

## ROLE OF NAGA WOMEN INDICATING IMPENDING VIOLENCE

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### Abstract

Role assigned to a person indicates his/her status. Naga women's roles, especially in a conflict ridden situation, during the pre-British, British and post-British period are analysed in this article. This study describes the role taken by the Naga women for bringing peace only after the peace and tranquillity of the society was disturbed. But, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325<sup>2</sup> (UNSCR, 2000) emphasizes the pivotal role the women should play in not only conflict management and conflict resolution but in social, economical and political aspects too. Lack of women's participation is a threat to future peace and tranquillity in addition to growth and development. Long-term political exclusion of women, economic discriminations, discrepancies between men and women and women's educational levels or place in the work place give warning of the impending conflict in the near future (*Schemeidl et al. 2002*). In the light of the above hypothesis, the article analyses the roles assigned to Naga women, with the assumption that the above hypothesis is true. Therefore, it is a descriptive study based on the reflection, compare that with the present and the identified gaps in the light of the aforementioned hypothesis for creating greater awareness among the mass. It concludes stating that though the Naga women are at par with the contemporary women in many respects, till there are roles yet to be played by them that would bring their society more peaceful and prosperous.

**Keywords:** *Naga, women, violence*

Terminologies: Naga: A tribal name of an ethnic group associated to the North Eastern part of India and North Western Myanmar; Mahatma Gandhi: An Indian freedom fighter against British colonial rule; Dem/Pukerlia: Among the Zeliang – a Naga tribe, Women involved in peace making are known by these terms; Rani Gaidinliu: A Naga political and spiritual female leader from Zeliang Naga tribe who fought against the British colonial occupation; Tangkhul: One of the Naga tribes; Dobashis: Individuals, who are well versed in the Naga customary laws, appointed by the government to advise the officers in the settlement of cases.

Naga Hills, the area where about 40 different Naga tribes lived, have now been fragmented into and straddling on the lands of some Indian States and Burma. Nagas, living in India, challenged the colonial regime and have been challenging the post-colonial India's political control, asserting their independence and claiming the right to self-determination. This has resulted into continuous conflicts between India and Naga political and social groups causing the loss of numerous precious lives, assets, peace and tranquillity. The struggle for independence and conflict has been continuing till today. The loss might be much more, had the Naga women not intervened into this struggle. Naga women, who constitute half the population of Nagaland, are for Von (1976) "the most renowned in South Asia in peace making". More than needed have been penned down on the violation of human rights, especially the rights of the more vulnerable sections of society – women and children. Peace is the cause of

women but also at the cost of women and thus women are the better sensors and indicators of violence and peace makers too. Many studies have been conducted on the impact of violence on women, children, civilians, role of women in peace making, etc. Violence, ultimately, brings changes in the role of women and likewise 'roles taken by women' too indicates impending violence. But, this violence is not necessarily that of it perpetrated by the outside agencies but sometimes by the hidden forces within the society in the form of socio-cultural practices. Therefore, the roles ascribed to Naga women in their society and by their society need a careful study and that would reflect the violence caused by the forces within and outside. The present reflection tries to place this paper on the following platforms: the role of Naga women before the advent of colonialism and Christianity; the role of Naga women during the occupancy of colonial forces till today in resolving conflicts and the roles ascribed to Naga women in comparison to the contemporary women during the present period. Despite, being the role of Naga women discussed in two periods – past and present, this paper does not aim at demarcating these two periods accurately in clear terms but moving the reflection along the purpose, i.e. the changing role of Naga women as demanded by time. In the course of time, there are some positive changes taken place but still stagnant in moving towards some desirable changes. Thus, there is an implication of creating awareness about what is denied from the Naga women that is yet to be remote to them, that they deserve, should desire and be reserved for them to dignify them before the contemporary women.

Naga Women in the Past: Before the advent of the British and the Christian missionaries, it is said that Nagas lived in fortified villages and there was pure democracy. Equality prevailed and there found a classless society within every village. The chief and peasants worked together and the egalitarian culture prevailed. Everyone was economically independent and there was a great community feeling and living. There were well found systems of legislations, judiciary and administration, howsoever simple they were, that would suffice the need of their simple and rustic social life. Every Naga village was an independent unit and ruled on democratic principles. Every Indian village was envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi to be independent unit and many Naga villages were like the model democratic village contemplated by the Mahatma. Till today Naga people are identified and taken as a pride to be identified by their village.

