kurung Kumey, and Papumpare districts, and propose strategies to ameliorate their socio-economic conditions.
- 2) To evaluate the feasibility and viability of consolidating the Puroik community in East Kameng and Kurung Kumey districts.
- 3) To recommend terms for negotiations with the Government of India to enhance the Puroik community's well-being in areas such as education, healthcare, literacy, and various other aspects.

The committee members were directed to submit their report within three months from the date of the committee's formation. In the course of their research, the High-Level Committee convened a meeting on September 13, 2011, under the chairmanship of Committee Chairman, Shri Hage Bath. During this meeting, committee members extended invitations to representatives from the All Puroik Welfare Society (APWS) to share insights on the socio-economic status of the Puroik community in Arunachal Pradesh. Attendees included Shri Kashok Haley, President of APWS, Shri Adang Yachu, spokesperson, Shri Kapit Puroik, District unit president of East Kameng, and other APWS members.

The All Puroik Welfare Society had previously submitted a memorandum to the High-Level Committee on the Puroik Community's Status on August 25. In their memorandum, they presented several proposals. These included the appointment of a Project Director from within the Puroik community to oversee their welfare initiatives. They also proposed the establishment of an autonomous agency called the Autonomous Puroik Development Agency (APDA), with a chairman and governing body composed exclusively of Puroik community members at the state level. In terms of resettlement and rehabilitation, APWS advocated for a reserved forest area near the Assam border, adjacent to the Rowta Forest Range and Balem Forest Range in West Kameng District. Furthermore, they suggested a 2 percent job reservation in all government job grades and the allocation of 20 percent of Annual Operating Plans for the development of their region. In 1976, two model Puroik villages were established in the Chayang Tajo circle: Laching Sulung, accommodating 32 Puroik families, and Yakli Sulung, home to 35 Puroik families. These resettled villages were named after Puroik communities' former masters' village, Pordung village of the Nyishi community. At that time, all Puroik villages under the resettled villages fell under the jurisdiction of Pordung village, and Pordung Sulung was situated within Pordung's territory. In the same year, Sangchu Sulung was established under the Chayang Tajo circle, replacing the old Puroik village known as 'Dache Sulung' and housing 45 Puroik families. Between 1978 and 1979, three resettled villages were established in the Bameng administrative circle, accommodating a total of 96 Puroik families. Rawa Sulung was the most populous among them, being the largest Puroik village in the district. From 1975 to the late 1980s, a total of 485 Puroik families were recognized in the 13 established resettled villages in the East Kameng district. However, only a few of these villages remain active, such as Sangchu Sulung, Poube Sulung, Rawa Sulung, Yakli Sulung, and

Laching Sulung. Some villages exist only in name, with few families residing there, possibly due to the scarcity of daily necessities and outmigration of villagers.

8. CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN PUROIK-MASTER RELATIONSHIPS

In earlier times, the affiliation of the Puroik community with their erstwhile masters was markedly disparate from its contemporary manifestation. An amalgamation of factors has contributed to the transformation of these dynamics. Firstly, the enactment of the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation in 1945 introduced official judicial roles, including political officers, Kotokis, and Goa Buras, tasked with maintaining law and order at the village level. Presently, Kotokis and Goa Buras still wield authority to adjudicate a plethora of cases at the village or district level, guided by Puroik customary laws, albeit with the exclusion of grave infractions like murder. In cases of discord among village denizens, the edicts of Gaon Buras are deemed definitive and irrevocable. In the antecedent era, prior to the appointment of such functionaries, village elders would amicably arbitrate all village disputes. The contemporary milieu witnesses the Puroik community presiding over its own affairs. Village heads and elders undertake the mediation of disputes amongst villagers, while community leaders and benevolent figures adjudicate cases of general import, inter-village disputes, and cases of considerable gravity. Bygone eras witnessed the former masters' dominion over these matters, with their rulings enjoying an unassailable status. The period preceding 1964 delineates an epoch wherein Puroiks in Arunachal Pradesh were ensnared in the trappings of bonded labor or servitude under the Nyshi community. During this era, they were cast into isolation from the wider world, with all matters, ranging from trifling to momentous, pertaining to Puroiks being the exclusive purview of their respective masters. Over the course of time, they extricated themselves from the Nyshis' clutches, and the contemporary landscape portrays Puroiks as emancipated individuals, no longer under the yoke of their former masters. They have attained a semblance of self-reliance, yet cases persist where liberated Puroiks encounter socio-economic and physical disadvantages. In such scenarios, it falls upon the government to provide facilities for their rehabilitation, in consonance with government policies. It has been posited that vestiges of the institution of slavery, though concealed, still endure.

