

New Light on Early History of Nagaland

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Introduction

Nagaland is the most picturesque as well as the most rugged of the Indian States. It is surrounded by the states of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh on all sides. It has a total geographical area of 16,527 square Kilometres. Its location on the international border and inhospitable topography render to it a highly sensitive and strategic position. Its population in 1977 was about 626,000. The Nagas are organised in numerous tribal groups. The largest tribes are Ao, Sangtam, Angami, Lotha, Sema, Chakhesang, Chang, Konyak, Rengma Phom, Yimchunger, Khien-nungam, Kalyo-Kenyu, Tangkhul, Zeliang and Kuki.

The Nagas used to be head-hunters. The capture of an enemy-head brought status to a man and fertility and prosperity to his village. Their political organisation has ranged from autocracy (Konyak) through gerontocracy (Ao) to the purest democracy (Angami). Descent is traced through the paternal line. Among some tribes an individual can raise his status by giving a series of feasts.

Mesolithic Culture of Nagaland

The archaeological studies have revealed that Nagaland possessed mesolithic as well as neolithic civilisations. A unique neolithic site named Chungliyimti in Tuensang district had led to the discovery of relics of Stone Age man. Other two sites known as Changsang and Maksha in the same district indicate through their existence of ceramic industry the habitation of the prehistoric man.¹

D.G.F. Hall in his reference to mesolithic culture in various parts of south-east Asia is of the opinion that there has been much speculation as to the possible connection of this culture with the neolithic which succeeded it. The neolithic oval-axe culture found in the northern Burma, among the Nagas of Assam, in Cambodia and in the eastern island of the Archipelago is connected with the use of plank-built canoe, and that both represent a development of mesolithic culture.²

J. H. Hutton opines that the funerary megalithic jars of North Cachar are often obviously and intentionally phallic, and in third way perhaps linked up with monolithic remains of Dinapur and Jamuguri, and with stone and wooden erections of the Naga tribe.³

Neolithic Culture of Nagaland

Traces of a neolithic culture is also widespread in Nagaland. S. E. Peal collected two small iron hoes, used by women in weeding

the hill paddy at Ledo and Tikak, two Naga villages, east of Makum in February 1895. These were full sized implements called "Rong Koi" or "Jan Tok" and have handles of split cane one foot long, the cane being firmly bound round the shoulder. The earlier forms of iron implements and weapons are based on that of their stone prototypes and these Rong Kois are simply the Kol Mon "Shoulder-headed Celt" made of iron. The scholar concludes that one time neolithic Mon - Anam races had their influence extended from the Vindhya all over the Ganges basin, Assam and the northern border of the Ultra Indian Peninsula.⁴

Origin and Migration

The history of origin and migration of the Naga People are still to-day an unknown and unexplored field of study. Many scholars have taken special pains and made their sincere efforts on the subject. In this context it may be worthwhile to start with an investigation on the racial bases of the population of India. B. S. Guha pointed out six main races and few sub-types in India as follows : The Negrito, the Proto-Australoid, the Mongoloid, the Mediterranean, the Alpine and the Nordic.⁵

According to S. K. Chatterjee, the Negritos or Negroids are the first intrants into India, came from Africa in Pre-historic times through Arabia and coast-lands of Iran and spread over the greater parts of India. Their traces are found among the Nagas in the extreme North East. The exact period in which these people have arrived to India is not precisely known but he is of the opinion that these elements were in India by the 10th Century B. C. when the Vedic literatures were compiled.⁶

Robinson states that from the apparant diversity of their languages, it may be inferred, that many of the Naga tribes have not sprung from one common origin. While a number of these tribes have emigrated from the North-West borders of China, probably during the sanguinary conflicts for supremacy, which took place between the different members of the Chinese and Tartar dynasties in the 13th and 14th centuries, others may from like political causes, have been driven into fastnesses of the hills of Assam.⁷

J. H. Hutton states "it seems likely that there were at some time wandering bands of Negrito hunters, as in the Malay Peninsula, some traces of whose blood can still be recognised here and there. But the earliest settled inhabitants of the Western ranges of the Naga hills seems to have been tribes of a pattern more or less conforming to the present Konyak Naga type ; often if not predominantly, naked, wearing cane belts and leg-bands ; tying the back hair (in the case of the man) in a Chignon ; using a communal hut for the unmarried ; exposing their dead on platforms ; and subsisting in the main on millets and/or taro. These men must have been presumably head-hunters, and have shared culture at one time probably spread over a wide area of South-East Asia ; it still survives on its fringes in Formosa, the hills of Assam, and Burma and in perhaps, the more inaccessible parts of the Indian archipelago. There are many close parallels in the cultures of the Naga

hills with those, for instance, of the hilly tracts of Formosa, and any one reading the Seventeenth Century account of the Formosa hillmen by Arnoldus Montanus (1671) might very well take it for a description of Naga tribes, not excluding canoe-gongs, garments of dog's hair and gaiters for old women.⁸

W. C. Smith after careful study of the cultural traits and physical characters of the Nagas classified them as Indonesians. In dealing with the Naga affinities outside of the Asiatic Mainland he took the Dyaks and Kayans of Borneo, the Battak of Sumatra certain groups of Formosa, the Igorot and the Ifugao and several other groups in the Philippines as typical examples.

