

CONTRIBUTION OF NAGALAND IN INDIAN CULTURE, TRADITIONS AND GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

Communities of Naga people, an integral part of Indian historical journey since ancient times, have contributed immensely to development and preservation of Indian culture, traditions and political ethos. Philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions demonstrate the strength of Naga religious thoughts, which followed the famous Vaiśeṣika philosophy, a form of atomism in natural philosophy. Naga people were true soldiers of Indian culture, society and family values as they strived for achievement of ultimate truth, happiness and contentment in life. They wish to achieve an innate harmony and order and this is extended to the entire cosmos. Naga pride preservation of their own and collective reputation, dignity and honour of the community. They cherish the dream of universal brotherhood and display unity in diversity. They have shown maturity of governance structure, rule of law and participatory approaches by adopting “village republics”. The structure of polity varies from hereditary to democratic collectives. Existence of various mechanisms, democratic in its application, at work in order to usher and maintain peace, justice, understanding and resolution for all within the community make Naga hill people special and distinguished.

KEYWORDS: *Community, Culture, Naga, Society, Traditions*

Article History

Received: 10 Jun 2020 | Revised: 15 Jun 2020 | Accepted: 24 Jun 2020

INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is a landlocked state in north-eastern India situated in the confluence of East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is one of the smaller states of India. Nagaland is bounded by the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh to the northeast, Manipur to the south, and Assam to the west and northwest and the country of Myanmar (Burma) to the east. Nagaland's capital city is Kohima and its largest city is Dimapur. It has an area of 16,579 square kilometres (6,401 sq mi) with a population of 1,980,602 per the 2011 Census of India, making it one of the smallest states of India. Nagaland became the 16th state of India on 1 December 1963. The State consists of eleven Administrative Districts, inhabited by 16 major communities along with other sub-communities. Each community is distinct in character from the other in terms of customs, language and dress. The traditional ceremonial attire of each tribe is in itself, an awe inspiring sight to behold; the multi-colored spears and daos decorated with dyed goat's hair, the headgear made of finely woven bamboo interlaced with orchid stems, adorned with boar's teeth and hornbill's feathers, elephant tusk armlets. The state has experienced insurgency, as well as an inter-ethnic conflict, since the 1950s. Agriculture is the most important economic activity, contributing more than 70% of the state's economy. Other significant economic activity includes forestry, tourism, insurance, real estate, and

miscellaneous cottage industries. The state is mostly mountainous except those areas bordering Assam valley which accounts for 9% of the total area of the state. Mount Saramati is the highest peak at 3,826 metres and its range forms a natural barrier between Nagaland and Myanmar. It lies between the parallels of 98 and 96 degrees east longitude and 26.6 and 27.4 degrees latitude north. The state is home to a rich variety of flora and fauna.

Nagaland is a rural state. More than four-fifths of the population lives in small isolated villages. Built on the most prominent points along the ridges of the hills, these villages were once stockaded, with massive wooden gates approached by narrow sunken paths. The villages are usually divided into khels, or quarters, each with its own headmen and administration. Dimapur and Kohima are the only urban centres with more than 50,000 people. The Nagas, an Indo-Asiatic people, form more than 16 communities share many cultural traits. The Konyaks are the largest community, followed by the Aos, Tangkhuls, Semas, and Angamis. Other communities include the Lothas, Sangtams, Phoms, Changs, Khiemnungams, Yimchungres, Zeliangs, Chakhesangs (Chokri), and Rengmas. There may not be a common language but they have a bunch of about 60 spoken dialects, differing slightly from each other. In some areas, dialects vary even from village to village. Intertribal conversation generally is carried on through modified Assamese, and many Nagas speak Hindi and English. The traditional Naga religion has conceptions of a supreme creator and existence of afterlife. Nature is believed to be alive with invisible forces, minor deities, and spirits with which priests and medicine men mediate. In the 19th century, with the advent of British rule, Christianity was introduced, and Baptist missionaries became especially active in the region. As a result, the population of Christians dominates.