Naga women were of great dignity in the past. They engendered the role of women to looking after the daily needs and house-hold chores, bringing up children, being a docile wife to their husbands beside working in the field. But, there was no role assigned traditionally to women on public affairs – decision making, judiciary, and administration. The women were the victims of culture as they had no legitimacy to inherit the ancestral immovable properties, to leave their husband's home in case of divorce, to repudiate all her deceased husband's properties in case of marrying after her widowhood. Talking on one side about her dignity and another side about her being neglected in some of the areas may seem to be contradictory to one another, but though these practices seem to be vicious and violations of women's rights, some of the practices were well justified for that period and context and founded on the great wisdom of their ancestors. Naga society is a patrilineal society, that exists a patriarchal

type of authority and thus power and decision making is still remained at the domain of men folks. In the past, this practice was augmented by the headhunting practice.

But, women were socially peacemakers in the past, specially termed as 'demi' or the 'pukrelia' (Kikon Dolly, 2000). However, Naga women's participation in public affairs was regarded as an ill omen, and women's handling of weapons was taboo. Among the Zeliangrong, it was taboo to kill a 'demi' and 'demis' were the only ones allowed to carry the head of the slain to the bereaved family. Among the Tangkhul, a pukrelia'- ' a woman married to a man from a different clan of her, would intervene in the midst of a battle holding a 'Y' shaped stick and appealing for an end to violence between men who were her kin through blood or marriage (Luithui, S., 2000). They carried the authority to stop violence and if anyone dared to raise a weapon after that, he was ostracised. Though, she is not in decision making and other public affairs of men, they got into peace building by resolving the conflicts brought by and between men.

Naga Women in the Present: But, during the course of time changes are unavoidable and Naga women are not exceptional. In a society, changes take place in the course of time and no society is static. It was taboo, in the past, for women to carry weapons but Naga social expectations and compulsions made women to carry arms when their peaceful living was under threat. Now, this change has been assimilated and internalized. One of the renowned women, the charismatic Rani Gaidinliu, who took arms and power in her hands by breaking the taboo of her days, is admired for her venture, heroism, and patriotism. Therefore, change is the only factor that does not change but everything else and everyone needs to adapt to or adopt something new in the course of time and Nagas are not expected to be an exception.

Social change is indicated by the changes in the roles, rules, and functions of the society. As Heraclites says, "No man ever steps into the same river twice". Change, desirable or undesirable, is unavoidable and without change every society is pushed back to social backwardness. Therefore, a society needs to adopt the desirable changes and adapt to undesirable and unavoidable changes occurring around and this is done in a society through the process of enculturation, acculturation and socialization. Advent of Christianity, education and modernization caused changes in general and in the status and role of Naga women too. Naga society, too is exposed to modernisation and experiencing abrupt changes due to the intervention of many people from different regions and cultures that brought greater mobility in education, economy and other aspects of life. Therefore, many changes have been taking place at all spheres of life.

Observation of the current status of women reveals that, comparing the contemporary women from the other states of India, Naga women are not limited with social prejudices. There has been comparatively less crimes on women, nothing much heard of female infanticide, dowry, child marriage, interference of tribal identity or economic status on marriage, etc. Naga women enjoy more freedom than the contemporary women around and no limitation was put on female education, matrimonial decision making and free movement. They are not stigmatised on widowhood or spinsterhood, barrenness, widow's remarriage, divorce, etc. In the past, they had never involved in policy making, settling of disputes or in any decision making. These traditional roles of Naga women have been carried on till now with an exception that many women work elsewhere other than agricultural fields for their economic improvement and for this they empowered themselves through education. But the 'political power and

authority' were the prerogative of men and still being continued in the modern Naga society. But, still there are some aspects that should look for changes. One such, that resists change, is the active political participation of women or the resistance to involve women in the political decision making process.

