

## Naga Women and the Peace Making Process

Ankita Borgohain

Research Scholar  
Department of History  
Gauhati University.

### Abstract

The paper highlights the role played by the Naga Women groups in the Peace making process of the state. In the patriarchal society where men is regarded as the head and the discussion making body, the women of Nagaland had made a significant contribution in the process of peacemaking in the state. Right from the very beginning, it is seen that Nagaland had been struggling to gain its independence. The idea of separate nation has embedded the Naga Community from the time India had attained its independence. Women in the meanwhile also had contributed in every possible ways to help the state to attain its aims and objectives.

**Keyword:** Women, Nagaland, Peace process, NMA

### Introduction:

The Nagas had a long struggle for independence and self determination. Although Nagaland was declared as an independent state in 1963, they have been claiming their rights to gain the desired goals. The Nagas have a belief that they are a group of people with distinct identity, history very different from the political and cultural ethos of India.<sup>1</sup> Government of India have failed in negotiating various groups of Naga people with the State. Different agreements and ceasefire were made but it didn't accomplish the given demands of the state. Ceasefires have been signed with the dominant group of the Nagas (NSCN-IM), which is a faction of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim. It has been annually renewed since 1997 to 2001, while a separate agreement was made with a smaller faction in 2001.<sup>2</sup> None the less, the violence conflict still prevails. In different countries around the world that has experienced violence, conflict women have always tried to bring about peace. Starting from peace rallies to boycotting and staging strikes they have always been a part of the peace process. Their contributions cannot be overlooked in this regard. Glimpsing the world view of countries seeking peace such as in Isreal-Palaestine conflict as well as in ethnic conflict ridden zone of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the women groups such as "Women in Black" have been actively

participated.<sup>3</sup> Women's organisations in Peru have pressured the government to halt the conflict and establish a democratic process in the country. They promoted peace through the media and other forms of communication, and they were also directly involved in humanitarian efforts.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1950s, a woman named Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama began the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. She had refused to comply with racist regulations that required Blacks to relinquish even bus seats when a white passenger boarded the vehicle despite paying the same bus money. When she was convicted of breaking the law, she challenged the law itself, which was followed by a boycott of the bus system organised by Martin Luther King Junior, who was then unknown. The boycott lasted 381 days, and the legal challenges resulted in a US Supreme Court decision forcing Montgomery to desegregate its bus system and ending "Jim Crow" laws that discriminated against blacks and whites in public places across the south. In addition to fighting apartheid, women in South Africa actively battled against measures that limited their mobility. In the area, a web-archive has been set up to document the efforts of those unknown, unnamed, and unsung women campaigners who helped bring the South African peace agreement to fruition.<sup>5</sup> Sri Lankan women, too, have been participating in peace initiatives in their troubled country since the

beginning. Multiple organisations representing various agendas and identities participated in women's activism in Sri Lanka, and they occasionally came together strategically to lobby for shared concerns. Kumudini Samuel, a human rights activist and co-coordinator of the Woman and Media Collective, had meticulously chronicled the early 1980s activities of the Mother's Front of Sri Lanka, which campaigned for peace and demanded the return of their sons who had gone missing in the north.<sup>6</sup> Women's Action Committee, a leftist women's group founded in 1982, worked on topics such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979), the release of female convicts, and the rehabilitation of raped women in the north and east. Since those early efforts, with repeated failures of peace negotiations, women's groups have increased their demand for peace, and their action has ranged from campaigning for law reform to following up on individual cases of wartime brutality against women throughout the last two decades. Mothers in the north have banded together to seek the return of their "disappeared" sons, while mothers of troops in the Sri Lankan military actively sought information on their missing sons. Women living in conflict zones have unique humanitarian needs, which are being addressed by various groups. These organisations have formed cross-ethnic bonds and stated and exhibited solidarity with one another's demands. Despite the numerous initiatives that women have taken to bring order to their society, they have been excluded from all formal peace talks.<sup>7</sup> It goes on to illustrate that women in north east India were not alone in trying to resolve social issues. The women of Northeast India, particularly the Naga women didn't remain in the back front in this regard. The women folk basically the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) had worked together to negotiate peace, sustain the ceasefire and bring about negotiation among the groups.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Khasi, Assamese, Mizo and Manipur women have come out of their houses formed associations and made large scale participation.

