

Traditional Political Institutions of Nagaland: A Study of the Lotha Nagas

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Abstract:

The system of democratic governance and administration, which is generally viewed as a product of western political evolution has long been in existence in an unrivalled form among the various exotic tribal groups of the Nagas even prior to the British colonisation of the Naga Hills. The village being a single administrative unit, unfettered and unrestrained by any outside forces, can be compared to a modern state. It had its own democratic administrative mechanism, headed by an elected chief and his associates.

The study is an attempt to reconstruct and examine the various traditional political institutions of the Lotha-Nagas, and also to gain an insight to their traditional lifestyles.

KEY WORDS: Lotha-Nagas, Village, traditional institution, chief, Morung,

INTRODUCTION

THE NAGAS

The Nagas inhabit the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam¹ in north-east India and also in Somrah region of Myanmar. Linguistically, Nagas fall under

Tibeto-Burman group² and racially belongs to Mongolia's (Tibeto-Chinese) stock³. The Nagas were the first ethnic communities in north-east India who started mobilizing culturally related tribal communities along ethnic lines against the Indian State with the avowed objective of protecting their identity and culture from what they viewed as the onslaught of Indian rule and culture.

The entry of the Nagas into the written history of the world can be dated to 24th February 1826. On that day representatives of the Kingdom of Burma and the British military signed the Treaty of Yandabo, in which Burma renounced all claims to Assam and Manipur. The first Nagas with whom the British came in contact were the Tengima (Hutton 1914: 476). Reviewing the various literatures on the Nagas by colonial ethnographers, we find that they are frequently flooded with baffling stereotypes as 'savages', 'wild', 'untameable', 'witch doctor', 'heathen tribes', 'barbaric', 'uncivilised' etc. Some well-known ethnographers of the colonial British, who made an extensive documentation about Nagas

¹ Wetshokhrolo Lasuh (ed), *The Naga Chronicle*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p.22.

² R. Vashum, *Nagas" Right to Self-Determination*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2000, p.11.

³ Wetshokhrolo Lasuh (ed), op.cit., 2002, p.22

includes- J.H. Hutton who wrote *The Angami Nagas* (1921) and *The Sema Nagas* (1921), J.P. Mills, wrote on *The Lhota Nagas* (1922), *The Ao Nagas* (1926) and *The Rengma Nagas* (1937).

These writers have documented various accounts on the Nagas which covers various aspects of their life including administration, customary laws, village economy, social organisations, psychological traits, food habits, domestic life, religious beliefs, etc.,

Due to the unavailability of any other written records either by the Naga tribes themselves, or by any Indian writer, the accounts given by the colonial ethnographers are generally relied upon. Therefore these accounts have been shaping the perspectives and attitudes of the outsiders towards the Naga people. The people whom we refer to as the 'Nagas', comprises of many different tribes, though they belong to the same racial orientation, known as the mongoloid stock. Regardless of the various contradicting theories given regarding the origin of the word 'Naga', it has been used to refer to the various tribes dwelling in parts of Myanmar (Burma), Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland.

One might come up with a confronting narrative of the origin and meaning of the word 'Naga', yet again, the number of tribes which the word represents is an equally complex issue which needs to be addressed. Studying the works of various scholars, we can see that the number of

tribes referred to for the word 'Naga' varies. Sema (1986) has given 20, Horam (1975) 32, Shimray (2005) has listed 40, Asoso (*cited in Chasie*) lists 50 tribes. The number keeps increasing in literature but the complexities don't end there. Language, cultural practices, geographical location etc., also add up to the riddle. The Nagas do not have a common language as each tribe has its own distinct dialect. The dialect not only differs from tribe to tribe but in certain cases, it also differs from village to village.

Who are the Lothas?

The Lotha are one of the major tribe in Nagaland. They call themselves as *Kyong*, meaning simply "man" (Mills 2003: 25). Wokha is the district of the Lothas which covers an area of 1,628 sq.km. According to 2011 census the Lothas population is 166,343 and the density per.sq.km is 102. The literacy rate is 87.69% as of 2011.