Naga Women during Conflicts: International community had realized the pertinent role of women and found their role as the fountainhead of peace and thus development. Therefore, the United Nations' Member States anonymously adopted the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325<sup>2</sup> (UNSCR, 2000) on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2000. This is a landmark international legal framework that addresses not only the inordinate impact of war on women, but also the pivotal role women should and do play in conflict management, conflict resolution and sustainable peace. The first operational clause of the UNSCR, 1325 goes as this:

*“Urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.”* (UNSCR, 2000)

As UNSCR 1325 and 1820 do not provide any clear mechanisms for monitoring implementations and ensuring accountability, the UN Secretary-General asked for the formulation of National Action Plans (UNSCR, 2008). Since 2005, 17 countries have adopted National Action Plans on the implementation of the Security Council Resolution, 1325. Several other countries are in the pipeline for adopting the National Action Plans. The goal of the US National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security is as simple as it is profound.

*“to empower half the world’s population or equal partners in preventing conflict and building peace in countries threatened and affected by war, violence, and insecurity. Achieving this goal is critical to our national and global security.”* (USA, 2011)

The above two citations, at the surface level, indicate the need for women’s participation as a cure and not prevention. But, the four pillars<sup>5</sup> of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which reaffirm ‘the important role of women, not only, in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and peace building but something much deeper, which are:

**Participation:** Participation women at all levels in decision making, including in national, regional, and international institutions, in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict, in peace negotiations, in peace operations, as soldiers, police, and civilians; and as Special Representatives of the U.N. Secretary-General.

**Protection:** Protection of women and girls from sexual and gender based violence, including in emergency and humanitarian situations, such as in refugee camps.

**Prevention:** To improve intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women, including by prosecuting those responsible for violations of international law; strengthening women’s rights under national law; and supporting local women’s peace initiatives and conflict resolution processes.

**Relief and Recovery:** To address international crises through a gendered lens, including by respecting the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps, and taking into account the particular needs of women and girls in the design of refugee camps and settlement.

In the modern period, Nagaland has been witnessing many armed conflicts between the state and non-state actors and among the different factions of non-state actors for about six decades. During the period of conflict, the role of exclusive women's organizations, both the governmental and non-governmental, has been very significant. This is contrary to the women's potential experienced in many countries where the women organisations lack the confidence to engage in conflict prevention efforts in a strategic manner. But, during this modern conflict period, Naga women have, greatly, been taking the role of i. protecting the communities through informal mediation between the state and non-state actors.ii. mediating armed non-state actors to adjure violenceiii. confronting Indian security forces for the safety of the civiliansiv. venturing to meet underground armed groups for making corrective action and follow non-violencev. shaping and sustaining the formal peace processvi. mobilizing for peace and reconciliation Conflict prevention is done at two levels- operational prevention level and structural prevention level (Schmid, 1998).

Operational prevention or Direct prevention - measures to address immediate crises. (e.g. sending high level diplomatic missions to mediate between parties, using economic tools such as sanction, inducements, or collecting weapons and demobilising fighting units), and employing forceful measures such as deploying peacekeepers to a region;

Structural prevention or Root causes prevention-addresses root causes such as poverty, political repression (here repression of women's freedom) and uneven distribution of resources, which can, if left unattended, escalate into violence.

Modern Naga women have greatly contributed at the operational level, as done traditionally, by sending her diplomatic mission to mediate between parties and successfully averted violence temporarily on many occasions and thereby bringing peace. At the second Naga Consultative Meeting convened by the Issak-Muivah group in Bangkok in January 2001, Th.Muivah, the Secretary of the NSCN (IM), affirmed that "In all stages of political negotiations the Naga people will be consulted and their participation sought for better understanding so that the past mistakes may not be repeated and transparency ensured". Here, 'people' includes women too as the NSCN (IM) included women in the Third Bangkok Consultative Meeting in May 2003. By this the importance of women's role is recognized officially by one of the warring groups.