### History Of Conflict

Looking back in the history of the Nagas, they as a freedom loving group always wanted to remain aloof. The Ahoms in the pre-colonial times to the Britishers in the colonial period did not bother to interfere in their matters. They adopted a policy of non-interference unless they found the place to be of any strategic importance to them.<sup>9</sup> There was little effort by the British to integrate, modernize, or administer this area. They hardly paid attention to the tribal people of the Northeast and did not even consider them members of the political community of India.

The British were the first to refer to the Nagas, a group of at least 40 ethnic tribes dwelling between the Chindwin and Brahmaputra plains.<sup>10</sup> They were oblivious to the fact that these people belonged to various tribes and, as a result, had different lifestyles and customs. The Angami, Ao, Rengma, Konyak, Tangkhul, and Sema are among the Naga tribes with the most people. As a result, they have been demanding independence from the British, who have rejected their demands and pushed them out of mainstream Indian politics. The Naga demands were only supported by Subhas Chandra Bose, when he made the Naga leader Phizo, but as Subhas Chandra Bose got disappeared from the mainstream political scenario, the Naga question remains unsolved.<sup>11</sup>

In the early decades of the nineteenth century when the Indian National Movement was gaining its momentum and the transfer of powers from the British hands to India was on the verge of attaining, the Nagas declared that they wanted an autonomous Naga State and not to be included in the newly formed Indian territory. India attained its Independence in 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947 but the Nagas under Naga National Council had declared its independence a day before.<sup>12</sup> The Naga National Council was established in 1945, composed of various members of Naga tribes. The declared independence was condemned by various Indian leaders, which on the other hand had led to the quest for the struggles of the Nagas. The NNC then established an underground armed movement which included both the men and women. This could be considered as the first armed confrontation that took place between the Indian government and the Nagas. With the large

armed population of the Indian government compared to the handful Naga arms, the Indian government was successful in legislating the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958.<sup>13</sup> The conflict that took place have shattered the Naga population as there were massive violence such as murder of large number of civilians and the saddest part was the sexual violence against young girls, women etc.

The involvement of women, even among armed rebel factions, was a unique feature of the Naga independence fight. The Naga Hill district and the previous Tuensang division of the North Eastern Frontier Administration (NEFA) were formed into a separate state called Nagaland in 1960 as a response to this movement. After gaining statehood in 1963, the state's protests continued to grow.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, with the Indo-Sino border war and India's subsequent shift in regional ambitions, more measures to militarise the border and periphery were made. After a backlash, the Border Security Forces were established. In 1970, after the border security force was introduced, the army remained in Nagaland and till today the army still remains. However in 1973, the Shillong Accord was signed, but it did not bring the fruitful result and remained as temporary settlement only. The only result that was brought from the accord was the split in the Naga Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland into two halves, one consisting of the T. H. Muiva and Isaac Swu (NSCN-IM) and the other by Khaplang (NSCN-K). The Khaplang group had received its support from the Ao region of Mokokchung, districts of Mon and some parts of Tuensung, whereas the rest of the states support was gained by Issac-Muviah group.<sup>15</sup>

NSCN-IM under the leadership of Issac-Muviah in 1997 had signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government of India where the Khaplang faction was not included. Women's groups were actively involved in the negotiations for a ceasefire, but these women were not members of the rebel groups, rather they were part of a number of different women's peace groups in Nagaland.

#### **The Initiative And The Women:**

In the struggle for Naga Nationalist struggle every community was engaged irrespective of its gender.