In this connection he points out the following common characteristics of the Nagas with the people of Malay and the Island of Indonesia :— (1) Head-huntings, (2) Common Sleeping houses for the unmarried men, but taboo to women, (3) Dwelling houses built on posts and piles, (4) Disposal of the dead on raised platforms, (5) Trial Marriage, (6) Betel Chewing, (7) Aversion to milk as an article of diet, (8) Tattooing by pricking, (9) Absence of any powerful political organisation, (10) Double-Cylinder vertical forge, (11) Simple loom for weaving cloth, (12) A large quadrangular or hexagonal shield and (13) Residence in hilly regions with a crude form of agriculture.⁹ In this context, Chatterjee states that all these traits are of course not found among all the Indo-Mongloids whether of Assam, Bengal or Nepal of to-day, but there is evidence to show that these were at one time spread or current among most or all of these tribes.¹⁰

Language of the Nagas

W. Robinson states that very little is known of the dialects of the Nagas and the available information will not permit to form any judgement regarding them. It is supposed that whilst some of the tribes may have dialects derived from a common source, other speak languages of a perfectly distinct stock. These dialects are so different that the two of adjoining tribes cannot converse together except through the medium of a third dialect somewhat known to them.¹¹

On the basis of dialects, E. A. Gait suggests Tibeto-Burman origin of the Nagas. He is of the opinion that with the exception of Khasi, the numerous non-Aryan dialects of Assam, all belong to the Tibeto-Chinese and mainly to its Tibeto-Burman sub-family. The dialects of the sub-family which are current in Assam are Naga spoken in the east of Naga hills, Kuki chin spoken in Manipur, Cachar and the Lushai Hills.¹²

Sir George Grierson also classified the Naga language into various groups and subgroups of the Tibeto-Burmas family, in common with most of the hill languages of Assam, and in contrast to the languages of the nearby Meghalayans, Khasi and Jaintias which belong to the Mon Khmer Austro-Asiatic speakers.¹³

Chatterjee states that linguistically the Sino-Tibetan languages have been classified into two branches - (1) Tibeto-Burman, and (2) Siamese - Chinese. All the Naga dialects are included in the

former group, that is Tibeto Burman. ^{13(a)} Hutton observes that distinct traces of Mon-Khmer language in river and place names of Naga regions can be distinctly linked up with Austro-Asiatic and Oceanic words. The traditions, customs, legends, and folk-lore of the Nagas are also strongly suggestive of submerged matrilineal element. Thus he suggests very strongly a population of Mon-Khmer affinities residing over a region now occupied by the Naga tribes. He also seems to indicate Mon Khmer element among the present Naga population. ¹⁴

Antiquity of the Nagas

The ruins of ancient city of Dimapur testify to high antiquity of the advent of the Nagas in the present land of Nagaland. The ruins consist of some pillars of various patterns, gateway, the ruined tower, palace wall, and a fort to the north besides tanks both within and outside the walls. The dotted site with ruins of imposing building numbering 50 or more, affords a peep into the architectural style of a remote period. The walls were built of brick and peeled stones. The pillars and towers are engraved with sculptures of many birds (like peacock) and beasts. One of the pillars still present the engraved pictures of a human skull. It shows that the Nagas of even that early period were accustomed with the habit of head-hunting. ¹⁵

S. S. Chib pushed back the date of origin and migration of the Nagas to 2000 B. C. He states that about 2000 years before Christ, persecuted Mongols started penetrating into India through Tibet and settled in the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills of North East India. Those coming from China settled in the present Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. ¹⁶

According to Chatterjee, the Tibeto-Burman group probably formed an area of dispersion, somewhere in the present province of Sinkiang in China, where from they began to spread east and south. From this centre of dispersion some of the Tibeto-Burman tribes took up their trek along the Brahmaputra river westwards. They found homes in the mountain tracts of the Balipata frontier tract to the east of Bhutan as Abors, Akas, Miris, Daflas and in the Sadiya frontier tract as Mishmis. The Assam-Burma groups of the Tibeto-Burmans include the Nagas and Bodos, who came down to Burma and entered Assam and Brahmaputra valley in fairly early times. ¹⁷