Role of Naga Women in Decision Making: The politics of the Naga people are characterise by parallel structures of authority, in which the modern Nagaland state structure and bureaucracy are in many ways subordinate to the authority of the traditional structure of tribal power. Democratically elected/nominated village and tribal councils that are constituted by men, continue to regulate their social life. There is no women representative in the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. In the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, the Wold's governments agreed to a minimum quota of 30% women in positions at decision making levels, a target that is far from being realized.

As Naga women's involvement in decision making bodies found the least, the Nagaland State Assembly had passed the Nagaland Municipal (Amendment) Act, 2006 whereby 33% of seats in the civil bodies were reserved for women. The Honourable Justice KK.Sema, the former Judge of Supreme Court of India and Chairman of UP Human Rights' Commission, has said, "...Nagas are no more infants, the Nagas, State and Legislature are matured and passing an Act like Nagaland Municipal Act where provisions are

*made for the reservation of seats for women is a sign of maturity. However, a change in mindset is the need of the hour as time abs come for Nagas to think globally and act locally.”*

However, the implementation has been failing till today as there has been great opposition and objection to this. In 1993, a constitutional amendment in India called for a random of one third of village council leader, or ‘pradhan’. Positions in gram panchayat to be reserved for women. The Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act, 1978 was enacted to empower the traditional village institutions and village courts guided by customary law in order to make the maximum utilization of governing bodies existing at that point of time. The village administration was further placed under the men fold with the complete exclusion of women.

A little sigh of relief and the official inclusion of women in administration is the inclusion of women in the Village Development Board (VDB). Through this, women are offered power to plan development schemes for themselves, which are commonly called ‘grassroots planning’. A field study conducted by Hibo from Nagaland reveals that the women are still not included in the Village Development Block (VDB) in reality but as in times they are called for signing the papers only. The VDB women funds are managed by the Village Women Society. Many women are not found aware of any future plans for the proper investment of the VDB women funds nor they could do something good for the welfare of the downtrodden women and many village women keep safe distance at the actual practice of VDB related decision making level.

Evidence from around the world and across cultures, shows that integrating women and gender consideration into peace-building processes helps in promoting democratic governance and long-term stability. In order to achieve these goals, women need to be able to play a role in building and participating in the full range of decision-making institutions in their countries. But the political participation of Naga women is still in its nascent stage as none was found the State Legislative Assembly and nor elected ever to represent in the State Assembly in spite of about 20 of them having been contested in the election since the statehood.

The UNSCR (2000) asserts that the one and the foremost one of the indicators is the women’s participation at all levels of decision-making in the government and another is the ‘domestication of specific and relevant regional and international laws, resolutions and conventions’. This is evidenced and expected to bring peace and less conflicts by the international community. Nagas, who are more open to positive changes, advanced in thinking and high mobility in different sectors of life, seem to be reluctant to realize the reality of women’s role in political participation due to reasons known to them. This reluctance is assumed not in the mindset of male members alone but the female too.

Role in Customary Adjudication: Naga women did not have any role in the official functioning of traditional institutions though all members of the community were considered equal in status to one another. To legitimise the traditional systems existed in each village, the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act 1978 was enacted to preserve and practice customary practices and therefore, no woman could be member of the Village Council. Therefore, women are completely excluded in adjudication processes done through customary practices. *Dobashās* an unique institution of Nagaland and this is not a traditional one and originally founded by the British.

*Dobashis* became deliverers of justice, or judgement in many disputes in the course of time. There are more than 2000 *Dobashis* serving in Nagaland. A tribal union of Nagaland came with the strong opposition to the appointment of a woman *Dobashi*. Therefore, women are completely ostracised in the traditional adjudication process too (The Nagaland Post, 2010).

**Role in the Churches:** The role of women in the churches has always been defined in large measure by the traditional role of women. The subordinate role played by them in traditional society is being reflected in the role allowed to them by the men who controlled the church. In many churches, deacons are chosen in the way the members of the traditional village council used to be chosen. Rentyh Keizare (1989) says, "If deacons are chosen as the village council used to be chosen, and if the deacons themselves exercise the power as the village councillors in the village councils, that is not according to the teaching of the New Testament and the Baptist Church". Thus, it can be concluded that the church administration too is infused with the traditional patriarchal system.