Although it was a taboo for the Naga women to hold weapons, yet out of necessity they stand against their tradition. Women in large number went out of their houses, trained and joined the men in the struggle for independence. Throughout the conflict, the women suffered a lot; men were captured and women were tortured brutally. The women were left behind in the homes with the old members and children where they had to struggle for food as the armies would burn their paddy fields. Under this pressure the women supported the armed movement in many ways. In the initial days however, the NNC refused to give training to the women, but later when they women were taken and harassed from the rescues in the churches, NNC leaders started giving weapons and training for their safeguard. Later a women military and political wing was formed in 1960. Most of their works were involved in underground activities, such as training the new recruits and providing early warning if any army raid was impending.<sup>16</sup>

The Naga women had played an important role in the peace making process. It has been historically proven that women have participated in enduring peace in midst of the battles. One of the exceptional features of Naga women's interventions in conflict is the multiplicity of the peace movements that they have initiated. The best known among these organizations for peace is the Naga Mother's Association (NMA). It was founded on February 14, 1984 out of Naga women's concern for the increasing problems in Naga society. Its head office is in the Angami city of Kohima. There were no specific criteria for the membership women irrespective of being single, married or unmarried can join. The women join the association basically for the development and the betterment of their tribes.<sup>17</sup> The association consisted of a president, vice-president and a secretary who was elected for a period of four years. NMA's objective is at upholding the rights of womanhood, injustice made to the people of Nagaland, violating their human values. The women of this association also worked for the impartment of education, social evils and economic exploitation meted by the people.

At the beginning the NMA, focused on various social evils in the society that included awareness

on drugs, HIV/AIDS etc. they campaigned in masses from villages to towns. They even run a drug rehabilitation centre.<sup>18</sup> Grounded as mothers, their peacemaking activities included awareness of the peace process, promoting reconciliation of the community level. They kept themselves away from any sort of radical agenda and thus for this attitude of theirs they got criticised by other organizations etc.

The NMA from its very beginning had been mediating between the Government of India and various Naga groups. Many achievements have been credited to the association such as in case of the age limit of the jobs, they became the mediator between the Naga Students Federation and the Government of India. They were successful in fulfilling the demand as per the age limit was increased to 30 years and to lower the pensionable age to 57 years. Another important achievement of the association was confronting the Armed forces. The NMA women had directly intervened in the villages and townships to become a human barrier between the civilians and soldiers. They physically prevented local boys from being arrested to face execution and torture. They appealed for the removal of army posts in villages and towns as these armed post often led to skirmish among the civilians, leading it to a disturbed atmosphere of violence.<sup>19</sup>

Women in the villages appeal the underground groups by walking into their camps and pleading them to not make arm encampment. On the other hand the women in the town areas, along with the elder leaders joined the political talks and took strategic efforts to negotiate peace with the underground arms. They appealed them to take stop violence and provoke them to make corrections to the wrong they did to the common civilians. The NMA women not only did the mediating role they even further made efforts to build communication with other groups of women from different parts of Northeast and other parts of the country to work together for the upliftment of the community and safeguard the women from different kind of harassments faced by them. They form coalition with the non-naga women to rescue hostages and to promote inter-community hostages. They worked together for the human rights, education of the womenfolk. By organizing

many events and campaigns they spread the message that Naga cannot gain their peace without gaining peace for all. Instances are referred as when the Indian army came, it was the women who stepped forward between the soldiers and villagers, and they were the only group that could intervene. The women as being mothers would go to the warring factions, walk miles into their camps and pledge them not to harass and kill each other. The NMA in this situation become the bridge between the local forces and the Indian army. Women not being concern of their safety, whenever situation demands they would rush to the disturbed areas pledging for peace.