CONTRIBUTION OF NAGA CULTURE

Naga culture is based on principles of equality, it received the status of high religion. Thus, Naga culture played the greatest role in the process of establishing a casteless egalitarian and integrated society in Indian cultural life. The accumulated habits, attitudes, values, skills and material goods of the Nagas, which have been transmitted from generations, are manifested through their culture. Every community has its own traits of behaviour. These particular traits of behavior distinguish them from other homogeneous groups. We may associate these traits as cultural traits and as particular expressions of social identity. The main components of their culture are history, custom, tradition, religion, belief, art, language, philosophy, social structure, system of values and other ways of life. Therefore, the identity of the people is known through their cultural patterns and the affiliation of an individual to a community can be identified through his habit pattern acquired from his culture. Thus, a Naga is known by his honesty, straight forwardness, self-reliance and equality. Controversies are created about the origin of name Naga or their origin or migrations of these communities from different places and countries. All these theories, which are floated, on assumptions, as per the convenience to create certain narratives, are not supported by facts or evidence. There has been mention of Naga word since Mahabharata times in ancient history and occurs at various texts at different times of Indian history. So it is established that Naga were always integral part of Indian historical journey. Since scope of this paper is limited to the contribution of communities of Nagaland in Indian culture, traditions and governances, the limited issue will be in focus. Naga communities always played a role in Indian society but the major contributions are in strengthening the theological explanations, philosophical basis to religious beliefs & practices, philosophy of Life, Social and family values, maintaining the culture of diversity and reinforcing village republics as governance model.

Philosophical Basis for Religious Beliefs and Practices

The various communities of Nagaland have been practising different religious beliefs, rituals and practices. The perception was created, mainly by the western British writers, who visited Naga areas, as conqueror of the territory, either to administer or as missionaries to spread Christianity, these people were religion less savages. The western writers called these communities as Animists, superstitious, primitive as they did not try to understand the culture and philosophy of Naga life. On the contrary, the Naga religious belief was rational, full of logic, and showed the ways of virtuous and sustainable life. They followed different paths, rituals and beliefs, which was in line with maintaining the Indian traditions of diversity but underlined philosophy of religion remained the same for all these communities. Concept of the knowledge about God as the creator, moral life, ways of proper and an organized way of worship practiced were followed by every community. Naga communities worshiped nature which was a kind of system to thank the god, the creator, for granting and bestowing people with nature to sustain life. One of the prominent indigenous religions is The Heraka religion of the Zeliangrong Nagas. Jadonang established a socio-religious movement called Heraka (literally means "Pure"), derived from ancestral Naga practices known as "Paupaise. Haipou Jadonang was a Zeliangrong Naga spiritual leader and political activist of the hill community. He established the Heraka religious movement, which was based on the ancestral Naga religion, and he was considered the "messiah king" of the Nagas. His movement was widespread in the Zeliangrong territory. He also envisaged an independent Naga kingdom ("Makam Gwangdi" or "Naga Raj"), as he started independence movement against British rulers of India. He was hanged by the British in 1931, at a young age of 26, and succeeded by his follower Rani Gaidinliu who continued the battle for independence. He made an attempt to revive and reform Naga religion by integrating and making it part of their culture and tradition. It tried to elaborate the system to explain as to how this indigenous religion passed down from generations to generations when there were no written records maintained (Sharma at al, 2018). Chaya, 73-year-old Angami Naga, one of the elders of Viswema, a southern Angami village 22 kilometres south of Kohima, follows his old religion, conduct ceremonies, looks after the old and the sick, inaugurate seed sowing and inaugurate harvesting of crops. According to Naga customs, there are Gennas or divisions of one's life which imply how one should carry out their lives. Chaya and those of his ilk believe in U-kepenuopfü, the Supreme One who is creator of everything. Interestingly, the word U-kepenuopfü has female connotation. It roughly means the "female one who gave birth to us" or "the one responsible for our creation." U-kepenuopfü as the creator spirit incorporates both male and female aspects. Men and women have their different set of rituals, meaning that it is only the women who conduct rituals and observe fasting to appease the house spirits. The priest, usually the eldest of the community, announces the rules for the day at the dawn and anyone who did what has been prohibited is punished. Traditionally, both feasting and fasting play significant roles in the life of the Nagas. An important aspect of the old religion is that it is not considered a sin if a mistake is committed unknowingly. But, it becomes a grave sin if the mistake is committed knowingly and genna is not obeyed (Indian Express, 2018). Eastern Mirror, the tabloid from North East published an interview of Mr. Mayawati Walling, a 93 old AO community person from Longkhum village, which is following the old Lamafur/Limapur religion who said that "There is only one Creator of all beings. I pray to Creator to grant me truth, to help me remember, and for the well-being of all. That's my simple prayer every day" (Eastern Mirror, 2019).