Therefore, it is clear that the peace is built in a nation where there is women's equal participation ensured in all the spheres of life and in the process of bringing peace in a conflict ridden society, the women's role is unavoidable and significant. Therefore, the aforementioned 'four pillars' of UNSCR, 1325 emphasizes the role of women in resolving conflicts, they give more emphasize on prevention than cure and the prevention is expected through women's active participation in decision making not only after conflicts but before conflicts too. Women's right to participation is the right that need not be given nor received but to be claimed by women and to be recognized by others.

**Women as Conflict Indicators:** A key element in understanding the context and situation in an escalating conflict is the ability to read warning signs of trouble and indicators of increasing tension or violence, which is the basis for "conflict early warning analysis" (Schmid Alex, 1998). One of the three hypotheses presented in favour of using gender indicators in conflict analysis in a study by International Alert and the Swiss Peace Foundation, is stated below:

*"Where women are particularly discriminated against or targeted, inclusion of gender perspectives can help ensure that discriminatory policies are not perpetuated in post conflict situations and that "newly established freedoms" are not reversed. These indicators include long-term political exclusion of women, economic discriminations (e.g. laws prohibiting from inheriting property), discrepancies between men and women's educational levels or place in the work place. These indicators give a warning of the impending conflict in the near future" (Schemeidl et al. 2002).*

Viewing the current status of Naga women through the above hypothesis as a theory, Naga women should be prepared by themselves for participation in political decision making for which they need to be empowered, encouraged, supported and motivated by all.

### **The Way Forward**

The apathy of a section of the society in women's taking new roles is due to the gap in knowledge between ancient and modern values with respect to time. This requires effective awareness programmes. These programmes should be conducted sincerely with the help of Nagaland State Women's Commission, NGOs, teachers, youth, volunteers, etc from the grassroots level for both the genders; An organization,

representing the entire women of the state, should be formed where Naga women's participation is encouraged and ensured without any barriers; Religious institutions should be advised not to follow the traditional village system to avoid giving birth to a new religious sect in future. These institutions should be the places of love, care and social justice for every member. As almost every woman is a member of one or the other religious institutions, reforms could be started from the religious institutions; In Village Development Board, the mandatory percentage of women members is less as it could be done proportionate to the number of adult members of the village. Women could be trained by the outside agencies, both the government and non-government, for the better administration and utilization of the funds. Women's involvement should be strengthened especially in areas of decision making at the village level; Educational Institutions should offer open education courses for the uneducated women, educated married women and home makers who want to continue their education.

### **Conclusion**

The roles of Naga women have changed tremendously except in limited but crucial areas. The static traditional practices, violating the basic rights of women, are not due to the attitude of men folk alone but also of the female too. Only a creamy layer of elite women participates and activates for a change but many women do neither know the existence of these organizations nor know the roles. Therefore, participation at all levels, enunciated by the international organizations, is not found and that is crucial for conflict prevention, conflict resolution and future conflict avoidance. The new roles taken by the women in the VDB are not a complete success though the women could do better. Therefore, women need to be empowered not only by participation but also by capacity building. This should be done not by women alone but also the men as men and women are complementary. There are many men waiting and wanting for the women's empowerment. As there are men to shoulder the women's struggle for emancipation, women could utilize their support in reaching their goals. Though parallel women's associations or organizations are suggested, at the higher level both men's and women's organizations should work together in making decisions. Reluctance of women's participation and their negative attitude in participation is highly found in writing, observations and studies. This may be due to the unconscious submission to traditional practices and this needs a change from the women folk too. This is not brought by education alone but by the change of mindset. Some of the women's organizations, as found in many writings on Naga women, having the syndrome "saving the sons' of the soil' should be changed to 'saving the children of the soil'. To do justice to the children, able women from all walks of life, irrespective of any status, need to participate in the decision making process too. Finally, had there been no violence by the intruders and had Nagaland be freed at the British leaving India, the existing women's associations may not have been formed nor we might have had the minimum role played in VDBs. The politically free Nagaland might have been completely patriarchal. Therefore, the impact of violence has also awakened the women and initiated the women's movement. Emancipation is possible by women's effective participation only.

May The Naga Women Arise and Awake!



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