

SOCIAL STATUS AND THE ROLE OF NAGA WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL NAGA SOCIETY

By: Dr. Ninghorla Zimik T.
Asso. Professor,
Pettigrew College, Ukhrul, Manipur

Abstract

Nagas are one of the indigenous tribes of North East India and Myanmar. All the Naga tribes have patriarchal social institutions and the line of succession is patrilineal. In this kind of social set up, the subordination of mother and children to the authority of the father is practically universal. However, headship of the father does not signify that mother's role in the family is under the strict instructions and control of the husband. She is empowered to manage her home affairs and honoured by installing a special mother's seat in the house. Naga women are known for their hard work and sincerity. When a girl attains puberty, she goes to the girl's dormitory where she is trained in all aspects of life as modern education institutions would educate. In times of war, women takes care of their family and even guards the village. In political spheres, women are not given any political rights except in some rare cases like that of Harkhongla of Maram, Rani Gaandinlieu etc. However during inter village war disputes, a woman called 'Phukhareila' is given the right to stop a heavy casualty war through negotiation or intervening in the war directly. A prerogative of such an honour was never given to men. She was called the Naga 'peace maker'. Naga sisters are also honoured by giving special meal in any festival by her brothers as a continued gesture of love and concern. Divorce is a rare case and Naga women are known for their fidelity. Unmarried women are also given economic security. However it is to be noted that many social restrictions were imposed on women and Naga women in many respects cannot exercise her power. Time has come for women and men to work hand in hand in all affairs without having any social segregation for the betterment of our society and nation.

Keywords: Naga women, dormitory, economic, peace maker, special gift.

Objective:

- 1. To make a documentation of oral history and traditional customary practices of Naga women of the past.*
- 2. To empower modern women as peace maker as practiced in the ancient days.*
- 3. To break social restrictions and give equal status and power in decision making.*
- 4. To give economic security to unmarried women.*

Research methodology:

Research methodology is partly descriptive and partly casual. For this study, data and information has been collected with the help of direct interviews, unpublished manuscripts, literatures and magazines.

INTRODUCTION

The Nagas are one of the indigenous tribes of North-East India. There are about sixty-six Naga tribes settled in the state of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India. The Nagas of Myanmar are concentrated in the northern part of Sagaing divisions comprising of five townships viz., Layshi, Lahe, Nanyun, Hkamti and Homalin with an estimated population of five lakhs. The Nagas who were living in compact areas were dismembered and were spread into different states and countries. However, the Nagas wherever they settled, shared common customs, religious beliefs and belonged to the same ethnic group of Mongolian race speaking Tibeto-Burman language. Every Naga village big or small was an independent unit having its own council and assembly headed by a village king. They have their respective customary laws which guides, governs and regulates the whole sphere of village administration. One law and custom exist for the whole land and people of each tribe. They have a rich culture and tradition that has evolved and existed for long.

The Nagas have rich folklores and literatures which are in the form of songs, legends, myths, stories, festivals, dance, superstitions etc. Their beautiful arts and crafts silently speak volumes of their rich culture and traditions and reflects the culture of the society. Agriculture was the main occupation of the Nagas. They have their respective traditional beliefs and strictly observed gennas and taboos.

STATUS AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FAMILY

All the Naga tribes have patriarchal family and hence the father was considered as head of the family and the line of succession was patrilineal. In this kind of institution, the subordination of mother and children to the authority of the father is practically universal. The girls in their tender age are taught to be quiet, gentle and perform all the entire household chores and work hard. The upbringing of the girl child encourages the boys to be dominating, authoritative, to be served and waited upon. When there has to be a choice, say education, the boys get better privileges though the girl has a brighter academic prospect. However in the Naga society, headship of the father does not signify that mother's role in the family is under the strict instructions and control of her husband. A girl is never married against her will and in her husband's home the wife occupies a high position and her children are treated well. The Naga mother exercises a firm hand in her family affairs. She is the heart and centre of the family. Among the Maram and Tangkhul Naga tribes, a special mother's seat is reserved and installed. The Maram Naga placed mother's seat near the long giant Naga bed. The Tangkhul Naga installs the mother's seat by invoking special prayers to the goddess of wealth called as 'Phunghui Philava'. The father has no such special seat in his home. Members of the family as well as the outsiders honour the mother's seat and no one dares to sit on it and disrespect the seat reserved for her. It is a special respect and honour given to a Naga mother. Her husband has great confidence in his wife and lets her manage the home affairs at her disposal. Her primary duty is to take care of her children and her home and to store food for the whole year. Begging was unheard of in the Naga society.