These examples of two Naga communities show that these communities had well developed theological basis and philosophies. The detailed philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions demonstrate the strength of Naga religious thoughts. As per the Indian traditions, all learnings and knowledge creation was lead from forests, and all Rishis (Learned Men) lived in forests. Naga communities kept the tradition of living in the midst

of nature intact. Western writers, who did not have adequate understanding of the religious philosophy of India dubbed these as animists. Indian theology has always been an environmentally sensitive philosophy. No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Indian faiths. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The Rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. Theirs was not a superstitious primitive theology. They perceived that all material manifestations are a shadow of the spiritual. This has basis in one of the six Indian Orthodox schools called Vaiśeṣika philosophy, a naturalist school. It is a form of atomism in natural philosophy. It postulates that all objects in the physical universe are reducible to paramāṇu (atoms), and that one's experiences are derived from the interplay of substance (a function of atoms, their number and their spatial arrangements), quality, activity, commonness, particularity and inherence. According to Vaiśeṣika School, knowledge and liberation are achievable by complete understanding of the world of experience. The Vaiśeṣika darśana (Point of view) stated that size, form, truths and everything that human beings experience as a whole is a function of atoms, their number and their spatial arrangements, their guṇa (quality), karma (activity), sāmānya (commonness), viśeṣa (particularity) and amavāya (inherence, inseparable connectedness of everything). Similar were the old and indigenous religions of different communities of Nagaland. They have a great contribution to the great Indian traditions in religious practices that they continued to have the legacy and cherished the basic ethos and values of nature worship.

Philosophy of Life, Social and Family Values

The hill people of Nagaland were the main contributor and also the follower of the Indian philosophy of life which is the achievement of ultimate truth, happiness and contentment. As per the philosophy, ultimate purpose life is enjoyment of supreme bliss as a free soul in the highest heaven. The attainment of happiness happens if one is contented and satisfied. The Webster Dictionary defines happiness as a state of well-being and contentment or a pleasurable and satisfying experience. Bliss, rapture, joy, elation, exultation, ecstasy, euphoria, delight, enjoyment, exuberance, glee, jubilation, gratification are some of the synonyms associated with it. They suggest that happiness is a state of mind characterized by positive emotions. Hill people of Nagaland also followed and reinforced the same path. This has been appreciated by western writers also. They interpreted and linked the same concepts with the way of life and qualities of these hill people. J.H. Hutton (1921), commented, "One of the first characteristics that strikes a visitor to the Angami's country is his hospitality, a hospitality which is always ready to entertain a visitor and which forms a curious contrast to the very canning frugality of his domestic economy...Another very striking trait of the Angami is his geniality. Both men and women are exceedingly good humoured and always ready for a joke." These people were gentle, genial, welcoming, hospitable and friendly as they were contented and satisfied people. Similar sentiments were expressed by another writer J.P. Mills (1922) commenting on the Lotha Nagas he wrote, "Their sense of humour is well developed and they are always already with a laugh." It is a Naga tradition, they treat their guests with great hospitality and honour their guests by offering with meats and rice beer. They represent the Indian culture of "*Athithi Deva Bhavo*"—means guest is god. So these people were true soldiers of Indian culture and values.