The North and West sides are bordered by Assam, on the East by Mokokchung and Zunheboto, on the South by Kohima district. The Lotha Village is invariably built on the very top of a ridge. The two essentials of a site are that it must be easily defensible from a Naga point of view, and near a spring (Mills 2003: 21). According to 2011 census there are 107 recognised villages under Wokha district.

Originally, the Lothas refer to themselves as 'Kyong' which simply means 'man' and even today, the term 'Kyong' is popularly used. Like the word 'Naga', the word 'Lotha' also has various theories regarding its origin and interpretation. According to one theory, the word 'Lotha' is derived from the Angami word 'Latha', which means 'gone to a far place' or 'gone ahead'. This theory has its own ground of argument because the Angamis were the first to have encountered the British. Therefore the British might have borrowed the term from the Angamis and applied to the 'Kyongs'. Therefore this view is generally accepted. The Lotha society has been a democratic and an egalitarian society since time immemorial. They follow the patriarchal system and the family's lineage is traced through the male members. Like the rest of Nagas, majority of the people still live in their native villages. Traditionally, the village stands as an outstanding social and political institution of the Lothas.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Morung or the bachelor dormitory system was once an essential part of Naga life and culture, which acted as the prime education centre for both boys and girls and the only form of formal institution before the advent of the colonial rulers. Mhonthung Yanthan, in an attempt to document the various cultural values with regard to the *chumpo* (morung) culture,

highlights the cardinal role played by the Morung in the socio-religion, educational and cultural activities of the Lotha Naga's society in his article "Relooking the Lotha *chumpo* (morung) culture (2015)". He attempts to bring the past *chumpo* tradition into present context and bare the rich Lotha Naga traditions. The diminishing relevance of the *chumpo* culture today is also examined.

With the absence of any written documentation regarding the historical background of the Nagas, it is rather formidable to ascertain the past histories of the Nagas. However, we can draw certain portions of the long lost history through the folklore and folk narratives which has been passed down orally through generations. Mhonyani Sangma(2017) has attempted to reconstruct the past histories of the Lotha Nagas using their oral traditions. She has focused on the origin and early settlement of the Lotha Nagas and how the oral traditions assert the common paternal ancestors of the Nagas.

Rosanna Kikon(2016) is of the view that the anarchical state of the Naga country created an atmosphere of uncertainty which prompted the Naga men to be always ready for assault from the enemies since headhunting was widely practiced in the pre-colonial Naga society.

Consequently, the larger portion of chores and of sustaining life had to be taken care of by the women. She highlights the overall contribution of women in the predominantly patriarchal Naga society, especially in the field of economy. Her contributions to the family and to the village at large could have been enough to earn herself a significant position in the society but her contributions were overshadowed by the achievements of the male folks. Each unit of village in the Naga homeland were completely independent from each other and was headed by a sovereign chief. Haopou Gante(2010) has tried to assess the role of chieftainship, particularly among the Kuki tribe of Manipur. He mentions how the institution of chieftainship, which is the oldest form of tribal administration, started deteriorating after the British occupation of the tribal areas. The chief was the supreme authority, with some assistance from the council of elders. Most chieftains refused to accept the hegemony of the colonial masters even after they had been conquered. He further narrates how the chieftains with the help of his subjects rebelled against the oppression of the British colonizers and the subsequent policies of the colonial masters towards the tribals that follows.

Vanthangpui Khobung(2012) in his article have presented an overview of the changes and continuities of the local self-governing bodies in the north-eastern parts of india. The existing local self governing bodies of the villages today are the evolution of the traditional institutions which were primarily geared to maintain social order.

Khrietuonyu Noudi(2006), as a teacher has observed that the knowledge of his students in general regarding the history of the Nagas is very much limited as it is confined to the post colonial period. He opines that the main factor behind the shrouding of the historical knowledge of the Nagas is the absence of any written material prior to the coming of Christian missionaries in the 1870's.

U A Shimray(2008) in his article recalls his grandfather's position as the chief of his village and how he used to exercise his power as the headman. The chief would summon and preside over the village meetings. He also outlines the tremendous changes that the traditional institutions have undergone with the passage of time and with the touch of modernity.