The mother is the busiest member in the family as well as in the society. On the family front, both husband and wife are co-workers. They work and toil together in rain and sunshine. A typical Naga mother wakes up before dawn and finishes her daily round of works like collecting firewood, fetching

water down from the streams, pounds rice, cooks food for the family and feeds the domestic animals, attends to the kitchen garden at times and keeps herself occupied for a few hours in the weaving loom. By 8:30 am to 9:00 am the family is ready to go to their respective fields after taking the morning meal. Sometimes she returns home with a heavy load of firewood along with vegetables, fishes, crabs, etc. filled in her traditional basket. As soon as she reaches home, she will immediately start making preparation for the evening meals, feeds the domestic animals and let her children sit around the warm family hearth that burns like a small bonfire and lights up the heavy loaded Naga kitchen and bedroom. Her husband sits nearby his wife and enjoys drinking the Naga rice beer. After supper, she will flick cotton and spins yarn for weaving. Sometimes she brews rice beer and makes rice cakes for her children. Naga women cannot be ill-treated by her husband and in-laws. In case her husband or in-laws mistreats her or beats her up or faces any trouble on account of it, her brothers, clan and relatives would come to her rescue. The married woman is always consulted by her husband in all domestic and family affairs. They play their respective roles as husband and wife. However, the society was not limited to irresponsible husbands who do not act as a good father or a husband and mistreats his wife in various inhuman ways. Furer Haimendorf wrote his book about the Nagas that "Women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their status and their free and happy life and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savage." Kiran Shankar Maitra also wrote about the Naga women that "...they stand equal to men in every sphere of life and need not entirely depend on the earning of the male members. Often they compliment family earnings by their own which surpass the men's earning. They being very painstaking and industrious never felt helpless even if their husbands dies and divorces the wife..."

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Naga society is a classless society and every Naga citizen enjoys equal rights and privileges guaranteed under the Naga customary laws of their respective tribes. Women are the backbone of the Naga society and through them the society sustains and continues to grow and live. They are involved in many social activities of the village but comparatively they are more active in the home fronts. In the Naga society, women were respected and protected and granted certain privileges.

When a girl attains puberty, she goes to the girls' dormitory (morung) called 'Ngalalong' in Tangkhul, 'Louchizii Fii' in Paomei, 'Raliiki' in Maram, 'Lochii' in Mao etc and associates herself with other girls of the village. Once she joins the Morung (dormitory) she would leave only when she gets married, betrothed and lost her virginity. It was regarded as a training school for the girls. In the morung, girls are trained in singing, dancing, weaving of various designs, handicrafts, social interaction, behaviour, manner, discipline etc. Women were allowed to join in any village social activities, functions, festivals, dances, except the war dance and head taking victory celebration.

The establishment of Morung facilitates a girl to choose her life partner. It was customary for the youths to pay nocturnal visit to Morung. One peculiar tradition of visiting the girls' Morung among the Maram Naga was that all the boys who came to visit would sit on the lap of the girls and they will all join in

singing, teasing and thus forget the daily toils and worries. Outsiders from other villages wishing to visit the girls' dormitory (Morung) of other villages should take prior permission of the girls' Morung and their visits should be informed to the village concerned authority. The girls will then get ready with Naga rice beer and eatables to enjoy in the evening. It is noteworthy that though they drink, they maintain moderation and were never a nuisance.