M. Alemchiba concludes that the original stock of the Nagas, starting from the centre of dispersion of Sinkiang province first moved westerly from Sinkiang and reaching head waters of the Irawaddy and Chindwin rivers bifurcated in several directions, ultimately leading to Tibet, to Assam, to the hill ranges between Assam, and Burma. That branch which came to the hill range moved further west and entered Naga Hills. Another wave came from the South-East Island taking a north-westerly direction and entered Naga hills using Burma as a corridor. ¹⁸

M. Horam states that the Nagas belong to the 'Indo Mongoloid' tribes. At one time the Nagas must have wandered about

before they found their present permanent abode ; though grouped as Indo-Mongoloids, the Naga tribes are not typical Mongols, the Caucasian element is present among them in a remarkable degree. It is for this reason that the Mongolian facial and other features are softened down in the Naga tribes. The Nagas are a result of the age-old contact between the Mongols and the Caucasian people. ¹⁹

Ancient Accounts of the Nagas

The vedic and Puranic literature refers to Kiratas, Mlechchhas and Chins. The vedic literature states that lord Siva along with his consort Uma went to meet the Mahabharata hero Arjuna in the guise of a Kirata. There is also a reference that a Naga princess, Ulupi, fell in love with Arjuna during the latter's sojourn in Eastern India. Ulupi took Arjuna to Nagalok which is generally identified with Hanima in the south west of Nagaland. The couple lived there happily till Arjuna moved to Manipur. ²¹

C. Singh holds that Nagas were not other than Kiratas of India. During the epic period the Kiratas migrated to their hills and later on they came to be known as Nagas. ²² Chatterjee opined that the Kiratas were known to the Hindu world as a group of people whose original home was in the Himalayan slopes and in the mountains of the East, in Assam particular, who were yellow in colour and presented a distinct type of culture. ²³

Alemchiba states that it is difficult to say exactly when the Nagas entered into the present Nagaland, but the ancient Hindu literature mentions the presence of early Indo-Mongoloid; kirata in Eastern India as early as 1000 B. C. By that time the Kiratas were known to the Vedic Aryan as cave-dwellers from whom the Aryans obtained mountain produce like herbs and drugs. The four books of the Vedas, supposed to have been compiled in the 10th Century B.C., mentions about the Kirata in the passages in the Yajurveda and this shows that the Kiratas are at least as old as that period.

The Epic and Puranas also mention about an ancient Naga kingdom in Far Eastern India. It is stated that a Brahmin disciple of Asvattahaman or Asvatthama (a son of Dronacharya, founded a new line of kings in the land of Naga people. The Brahmin disciples name was Kaundinya. ^{24(B)} He was a great hero and unique in Javelin fight. It is said that he became king of a vast region in Eastern India and threw his javelin in order to mark the site of his future capital. He then married, Soma, daughter of Naga king and established a new Naga dynasty. ²⁴

In this context a Chinese source gives more details. The earliest Chinese reference to the kingdom of Funan comes from the pen of Kiang Tai, who together with Chu Ying was sent thither on a mission in the middle of the third century. He tells the story of the foundation of a kingdom by Kaundinya, whose name he transliterates Hun-t'ien. According to his account this ruler was a foreigner, who came from a place which may be India, the Malay Peninsula or even the southern island. He was guided to his future kingdom by a dream, in which he was vouchsafed divine revelation of his destiny. On arrival he defeated an attempt by the

queen of the country, Liuysh, 'Willow Leaf' to seize his ship by transfixing her boat, with an arrow from his magic bow. Then he married her and founded the dynasty which ruled after him for a century and a half. ²⁵

The story is apparently a local adaptation of the Indian legend of the Brahmin Kaundinya and the Naga Soma, the daughter of the king of the Nagas. The correct account of the Indian legend is given in an inscription found at Misson in Champa. This tells how the Brahmin Kaundinya received a sacred javelin from Asvatthaman, the son of Drona, and threw it in order to mark the site of his future capital. He then married Soma, the daughter of the Naga king, and founded a line of kings. The descendants of the Pallava rulers of Conjeveram used a similar legend to explain their own origin. At a later date the legend was adopted by the Khmers and Naga became the sacred symbol of their origin. A mystic union between the Khmer king and a Naga princess had a prominent place in the court ceremonial of Angkor; he was required to maintain the well being of his realm through consummation of a union with a nine headed Naga. The nine-headed cobra indeed became the dominant theme of khmer iconography. ²⁶

Origin of the Word 'Naga'

Regarding the origin of the word 'Naga' various theories have been put forward by many scholars but no unanimity of opinions could be arrived at.