J.P. Mills (1922), a civil servant and an ethnographer of the colonial British has given accounts about various tribes of the Naga Hills, based on his experiences during his tenure in the Hill districts. In his

book 'The Lhota Nagas', he have tried to record the cultural practices and the way of living of the Lothas, who he deemed were beginning to lose their distinctive features as a result of the introduction of Christianity and colonial rule.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To examine the traditional hierarchical political organisations of the Lotha Nagas
2. To analyse the power structure and functions of these traditional political institutions
3. To know the efficiency of governance under this system of administration

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research is an investigation of materials and sources in order to establish facts. Methodology for this research includes both primary and secondary data.

Primary data refers to the first hand data gathered by the researcher himself. Secondary data means data collected by someone else earlier .For primary sources, the researcher will rely on survey methodology, interviews and oral data. Survey methodology is a method of qualitative research .It gives quality and accuracy of responses. This will comprise of questioners. For secondary data, the researcher

will rely on sources including books, journals, articles and other internet sources.

THE VILLAGE:

The village is the crux and the backbone of all other political institutions. Each village is perched on the hilltops for defensive reasons as they were in perpetual risk of invasions from enemies and also from wild animals. Defensibility and availability of water were the two essentials in order to set up a new village. The fortification of the village was a substantive aspect and was given due importance.

The traditional Naga village can be compared to a modern day state, an autonomous structure with its own defined territory, population, system of administration, and most of all, each village was a sovereign unit. The people were predominantly confined to their own village and had a great attachment to it, which can be clearly reflected even today. In fact, a person is identified by the name of the village he belongs to. No person would ever dare to go against the traditions and cultural practices of the village and as such, a person's actions were driven with coherence.

To be disowned or to be excommunicated from the village would mean to become a 'nobody' in the society unless the person who has been cast out is given a position by a neighbouring village, which is of a very rare case if not in a time of peace.

Though a demarcating line could be nonexistent or barely seen, the village was further divided into 'yankho' or khels, depending on the number of population. These khels are basically a division of clans in most of the villages, except for the considerably small ones. Each place was named based on its certain features or based on events that took place in the past.

"Unlike the Semas, the Lothas rarely call a village after its founder. An almost unique example is Mangya, which is said to have been founded by Mangyasang. More usually some peculiarity of the site, or incident connected with the village, gives it its name. Seleku is so called because many flying squirrels {seluk} were found when the site was cleared. Niroyo is the place of a plant with red berries called niro. Lungsa {olung = stone, osa = platform} is so called from a flat-topped rock near the eastern entrance of the village."⁴

The Naga villages, all in their glory persisted till the arrival of the British in the 1830's.

Traditional Hierarchical Political Institutions

Since the village was a single independent unit, it has its own administrative system and hierarchical organisations which are as follows:

THE CHIEF (Pvuti);

⁴ J.P Mills, *The Lhota Nagas*, Macmillan and co., limited, London, 1922, p.21

Like all the other Naga villages, the Lotha villages were also headed by a village chief, which they call 'Pvuti' in their dialect. The structure of administrative setup in the Lotha villages was democratic in nature. Initially, the position of chieftainship would go to the family who originally founded the village but this privilege was not permanently confined to them.

Though there were instances of hereditary practices, this only happened when the former chief had a son who fulfilled all the norms and is deemed eligible to take up the position by the council of elders. In most cases, the most qualified person from among the elders was generally elected as the village chief by the council of elders. Much of a quality was expected from the man who would represent the village in all aspects. Virtue of capability and bravery in terms of warfare was a requisite. He is also expected to be morally sound, physically strong and possess oratory skills. His wealth in terms of land and livestock were also considered.

Powers and functions of the chief;

The chief was the highest authority in the village and by virtue of his status occupied an eminent position in the village. Some Naga tribes are known to have practiced the system of dual chieftainship, where there used to be two chiefs in the same village at the same time i.e., Secular and Religious chief. Needless to say, the religious chief headed all the religious activities

and the secular chief took care of the rest. However, in case of the Lothas, there was only one chief in a village who performed both the secular and religious functions. This might also differ from village to village because as mentioned, each village was on their own, free from outer influences. Therefore it will not be appropriate to generalise and attribute the practices of one village to the whole of Lothas.