When the menfolk are away for war or any other business, it is the women who take care of the family and at times even guards the village. Nowadays, it is common to find many women organizations and NGO's formed that are very active in various social activities and issues among the Naga society. The Naga Women Union Manipur is the apex organization of all the Manipur state Naga women. Every Naga tribe is a unit member of NWUM. In the unit level, e.g. 'Tangkhul Shanao Long' is the apex body of Tangkhul women and all the Tangkhul villages are its unit member. All these organizations have done commendable services in eradicating social evils, fought against army atrocities and human rights violations. It is to be mentioned that many Naga women have been raped, tortured, killed and molested, e.g. Oinam incident during the struggle for peace in the region. In the Tangkhul Naga region, late Miss Rose and Miss Luingamla demonstrated a spirit of bravery by sacrificing their lives to uphold the moral and dignity of Naga women.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

As mentioned earlier, Naga women are hard working and industrious. They start their work from early dawn until sunset. Traditional women were looked upon by the society as a woman of hard work. Such was the conventional attitude towards Naga women held by the society and it is true even today. The traditional women though un-educated, knows how to manage and plans out her routine work and activities in advance and tries to complete the work within the time frame.

Agriculture was the main occupation of both men and women. In the division of labour, men were assigned for fieldwork and women for both field and domestic work. During the off season, women were engaged in weaving clothes for family and also for sale. She also stores food grains and necessary items for the whole year or for months to go such as dried fish caught before rice plantation and during harvest time. She also earns her family income through backyard rearing of animals and handicrafts. Without depending on her husband, the wife can sustain the family. The woman earns a major share of the family income as her husband is engaged in social, political and other affairs. Naga women were the producer, provider, sustainer and manager of the home.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In politics women have a little share. In the village council, women are not given representation and thus debarred from enjoying in the decision making body. She participates in the village administration indirectly by influencing her husband, brothers and father. But in the context of Tangkhul Naga, we cannot outrightly say that women never join in politics. There were some exceptional women like 'Harkhongla' of Maram village. She was elected to the village council and also led the warriors of her village as commander-in-chief. So complete was her domination over her people that the villagers

submitted themselves wholly to her leadership. Another renowned women was 'Kaireila' of Talui village. She was a good decision maker and a judge. She presided in the council assembly sitting cross legged and deliberated the discussions. Other than these two Tangkhul Naga women, there were many other renowned Naga women in the village and regional politics. In the Zeliang-Rongmei community, Rani Gaidinlieu was an exceptional woman who fought against the British imperialism. In the modern times, Late Mrs. Shiningla Keishing was nominated in the Manipur Territorial legislative assembly in 1974. Late Mrs. Hangmila Shaiza was the first popularly elected women of the Manipur Legislative Assembly. Mrs. Grace Shatsang and Mrs. Valley Rose Hungyo also contested in previous elections but were defeated. If chances are given, Naga women can also contribute the same services as men. But Harkhongla, Kaireila and Rani Gaidinlieu were all exceptional women of history. In the village council, there is a clan wise representation but not a single provision to represent woman in the village council and Regional Council. The Govt. of India has also not made any changes for the North-East tribal women till date.

RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONS

Religious functions were actually performed by the village priests and kings. However in the Tangkhul community there are certain rituals which are exclusively entrusted to women like the first opening and drawing out of newly harvested grain from the granaries. It is taboo to start eating new rice till 'Chumpha Phanit' (festival) is observed and necessary rites or pujas were performed to the goddess of wealth by women of every household. On the eve of Chumpha festival, all the male members of the family usually stay out of home for two consecutive nights as it is a bad omen to witness her performance. If he happens to see her by chance, it was believed that he will have no success in hunting, fishing or in taking of human heads during war. There is a dark room in the corner of a Naga house and women usually libates rice beer and leaves a little portion of food to propitiate the various spirits. Even in the fields, women perform rituals and invokes special prayer to the goddess of wealth (phunghui philava).