The advent of modern administration under the aegis of the Deputy Commissioner has yielded benefits not only to the general populace of the district but, crucially, to marginalized communities like the erstwhile bonded labor Puroik society, along with Nyera and Pagney (formerly Bangni slaves). Instances of injustice and misconduct against Puroiks by their former masters are met with resolute response from the district administration and fast-track judicial tribunals. This equitability in treatment has facilitated their unfettered access to developmental programs and government initiatives. However, parity in their standing is not invariably discernible at the village level, owing to the historical baggage of bonded labor under the Nyshis. The inception of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system in 1969 within the erstwhile NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) ushered in a novel epoch of governance. The inaugural elections for Panchayati Raj bodies took place in 1970, a period marked by the system's novelty to many in Arunachal Pradesh. Notwithstanding, the Puroiks of Arunachal Pradesh have managed to secure a modicum of representation as Zila Parishad Members (ZPMs) in the decision-making machinery of local democracy. In 1975, the late Maet Sukung assumed the mantle of a ZPM, thereby representing the Puroik community. This

tradition endured until 1983, subsequent to which no Puroik has been elected or nominated to such positions within the Panchayat bodies.

A conspicuous fraction of the Puroik population has undergone a significant religious conversion, primarily to Christianity. This spiritual transformation has wielded a transformative influence over their cultural mores, indigenous beliefs, traditions, and customs. In instances like Rawa Puroik, converts to Christianity have renounced their indigenous belief systems, traditional cultural practices, and social customs, rationalizing that these practices entail substantial financial outlays in the form of sustenance, lodging, monetary contributions, animal sacrifices, and the imposition of taboos following rituals. Post-conversion, Puroiks in Rawa village forgo their engagement with indigenous belief systems and select customary laws, preferring to adjudicate disputes in a religious context, invoking the appellation of Jesus Christ. They eschew the recourse to customary laws when they contravene substantial penalties and protracted legal proceedings. In such scenarios, the church's ecclesiastical leaders or pastors serve as arbiters in conflicts amongst Christian Puroiks. This religious transformation has served to bridge the lacuna in their rapport with their former masters, many of whom have themselves embraced Christianity. It is noteworthy that the majority of the Puroiks' religious beliefs, rituals, and customary laws are legacies inherited from their previous masters, the Nyshis and Mijis.

At present, a segment of educated individuals has emerged among the Puroiks in East Kameng District, manifesting an escalating literacy rate. These educated Puroik youths are actively engaged in endeavors aimed at enhancing the socio-economic status of the Puroik community through modern education and developmental initiatives. The Puroik youth cohort has seen a proliferation of government officials and civil servants occupying roles in various departments. For instance, [Bopai \(1997\)](#), distinguished as the first Puroik graduate, presently holds the position of Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) in Deomali, while Mr. Kashok Haley assumes the mantle of Ranger Officer in Bhalukpong. Their contemporary interactions with their erstwhile masters are characterized by a kinship akin to that of familial bonds and fraternity, in contrast to the master-slave dichotomy of yore. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of the Puroiks continue to inhabit remote, arduously accessible highland regions in Arunachal Pradesh. They persist in contributing labor in the fields of their former masters, providing aid and support out of a sense of fraternal obligation. Certain Puroik villagers are now remunerated for their daily toil, in marked contradistinction to a bygone era when they were conscripted into service in the fields and domiciles of Nyishis without compensation. A momentous transformation entails Puroiks' entitlement to wages or remuneration for their labor, an entitlement previously unacknowledged.

Historically, the Puroiks endured the ignominy of being stigmatized as slaves or bonded laborers, an ignominy that manifested in their social ostracization. This ostracization spanned an array of facets, encompassing participation in rituals, access to significant roles within social organizations and political entities, and the imposition of restrictions on the marriage of Puroik girls. Notably, major tribes, including the Nyishis, failed to recognize them as equals, relegating them to the status of third-class citizens, both ethically and psychologically. Instances of physical and other forms of maltreatment of Puroiks by their former masters have dwindled appreciably. Such maltreatment is chiefly manifest when Puroiks incur debts or obligations to their former masters. Certain Puroiks borrow money and materials, ranging from long swords to paddy, rice, and salt, with the intention of reciprocating these advances through labor. A plethora of Puroik villagers find

themselves laboring for the Nyshis due to their incapacity to discharge their debts. Some Puroik youth engage in fieldwork and commercial undertakings for the Nyshis, the motive for which lies in familial indebtedness to their former masters. Notably, notwithstanding official recognition as 'Puroik,' many Nyshi individuals continue to employ the nomenclature 'Puroik.' This nomenclature, deeply entrenched, may persist for an extended duration, owing to its entrenched status as a fundamental facet of Puroik identity. An analysis of field survey data has unveiled the perspective that 'Puroik' represents the traditional term and identity bequeathed by their forebears, while 'Puroik' serves as an appellation imposed by their erstwhile masters. Ergo, 'Puroik' retains a heightened popularity within society as a marker of their identity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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