There were no written documentation on the laws and norms of the social conduct or administration but the chief governed the village based on the customary laws which has been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions.

- The chief as a ceremonial head: - any kind of activities throughout the year had to be started with certain formalities and ritual ceremony was a must for all kinds of events.
- In case of disputes among the citizens, the case is brought to the chief for final settlement. The chief would examine the case and pronounce a solution which would be binding to all parties. However, the door of the chief would be knocked at as a last resort. In other normal cases, it would be settled by the clan elders involving both the parties.
- In case of an imprecise accusation and suspicion, a person can wash off his hands by taking an oath in front of the chief and council of elders. An oath is highly regarded

in the Lotha society and it was done in a very serious note. Nobody would dare to take a false oath for the belief that all sorts of misfortunes and torment would befall upon the oath takers if taken falsely.

- The pvuti also led all the ceremonies and rituals concerned with the welfare of the village
- The chief announces all the important days like the festivals, clearing the fields, sowing, harvesting etc.

The chief also enjoyed free services from the morung boys and the villagers whenever needed

THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS

The chief, as in a democratic setup was assisted by a council of helpers, which mainly consist of elders from different clans. These representatives were the decision making body, which of course was headed by the chief. The chief himself is elected from this group of people. The people in this category consist of those who has given the 'feast of merit' and who the clan members deemed most fit to represent them.

Petty cases were resolved by the elders themselves even without involving the chief. An elderly man can also perform ceremonies concerning the clan he represents.

CLAN ORGANISATION

The clan organisation can also amount to the khel organization in case the entire residents of a khel belong to one particular clan. The eldest or the most capable and qualified member among the clan will be the head, who would also represent them in the council of elders. It was the clans who owned the land and not the individuals. At the starting of the year, when it was time to clear a new field for cultivation, the elders of the clan will allot the plots to each household, which is represented by the father.

Inter clan marriage was practiced but marriage within the clan members was strictly prohibited and was a taboo. The clan will always stand as a single unit in case of any issue with other clan, as long as their cause is right.

The institution of Morung (chumpo)

The morung is perhaps one of the most important aspects of a Lotha's life as a social being. It was a dormitory where the young people, at the attainment of puberty were made to stay till the time he got married. It can be considered as an important social, political and educational institution, where all sorts of knowledge and traditions were passed down to the younger generations through the older ones. The morung was indeed the sharpening factor of the young minds of the traditional society where all sorts of social values, morals, code of conduct etc were instilled in the young minds

and prepare them for the future. The most strategic location in the village was chosen for building the morung.

The morung was a thatched house which mostly composed of bamboos and timber. During war, each head of enemies taken in the battle were first brought to the morung for ceremonies and was later taken to the 'mengitong', known to be the head tree of the village and hung there. The morung was decorated with many different kinds of carvings on the wood, with each carving telling different stories from the past. It was reconstructed every eight to ten years.

In regard to the learning system of the morung, Asoso Yonuo stated, "they learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies living in it. In other words, it has been a school for the young to learn the art of livelihood, responsibility and co-operation before the Nagas came in contact with the modern education and life"⁵

In villages divided into khels, morungs can be found in each one of them, which also served for the same purpose. No women were allowed to set foot in the bachelors' dormitory. Separate dormitories which were meant strictly for

⁵ Asoso yonuo. *The Rising Nagas, A Historical and political study*, Vivek publishing House, Delhi, 1974, p. 15.

women were also found in many villages, in which men were not allowed.

The chumpo might not have been the most convenient place as compared to modern facilities but it was the best they could have, and old people would often reminisce their happy chumpo days, when they were young and in their prime.

THE COMMONERS

The commoners or the citizens are the real source of power as they are the ones who elect and select all the other representatives. The citizens consist of all the households of the village and its members. The households are generally represented by the father or if the father is no more, the responsibility goes to the eldest son.

If the chief or the council of elders make a decision which is not acceptable to the common people, they were free to raise their voice and it never fell on deaf ears.