To begin rice plantation, it is a religious duty for the Mao Naga woman to perform certain rituals in that particular field to propitiate the spirits of the paddy fields. The mother of the household will wake up early in the morning and walk down to her paddy field without talking to anyone. She also took extreme precaution so that she will not be seen by anyone from the village. As soon as she reaches the paddy field, she takes a handful of paddy and plants in and around the small area where she selected to offer prayers. She would then fill fresh wine filled in her wine guard and libate wine three times in the directions of the men, the lion and hawk. After that the family can start planting. The similar custom of rituals was practiced by Maram and Paomei Nagas with little variations.

PREROGATIVE GIVEN TO WOMEN

During inter village war, a Tangkhul woman was granted a special power to stop heavy casualty wars. She was called 'Phukhareila' in Tangkhul. Phukhareila was a woman married to a man from another village. Whenever war broke out between her native village and husband's village, she is granted a special power to stop the war through negotiation or to intervene in the war directly. She can move freely between her former village and husband's village. For her security, a special act was enacted

which forbids a man to lay a hand on her. Some severe wars were stopped through her wise diplomatic policies. In case she cannot stop the war through negotiation and the fighting starts, she would physically enter into the midst of the battlefield holding her 'zeithing' (iron staff) and the moment she lifts up her zeithing, the two warring groups should stop fighting immediately and that would be the end of the war. The violator of the customary laws would be given stringent action or could be killed by the whole associations of the villages. Thus when two villages failed to resolve to a dispute and declares war, the final word would be from a woman. A prerogative of such a high honour was never given to man. She enjoys full diplomatic immunity. She was called a peacemaker; the bearer of the torch of peace and the "Red cross" bearer of Naga inter-village war.

Among the Mao, Paomei and Maram Nagas, women joined in the war by standing behind the two warring groups. Women will supply stones to the warriors of their respective party and when the fighting became too severe; the women of both the parties would move forward and stopped the fighting. Once the women of both the parties made a declaration of peace, the warriors should comply the orders and stop the fighting right then and there. The customary law forbids to strike women of both the parties. In this way, the Naga women were empowered to intervene and stop severe wars. It is indeed a unique tradition found among the Naga tribes.

Special Gift

It is a Naga tradition to invite the married sisters by their brothers in any festival of the year and a special gift of specially cooked pork is presented as a token of love to continue the chain of love as brothers and sisters. The Mao Naga tribe invites during 'Chithuni' festivals and the Tangkhuls during 'Luira' festival or 'Mangkhap' festival. It is also a customary obligation to present the leg portion of the animal killed for meat during marriage feast or feast of merit. The meat, be it beef or pork, was cut from the thigh portion and preserved for the sisters and all the paternal aunts would also be given the leg portion of the meat according to the seniority of the sisters. Among the Tangkhuls the sisters of the groom presided over the paternal aunts in such a distribution. In case the leg portion of the meat was not sufficient to give, meat from other portion of the animal would be given. All this customary practices signifies that women in the Naga society were respected and well placed in high honour.

Law of inheritance

Decent and inheritance are in the male lineage. The Naga women are not entitled to inherit the immovable ancestral property. In the absence of a son, the nearest relative of the family called "Shimluikat" in Tangkhul will inherit the property. No ancestral property can be given to the daughter even if she happens to be the only child of the parents. Women can be given only movable property called "tham" in Tangkhul. Every year during the harvest, the parents set aside some portion of paddy for their daughters. The practice will continue till her marriage and on her marriage day she will be given all the collected paddy and other movable properties and jewelleryes. A widow maintains the property of her deceased husband as long as she remains in the household and clan. But if she remarries the right of maintenance is forfeited from her.

In short, inherited property cannot be given to daughters but any acquired property during the lifetime of the parents' could be given to their daughters. The customary law gives economic security to the unmarried daughters by allowing them to obtain one or more cultivable fields, wood lands, homesteads and any others for their sustenance till death.