Naga generally place a high value on harmony and unity with others, keeping a strong nexus with their community and relatives. A unified and interdependent community or family provides a support system that an individual can rely on daily. Naga can almost always trust in their social ties for assistance in virtually any activity. Isolation or

seclusion can seem daunting, as group loyalty and assurance of inseparability provides security and confidence. Naga, like rest of Indians tend to be conscious of how their behaviour may reflect on their family or community. Many tend to emphasise humility and the preservation of their own and collective reputation, dignity and honour. Naga tend to have a sense of acceptance towards one's life position or a belief that, due to actions in one's past life, good or bad personal circumstances are deserved. This attitude partly stems from religious ideas such as the 'karma' (actions or reactions that affect a person's current or future life) and 'samsara' (the cycle of rebirth). The interplay of these social, cultural and religious factors allows people to be accepting of life events and trajectories. Problems are usually managed in a cheerful, cooperative and innovative manner, along with light-heartedness towards situations that might otherwise be understood as frustrating.

Universal Harmony & Unity in Diversity

Naga philosophy and culture tries to achieve an innate harmony and order and this is extended to the entire cosmos. Naga culture assumes that natural cosmic order inherent in nature is the foundation of moral and social order. Inner harmony is supposed to be the foundation of outer harmony. Unity in diversity is based on the concept where the individual or social differences in physical attributes, skin colour, castes, creed, cultural and religious practices, etc. are not looked upon as a conflict. Rather, these differences are looked upon as varieties that enrich the society and the nation as a whole. The Naga people are divided into various ethnic groups and some of the prominent Naga ethnic groups are Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Mao, Poumai, Rongmei, Sumi, Tangkhul, Tangshang, Zeme. Diversity is reflected in these groups, each having its own rituals, rites, rules and customs. It can be seen in terms of linguistic, religious and other ethnic variations. The styles of life differ from community to community. There is linguistic diversity among different communities. Nagas have more language diversity than any other ethnic group or states in India. Naga people speak over 89 different languages and dialects, mostly unintelligible with each other. The Naga languages are either classified under the Kuki-Chin-Naga languages or the Sal languages. Kuki-Chin-Naga languages include the Angami-Pochuri languages, Ao languages, Tangkhul-Maring languages and Zemeic languages. The Konyak languages fall under Sal languages.

Village Republics and Structures of Governance

India has a tradition of having republics from the ancient times. The type, shape and structure of republics were different but it was indicative of the presence of defined social, political and economic relationships. It was the sign of the maturity of governance structure, rule of law and participatory approaches. Hill people of Nagaland could withstand the onslaught of various raiders/ invasions to India like Greeks, Persians, Mongols, Ghazni, Moghuls and many more and were able to keep the unique tradition/ feature of village republic. Republics were prevalent during Vedic periods, Mahabharata, Gupta, Mourya periods in various forms. While this tradition disappeared due to the requirements of larger and strong kingdoms to defend the country, hill people were able to maintain the originality in governance. Naga villages have always been 'village-republics'. It was based on their independence of external forces and autonomous management of their own internal affairs (Hutton 1921). This makes them a distinct class. Ganguli (1984) asserts that 'every village is an independent, self-contained administrative unit' (p.54). This is considered as the basis of the ancient political system of the Naga people and they organized the sovereign village state with their own unique forms of government (Singh, C, 2004). The village assembly alone is the apex body of the Nagas (J.P. Mills, 1922). The village is the highest form of the organization among the Nagas that represented political, social and religious bonds. Naga polity is based on equal representation of its constituents; large or small. The polity is based on consensus and not election, which promotes

conflicts and power-struggles to the detriment of the people.