THE HEAD TREE

The 'mengitung,' or 'the head tree' is usually situated in the heart of the village. It is the tree where all the heads taken during wars were hung. At the bottom, the mysterious 'oha' stones, which the people consider to bring fortune and charm, were placed. The place of this tree must not be changed under any circumstances. This tree is planted during the

time of building the village itself and is regarded to hold the fortune of the village and not even a twig was to be cut from it.

If even a branch falls out of it, various ceremonies had to be performed, lest misfortune befell upon the village. If a new village is to be founded, a twig from the tree of the parent village was stolen and planted in the new village, though the parent village tries their best to avert it. The fully grown grand old 'mengitongs' can be found in almost all the villages even today.

Women

There is no doubt that the Lothas had a patriarchal society like the rest of the Nagas, but Lotha women were no inferior beings. In this regard J.P. Mills has recorded that, "A Lotha's wife is by no means a slave or chattel, but a very real companion. Her duties are nevertheless sharply defined. She must cook for her husband, look after the children, make the clothes for the family, and carry up firewood and water. Her husband will help her with a load if need be, and in the fields they work side by side. You never see, as you do in Konyak country, the young men idling all day in the shade in the village while their wives are toiling and digging in the sun."⁶

Divorces are not unheard of but at large, it was the women who choose not to stay with the husband. Without a valid argument or inevitable

⁶ J.P Mills, op.cit, p.112

reason, it was comparatively rare from the part of the husband to resort to a divorce. Mistreatment of a wife would attract the attention of the wife's relatives and clan members. Property inheritance was exclusively for the male heir but a married woman has the authority over the husband's wealth as her very own

CONCLUSION

With the advent of the colonial British in India in general and the Naga Hills in particular, much of the age old traditions and practices of the people were deliberately eradicated because they considered them to be the practices of 'savages' and 'heathen' tribes. The tribal's way of life was considered as abhorrent and evil, and the Nagas were "tamed" to adopt the western way of life.

The Nagas today in general are quite contented by the fact that the colonial masters at least pointed to them the path to modernity and unified them, but the price paid for the same is quite disconcerting. With the exception of the unpopular practice of head hunting, uncanny amount of valuable and irreplaceable practices of the Nagas have been eroded.

The Lotha-Nagas were in practice of democratic system of governance since time immemorial. With the village being an independent and sovereign unit, there can be no question about efficiency and effectiveness of administration

because the size was not too large to hamper good governance. It is evident from the data collected that most Nagas still have a strong bond and a sense of belongingness to their native villages. The village still have a substantive significance since more than 80 percent of the entire Naga population still choose to live in their respective villages.

The Nagas by nature are no fan of confinement and constraints. The free spirited nature of the Nagas is evident from the fact that in spite of dwelling in their present homeland for centuries, there was no significantly large settlement until the colonial British interrupted. When a settlement becomes large enough, they would split and wander off to form their own commune, with the people of their own choosing. Though in scanty numbers, they would rather form their own, than submit to any authority where they are not properly represented, and their voices unattended.

The pre colonial lifestyle of the Lothas can be best narrowed down in the words of J.P. Mills, who recorded that "Petty theft is rare, and a man can leave his spear and cloth by the side of a village path knowing that he will find his property untouched when he comes to pick it up on his way home."⁷

Most of the cultural values and heritage of the Lothas in particular and the Nagas in general

⁷ J.P. Mills. Ibid., p.19

have vanished. For instance, the colourful traditional attires have become a mere, devalued piece of cloth for festivities. The morung can no longer be found in its true essence, except for a smaller replicated form built for its alluring structure, which is also a very rare sight, and the list goes on. Younger generations embrace and endorse foreign cultures more than their own, which further contribute to their already decaying culture, undermining the intimidating fact that a culture lost is an identity lost, and an identity lost is a significance lost. Morals have degraded, values have condensed and the society lays in strife, deluged with unwanted elements of alien culture.

What lingers on is a fragment of the traditional system of village administration, which is in lieu of the system of traditional chieftainship. Under democratic decentralization, the Naga villages are allowed to govern themselves under the aegis of certain acts and constitutional amendment.

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