Divorce

Divorce is a rare occurrence among the Nagas but it did happen at times. If divorce takes place due to the husband's infidelity like marrying another woman, the property movable or immovable shall be in the name of his wife and their children should be looked after by his wife. In case the divorce is due to the wife's fault, she has no right to take away a single property of her husband and he even has the right to chase her out from his house on the ground of her infidelity like her involvement in adulterous act if proved with evidence.

Administration of justice

The highest court of justice was the village Headman house and he was the Chief justice of the court. All the decisions and disputes are settled in the name of the village councillors. Women were strictly forbidden in the court except the one where the woman herself is involved. Village court was thus exclusively a male court.

In the days of yore, when there was no written record and the appellate was done orally, a woman has the right to make an appeal to the court through the male members of her family or the elder of the clan. When cases were of serious nature, oath taking was resorted to. Women were always expected to honour men, particularly the village elders in their action, word and gestures. A breach to this was punishable by law. There were number of instances of women being prosecuted or fined by the village court for lack of courtesy and honour to village elders.

The 'male club' where decisions were taken remained as taboo areas for women. Only in matter of controversies involving in person, a woman was given the right to have her say. Women were forbidden to eat certain sacrificed food and restricted to touch spears and shields which were men's domain.

There were also many social restrictions such as those where women cannot perform religious rites and rituals, cannot shout in the main village street, cannot step or cross over men, cannot sit cross legged, should not sit near the main door of the house, married women should not keep their hair short, should not sit in the village court with her open hair, should not wear skirt in front of a man and on the day of genna post election, women should skip her meal, women should not climb on the roof of the house as it is a disgrace to man and many other restrictions. In this way, women were bound by so many social restriction.

Findings:

1. Naga women in the traditional society were given certain socio and economic rights but were not empowered with political rights. Many social restrictions were also imposed on them.
2. Naga women were the main home maker and bread earners.
3. Naga women cannot be ill-treated by their in-laws as brothers and clans protects them.
4. She is trained in the dormitory as a modern education institution would educate.
5. Naga women were given special power to stop inter village war and was honoured by reserving a special seat in the family.
6. Unmarried women were given economic security during their lifetime.

Suggestions:

1. Age old customs and traditions not suited in the modern world should be reformed and abolished.
2. Naga women should be allowed to join in the village administration and district council by giving reservation as it is given in the Panchayat and Municipal elections. Due to Naga customary laws, women are not allowed.
3. Women should be empowered as peace maker in the present society as it was in ancient days.
4. Economic security and special necessary attentions should be given to the unmarried women.

Conclusion

The traditional Naga society shows that women have little or no say in the village administration and no share in the decision making process. A woman's domain is her home. She indirectly participates and shares her wisdom by influencing her husband, brother, father and her sons who represents in the village council. But with the change in times, the position and roles of Naga women have undergone metamorphosis. There are remarkable progresses in uplifting the status of woman in Naga society. Some traditional attitudes towards women have lost relevancy as they are no longer practical. However, the home is the first area of concern for a Naga woman. Several cultural, religious and voluntary societies and organizations puts a strong emphasis on training of women in home management. But to be in tune with the changing of times, women need no longer be confined to household chores alone but have more opportunities for wider avenues in life. Women should strive to participate in the decision making bodies but there is a great need for motivation as it is a new awareness. But to change the mindset of the traditional ridden Naga society is a herculean tasks for women. At this transitional stage, women themselves need to project in a more positive way. They should also endeavour to bring a change from the grass root level of the society. Moreover, with the dawn of education, there is a sea change in the socio economic and political lives of the Naga community. Time has come for women and men to work hard hand in hand in all affairs without having any social segregation and restriction for the betterment of our society and nation.

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3. T. Mangkhap, Tangkhul elder
4. Kholi Mao
5. L. Dishong Maram
6. Unnamed Myanmarrese Naga