



Socio-cultural traditions of the Naga society

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Abstract

There are so many tribes belongs to the State of Nagaland and Angami is one of them the major concentration of Naga Population is in Nagaland on which the present Study is centered. Nagaland is a land of Myth and legends, with festivals and culture richness, a world of interesting ancient rituals and practices

Background of Nagaland

Nagaland situated at the easternmost part of India, covers about an area of 16,579 sq. kms. It is bordered on the west by Assam, on the north by Arunachal Pradesh, on the east by Myanmar and on the south by Manipur. Further, it is also equidistant from the tri-functional of Indo-China-Myanmar in the Northern and Indo-Bangladesh in the south.

Historically, the Nagas have always been brave warriors. Like all territories of the Northeast India, Nagaland too has its own share of legends and stories. Each Naga village had their independent system of governing. It was only in the 19th century that there came a change in the history of the Nagas, when the British appeared on the scene. Nagaland too, did not remain untouched by the revolt of 1857 and later in the struggle for freedom. After independence in 1947, this territory was made a centrally administered area under the Governor of Assam.¹

The State of Nagaland was formally inaugurated on December 1st, 1963, as the 16th State of the Indian Union. With statehood, a sense of self- attainment was achieved among the Nagas, and within a short span of a decade and a half there had been tremendous changes. Today the State consists of 11 (Eleven) Administrative Districts, with Kohima being the State capital.

Topography of Nagaland is similar to that of any young mountain terrain features with

high hills, sharp crest ridges, deep gorges and narrow valleys. Bearing a few hundred square kilometres of plains along the foothills in the western part of the State and in the valleys along the riverbeds, the entire state is covered with high hill ranges. The climate is pleasant except for a few small regions in the foot hills.

People

The indigenous people of the state are commonly known as 'Nagas'. They are tribesmen belonging to the Indo-Mongolian group of people. They have been for centuries dwelling in the land they inhabit today. They were formerly head hunters, and that is about all that the outside people knew about them. They had a free and an independent outlook on life. They are cheerful and have a sense of hospitality beyond their resources. They have an instinct for colour, love of music, rhythm and dance. Although, most of the Nagas have now become Christians, they still preserve some of the remnants of their early animist and ancient culture.²

The major tribes are Angami, Ao, Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiammungan, Kuki, Konyak, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchunger, Zelaing, Pochuri and Rongmai. Each of the 16 odd tribes and sub- tribes that dwell in the hill state of Nagaland can easily be distinguished by the colourful and intricately designed costumes, jewellery and beads that they adorn. The creative talents and love of colours have propelled the younger generation of today to blend the



ancestral motifs with modern appeal bringing out beautiful mix of the past and the present. These tribes and sub-tribes have their own distinctive dialects and cultural features.³ Greirson (1927) classified the Naga dialects in the Tibeto-Burman family, dividing them into three groups: The western sub group, the central subgroup and the Eastern subgroup.⁴

Culture

The Naga tribes were endowed with a very rich heritage that had been handed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition. They do not possess any written history but what little we know of came through the folksongs, folklore and dances, British administrators/writers, documents, reports, research works and local writers.

Colorful life and culture are an integral part of the Naga tribes of Nagaland. These 16 tribes are different and unique in their customs and traditions. These customs and traditions are further translated into festivals which revolve around their agriculture cycle. Songs and dance form the soul of these festivals through which their oral history has been passed down the generation.