In order to deal with the underground armed groups, the village women devised a strategy for negotiations, which they termed as 'kitchen politics'.<sup>20</sup> The women used to invite the underground members to their homes of their tribes and speak. Subsequently following the ceasefire, 'kitchen politics' were further extended to facilitate dialogue between the top leaders as well. The 'kitchen politics' were somewhat successful in bring negotiation between the groups. They have raised slogan "Before you kill your brothers, kill your mothers". It gained momentum in due course of time. Instance of violence have occurred when in September 1992, a 12 hour shooting confrontation took place between the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K. It terrorised the whole village but no one dared to intervene between the two groups. The Angami Women Association then appealed the NMA to intervene. There were many such instances where NMA became the main force to bring peace.<sup>21</sup>

In 1994, a day of mourning was set aside by the NMA in memory of all those who are killed due to political conflicts, among the nagas and non-nagas to foster a feeling of healing and reconciliation. They organised a campaign with the slogan of "Shed no more Blood".<sup>22</sup> Neidonuo Angami the president of NMA appealed all the tribal organizations based in Kohima, to express forgiveness and love.

Although NMA is the largest, it is not the only women's group working towards peace in Nagaland. There many others, among them an important organization called the Naga Women's

Union in Manipur. Nagas in Manipur have tried to join the state of Nagaland which has led to violent repression against the community as a whole. The Naga Women's Union has come out strongly in favour of peace. They feel that solutions lie in political negotiations and not in violence. This took tremendous courage on their part because, as a minority group, they have hardly any support from the State Government or the rebel groups who are largely in favour of armed settlements. Silent marches were staged in the town of Kohima in August 1996. There are other women who have strongly protested against the killing of the common people by gun-wielding maniacs who take the law into their own hands (Changkija).<sup>23</sup> However, there prevailed problems working together among the AOs and Angami. The conflict between the Watsu Mongdung, an Ao women's organisation, and the NMA, which is predominantly made up of Angami women, stems from an incident in which an Ao woman was detained by police for drug trafficking and brought into custody by the NMA, which tried her under Angami common law. Some Watsu Mongdung members were confident of her innocence.<sup>24</sup> Others believed that she should have been tried according to Ao common law, even if she was guilty. Their inability to reach an agreement in the case continues to limit the scope of interventions that women can make in peace negotiations. Women's peace groups in Nagaland are able to integrate the political with the social, which helps them stay effective for longer. The NMA has made a smart transition from political to social issues. They have demonstrated against all forms of violence and human rights violations, as well as becoming crucial in the field of drug rehabilitation. Their participation in developmental initiatives has improved their efficacy as well as their acceptance in Naga society. They have gained so much respect from the people of Nagaland that they are now attempting to broker a truce between the rival NSCN factions. They've spoken out against sectarian rivalry and violence. When they appeal to the Isaac-Muivah faction or the Khaplang faction to cease the violence, they use an apolitical picture of Naga women. They don't appear to pick sides, instead appealing as mothers to put an end to Naga bloodshed. They have negotiated access

to all of Nagaland's power groupings, including the army, with great success. They've also managed to keep peace from becoming politicised. Women's peace organisations in Nagaland have also improved their effectiveness by locating themselves in traditional settings. For example, the Watsu Mongdung began in a church. In Nagaland, the church is part of the women's realm, and peace organisations have met in this customary place.

Women can maintain their legitimacy to meet in this place by locating themselves in churches, even during times of political upheaval or when curfew is declared, which happens every evening in Nagaland. When women in these communities learn of approaching army operations, they congregate in churches, which are rarely targeted and assaulted. Furthermore, the legitimacy of church gatherings is never questioned. Although differences prevailed, in case of the cause of the greater Nagalism, the Naga society groups actively participated in Delhi every year as the ceasefire was annually renewed and extended. NMA and NWUM have directly addressed the Indian Prime Minister and the chairman of Isaac-Muivah group to act upon the ceasefire with sincerity and transparency. They appealed to end the ceasefire violations and ongoing violence against civilians.<sup>25</sup> The associations urged both the parties to create an atmosphere more conducive for peace. They have campaigned to end the terror of the Indian Army upon the civilians. They even urged to ban on the NSCN. Thus, it can be said that the women associations have been trying through all measures to bring about peace and negotiations among various Naga groups and Indian Government.