Several scholars attempted at classifying the different Naga polities based on the system of election/ selection, power centre and administration/ decision making process. Some communities practised hereditary chieftainship, others were governed by bodies of elders, few were extremely democratic and some were authoritarian, wielded a lot of power with centralised decision making. (Kumar, B.B, 1997, Rao, V. V. 1976, Elwin, V. 1969). The Semas, Konyaks and Maos practiced hereditary monarchy. The Sema Monarch had absolute power. Among the Konyaks the chief, known as Angh, is highly autocratic. The Angh is the head of the administration and political affairs. Asoso Yonuo (1974) suggests that the 'Nagas are normally governed by the kings or chieftains of their respective villages, chosen for their bravery in war skilful diplomacy richness in the farm of cattle and land or power of oratory in contrast to the hereditary system in which the office of a king passes to the eldest son on the death of his father'. Almost all the Naga organizations are motivated on this democratic principle of equal representation of all people without allowing the politically and economically powerful sections to dominate decision-making. As argued above, the social organisation of Yimchunger society is built around the Kiulongthsürü, the centre of all governing authority. The establishment and maintenance of Kiulongthsürü were built on two major principles, namely patriarchal and patrilineal heredity, and participative democracy. The former ensured the organising principle of disconnected lineage of the society from the founder of the village to the present day village authority. The lineage of the founder of the village is continued through the office of Kiulongthsüpüh and the co-founders through Kiulongthsürü. The second principle of 'participative democracy' is a methodical foundation for running the affairs of the village. When fully enacted, it gave every member an opportunity to express themselves on matters affecting them. Discussions, meetings, and the settlement of cases, were conducted with the concern and participation of those mattered. Therefore, participation by the entire community in decision-making processes was considered vital and a key principle in Yimchunger way of life. The self-ruled government in practice is more than the rule of the majority of our day. Here the emphasis is on participation, consensus and cooperation. Though only a few hold offices, the freedom to express one's opinion and to participate in the decision making was possible for all villagers. Kiulongthsüpüh has the final word on the matter representing him on the wisdom of all. He is not an autocrat but the first among the equals. It is his responsibility to discern the true and best for his people based on the traditional wisdom and customary practice. In this perspective, we can say that Yimchunger Governing system holds high the principle of democracy in its functioning. Though the members of Kiulongthsürü are inducted based on heredity, the freedom of choice, effected by the clan, ensures the selection of the best in a direct democratic manner. Among the many traditional values, the spirit of equality and belongingness to the clan/tribe were very dear to every Yimchunger. It is also assured that any authority, be it religious or social, is primarily to foster community's well-being. Thus, we find various mechanisms, democratic in its application, are at work in order to usher and maintain peace, justice, understanding and resolution for all within the community, inclusive of the structure and functioning of the governing system.

CONCLUSIONS

All communities of Naga people since ancient times have been always a part and parcel of Indian culture continuum over the centuries. They have contributed immensely in development and preservation of Indian culture, traditions and political ethos. Central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions, beliefs and rituals demonstrate the superiority and richness of Naga religious thoughts. These can be classified under the Vaiśeṣika philosophy, which appreciated the integration of men with nature. Naga carried forward their culture, society and family values, preserved same in oral

traditions. Their philosophy and goal of life was the attainment of ultimate truth, happiness and contentment. The issues arise if their concepts on religious understanding and philosophical explanations for life were so rich how they were dubbed animists and people with no religious knowledge. Naga always displayed harmonious relationship with their inner self, nature and community and was gentle, hospitable and contented people. Again the question arises that if Naga people were having these qualities, why one aspect of their being head hunter was highlighted. Unfortunately wars and head hunting have been prevalent in every society in the world at a certain point of time. These were abrasions and had never been the norms or part of a culture in any society. Naga had tradition of preservation of their own pride, collective reputation, dignity and honour of the community. They have shown exceptional maturity in establishing systems, regulations and democratic approaches on governance. They have been successfully demonstrating “Village republics”, a model dream of self-reliant villages of Mahatma Gandhi. The structure of polity may be different but they all worked to usher an era of peace, justice, understanding and resolution for all within the community.

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