The 16 tribes and several sub-tribes in Nagaland differ so much from tribe to tribe, yet there are similarities in many aspects. Each tribe have their dialect entirely different from the other. In fact, even among the villages of the same tribe, there are differences. Each tribe is distinct as well, in terms of culture, tradition and social life. Naga traditional society was characterized by equality, devoid of class or caste society. Traditionally, the Naga social unit was not the tribe but the village. The village and not the tribe was the sole political and social unit.⁵

Each tribe in Nagaland is distinct in character in terms of their customs, traditions, language and dress. They differ so much from tribe to tribe, yet there are similarities. The Naga society is non-class, non-caste with autonomous culture. Each tribe comprises of a number of villages and are bound together by political, social and

religious ties.⁶

Ramunny, Murkot, in 'The world of Nagas', describes the varied pattern of village administration ranging from near dictatorship to most liberal democracy. In many villages the most important indigenous institution was the Morung or the dormitory for the unmarried young men. They served as clubs, guard house, training place in art, discipline and for several ceremonial purposes.⁷

Each village had their own indigenous institutions of village council. These councils composed of elders representing the clan and khel (sectors), had both judiciary and executive responsibilities. They direct the co-operative actions and regulate the village life. In Nagaland the village council, in fact, provides the basic machinery for local self government. The ancient Naga people though, unaware of the democratic principles of western civilization lived and were govern by democratic principles and practices since time immemorial.⁸

They were and still are people fond of social and community life. Their social life was marked by traditional institutions, feast of merit, traditional festivals and games. There were varieties of festivals celebrated throughout the year by different tribes. Each tribe had a number of festivals of its own. Some of these festivals are still being celebrated by the different tribe of Nagaland. Some important festivals are sekrenyi of the Angami tribe, moatsu of the Ao tribe, tokhumonyu of the Loath tribe, tuluni of the Sumi tribe, etc.

The festivals of the tribe in Nagaland differ in their timings of celebration but are still found to be celebrated even today.

Table

Important Festivals And Time Of Celebration

Tribe	Festivals	Month
Angami	Sekrenyi	February 25 th
Ao	Moatsu	May 1 st Week
Chakhesang	Sukhruhnye Tsukhenyie	January 15 th April 24 th
Chang	Naknyulem	July 29 th -31 st
Khiamniung	Tsokum	October 1 st



an		Week
Kuki	Mimkut	January 17 th
Konyak	Aoleang Monyu	April 1 st Week
Lotha	Tokhu Emong	November 7 th
Phom	Monyu	April 1 st Week
Pochury	Yemshe	October 1 st
Rengma	Ngada	November last
Sumi	Tuluni	July
Sangtam	Amongmong	September 1 st week
Yimchungru	Metemiu	
Zeleiangrong	Meilinyi/Hega	February October

Music, art, beads, ornaments are an integral part of the Naga people. They were singing and dancing people in times of joy, victory and sorrow. The folklores, folk dances and folk tales eulogizing ancestors, brave deeds of warriors, depicting scenes, famous events, were a great source of information and projects the rich and unique Naga culture.⁹

Naga society is patriarchal and matrilineal. The social customs here differ widely from those in other parts of the country. Also, isolated from the other, has made the Naga tribes' lifestyle different from each other. Inheritance and land ownership are fields in which Nagaland observes its own usage. The tribes were also not immune to the values of materialistic values of modernity. Thus, a number of social values of the traditional Naga tribe had also undergone changes bringing about a drastic change in the value patterns of the people.

Religion

The traditional faith of the Naga was termed as 'animism'. They did not worship any form or figure, nor did they belong to any major religion of the world, but like all other tribes of the world they believed and feared the spirits. They believed that the spirits were present in all nature and thus respected it. Nature dictated the various activities to be carried out in the village. Today, more than 90% of the people of Nagaland are Christians but there are still a few in some villages that still follow the traditional beliefs.

Traditionally, the religious beliefs of the people regulated their social and individual life. The various festivals celebrated with strict traditional rites and rituals by the ancient Naga are today being celebrated with interwoven secular rites and rituals.¹⁰

Population

As per the Provisional Population Totals of census 2011, the total population of the State stood at 1,980,602, comprising of 1025707 males and 954895 female. Of this, the rural population stands at 1,406,861 and the urban population 573,741. The rural population constitutes 71.03% of the total population and the urban population 28.97%. The decadal growth rate of Nagaland during 2001 to 2011 is 0.47%.