#### **Conclusion:**

The Naga women have succeeded in peace movements as these movements do not challenge the traditional role of women but instead negotiate spaces within these roles. As a traditional role peacemaking in the family has always fallen on women's shoulders. They solve the issues that make disturbances in the family and then in the society. This part of Naga women's traditional roles has been utilised for modern political goals by Naga women. As mothers, wives, and sisters, they make a plea for peace. They

always use personal language in their speech. Because they do not appear to threaten traditional gender roles, their leadership in these organisations is accepted without condemnation. In actuality, they are challenging such roles and are gradually making their way into public life in a more official manner.

Women's experiences in peace organizations have helped them learn to question, and in certain cases, even to address their absence from decision-making bodies. One of NMA's members ran for office and was elected as the first chairwoman of the Kohima City Council. Another member of NWU has been elected to the Moyon Village Council for the first time. This shows that women in peace movements have the potential to not only redefine peace, but also to remodel gender preconceptions that keep them out of power. Defining the peace-making process they have carved out a space for themselves in the public domain.

In the various ceasefire negotiations, they played a commendable job of negotiating between the Government of India and other rebel groups. Both the former and the latter could not unheard the voices rise by the womenfolk. Their voices were even included in the official documentation and proceedings. Women were able to carve out a place for themselves within the established political process through peacemaking. They were effective in gaining a say in decision-making. In regards to the Naga peace process, no such actions were taken into account as significant as the role played by the NMA and NWUM. Thus it can be concluded that unlike other parts of the world, in case of conflicts Naga women were recognized as the voices of the common people suffering from the destruction and conflict of the long struggle for independence. They negotiating between the groups can be seen as a one step closer to peace.

#### References:

[1] Alemchiba, M. 1970. *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*. Kohima: Naga Institute Culture Nagaland.

[2] Rita Manchanda, *Naga Women making a Difference: Peacemaking in North East India*, Women Waging Peace Policy Commission

Sanam Naraghi Abderline, Series Editor, January 2005.

- [3] Sajal Nag, *When Hens Crow: Women, Peacemaking and the Genderisation of Politics*.
- [4] *Ibid*.
- [5] Lucy Thomas(ed), *Women in Naga Society*, Regency, New Delhi,1998.
- [6] Paula Bannerjee, "The Naga Women's Intervention for Peace," in *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 19. No.4, pp.137-144
- [7] Sarala Emmanuel, "Where are the women in Sri Lankan Peace' in *Himal*. Vol.16, No.10, October 2003, Pp.52-57.
- [8] Rita Manchanda, *Op.cit*.
- [9] Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, Reprint 2013.
- [10] Alemchiba, M., *Ibid*.
- [11] Paula Banerjee ,The Naga Women's Interventions For Peace.
- [12] Verrier Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*.
- [13] *Ibid*.
- [14] Paula Banarjee, *Op.cit*.
- [15] *Ibid*.
- [16] Esterine Keir, *Bitter Wormwood*, Zubaan Books, 2013.
- [17] Paula Banarjee, *Op.cit*.
- [18] Rita Manchanda, *Op.Cit*
- [19] *Ibid*.
- [20] Paula Banarjee, "The Naga Women's Intervention for Peace," in *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 19. No.4, pp.137-144
- [21] Gina Sangkham, *Naga Women and Peace Process*, Paper presented in Oxfam Seminar on North East India, Shillong, June 202.
- [22] Paula Banarjee, *Op.cit*.
- [23] *Ibid*.
- [24] Sajal Nag, *Op.cit*.
- [25] Paula Banarjee, *Op.cit*.