Literacy

The literacy rate of Nagaland as per to the Provisional Population Totals of census 2011 is 80.11%, a considerable jump from the 67.11% recorded in 2001 census. The literacy rate in rural areas in 2011 stands at 75.86% whereas in urban areas it is 90.21%. As in 2001, the male literacy rate (83.29%) continues to be higher than the female (76.69%). In 2011 however, the gap between the male and female literacy rate in Nagaland (6.60 points) is not as wide as at the National level (16.68%).¹¹

Education

Before the advent of the British, Naga people had no formal education. They had a number of indigenous institutions in each village, which was responsible in the education of the village people. The most important of institution in the Naga villages was the 'Morung', which has been translated as 'male dormitory'. It was here that some kind of informal education was carried out for the adolescent boys. These institutions evolved from a very primitive stage. These indigenous institutions trained the young male to build up their life with very strong community-based approach and established a deep sense of cooperative relationship among them. This institution occupied the central position in the village organisation and administration as an institutionalised



mechanism of social control and socialised education. Education in the ancient periods was in the form of discourse between the elders and the younger generation through oral communication. The village community and the elders played a vital role in the education of the younger generation.

It was in such a scenario that the British arrived into the land of the Naga tribes. The real changes in the field of education were brought by the Christian missionaries. The first American missionary to arrive in Nagaland was Rev. E.C Clark, who ventured into the territory in 1872, even before the British could set up their permanent headquarters which was in 1878. The missionaries not only influenced the Naga people in their faith but education became a corollary. The first formal school was established at Impur in the year 1882 and thereafter there was gradual progress in the field of formal education in Nagaland.¹²

The growth of formal education got its momentum after the attainment of Statehood in 1963. The Government of Nagaland had established a number of schools all over the state. There were only two colleges before the attainment of statehood. The first college being, 'Fazl Ali College', in the year 1959, followed by, 'Kohima Science College', in 1961. There after there was considerable increase in the establishment of colleges. Today there are a number of institutions all over the state. Nagaland has had tremendous increase in the literacy rate over the years. The literacy rate was only 27.40% in 1971, with an increase to 67.11% in the 21st century, and a considerable jump to 80.11% in 2011.¹³

Condition of women

Women in Naga society mostly had the same conduct of duty, which started from her youth. It was her duty to have knowledge on traditional customs such as house hold chores, weaving and making clothiers, participating with men in agricultural field works and festivities etc. As a mother she had to undergo certain rituals during the birth of her child to have a good

future. Most of Naga tribes restrict women to have the right to possessions of wealth and restrict their presence in performing certain strict gennas (No work days). Most of Naga girls had to keep their and. Shaved until her marriage or attaining marriageable age. These were some of the few similarities found among the Nagas living in Nagaland since the olden days and till today's also and these Clements in them note only denotes their close relation racially and culturally among themselves but also with the other Nagas living in other parts of North east India.¹⁴

Trait of head hunting

Since time immemorial the Nagas were head hunters. The study of Naga history becomes incomplete without mentioning about this head-hunting activity. This was one of the chief characteristics of their daily lives. They had strong faith in the soul and the head being the holder of the soul, heads were acquired. Blessings were believed to be bestowed from above fertility in land as well as over the house held once head were brought home. The head of women was considered more precious as it would stimulate and abundance of food crape, would stimulate and abundance of food crape, the warrior's insignia.¹¹ Village feuds were not uncommon. Hitherto the village youth kept guard of their village in times of peril. Not only village feuds but feuds was also quite frequent never the less, it has been reasoned that head-hunting was a part of their culture and not a sport, though some people say that it was a sport for the brave, the religious and the death defying warriors. Head hunting was the reason people lived in fear and the cause of many unnatural deaths. The other reasons for head hunting were subjugation of any enemy village, memorial benefits and also trade advantages.¹⁵

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