Robinson states that the origin of the word 'Naga' is unknown; but it has been supposed by some to have been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Nagna'. Then it was applied in derision to the people, from the paucity of their clothing. But there seems little foundation for this etymological derivation, as the term has never been applied to any other hill tribes who are of a greater degree of nudity than any of the Naga tribes. Whatever may be the origin of the word Naga, it appears that the appellation is entirely unknown to any of the hill tribes themselves. The inhabitants of these hills are divided into numerous communities or races, and they know themselves by the designations of their respective tribes only, and not by any name common to all of the races. ²⁷

According to Owen, the word 'Naga' (a Sanskrit one) appeared to be identical with snake. On the authority of a good Sanskrit scholar, the word may be translated not only into a snake, but a swiftly travelling one, too, a derogatory term applied in all probability by the natives of the plains to them, from their notoriously shy, stealthy habits and wandering life. Not recognising the word themselves make it more probable, as they themselves distinguish one another by other appellations. ²⁸

According to Mr. S. C. Dutt, the word 'Naga' means a serpent, but it is not pretended that the Nagas are of serpent or scythic descent. The name was more probably given to them originally as being best expressive of their character, for of all wild tribes they are held to be the most subtle and treacherous. ²⁹

Gait states that the collective designation by which the Nagas

are known to the Assamese seems to be derived from 'nok' which means folks in some of the tribal dialects. He suggested that there was some connection between this and the Sanskrit word 'Loka' (man). 30

There are also many similar theories advanced by different scholars in the field. But from our above survey of the subject we like to conclude that the Naga people were very much acquainted with the native people of ancient India. These people were associated with the snake tradition of Indo-Chinese and Indonesian world. Oceanic influence was very strong amongst them. Naga people's love to marine shells as their ornaments testifies this truth. Many of the Nagas left the oceanic land in the prechristian era when their land was in primitive stage. Aboriginal matriarchy was the prevailing institution with them, when men and women went about naked. The Naga tradition as associated with Brahmin Kaundinya was not an altogether unknown feature in Ancient Indian History. 31 Many Indian kings claimed descent from Naga or semi-Naga legends incorporated in the Mahabharata and Puranas.

Thus the word 'Naga' means primitive, naked or Semi-naked people of Indo-Chinese and Indonesian origin possessing symbolic snake characteristics (swift, subtle and fierce).

Early History of the Nagas

The term 'Naga' includes the various tribes of the present state of Nagaland, Nocte, Wancho, Tangsa, etc, tribes of Arunachal-Pradesh and their congeners in Manipur state and Somra tract of Burma. In spite of a political system broken down almost to the village unit and a multiplicity of languages, these tribes had something in common which has made them recognised as a people since at least the time of Ptolemy, the Greek geographer of the second century A. D. The Greeks in the first century A. D. had heard of these people during their visits to Western India and South India as a wild people with the characteristics flat nose of the Mongol races. Ptolemy locating what the Hindus spoke of as 'Nagalog' or naked people in approximately the area which they still occupy, records about them as 'Nagalog' which means the realm of the naked. That was about A.D. 150. 32.

In the 13th century, Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty in Assam, when crossed through realm of the Nagas, saw these tribes as strongly organised community. The way Sukapha carried on indiscriminate slaughter of the Nagas is still recounted by the Naga elders by way of folktales. After sometime Sukapha developed fascination for these Naga people. Subsequently, the Ahom even picked up Vaishnava Hindu cult from the people of these hills. 33

In the 17th Century, we find Mir Hussaini, historian of the disastrous expedition into Assam of Shayista Khan's Mughal General, Mirjumla, likewise wrote of them as the Nagas. At the same time a Dutch sailor, cast ashore on the Bay of Bengal and enlisted to serve as an artilleryman with Mirjumla's force described them as cannibals in his account of his shipwreck and subsequent adventure. 34

These allusions, however, brief as they may be, indicated, re-

cognition of a Naga people in spite of the very marked differences of the tribes that constitute them.

Conclusion

History of Nagaland specially of its ancient period is an uninvestigated field of study. In our survey we have made very brief investigation on various themes like mesolithic and neolithic culture, origin and migration, language, antiquity, Sanskrit, Greek, Persian and Assamese accounts, the word 'Naga' and early history of Nagaland. We have taken into consideration the valuable contribution made by scholars like Ptolemy, Robinson, Gait, Grierson, Smith, Peal, Hall, Hutton along with a few Indian scholars including Chatterjee. Thus we see the subject has already attracted attention of many noted scholars, although thorough investigation has not yet been made on the traditions, folktales and archaeological sources. It was not our intention to compile an early history of Nagaland, rather we only wanted to throw some new light on it and it is hoped that our efforts may have drawn attention of the lovers of history.

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 23. S. K. Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 157.
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 24. (a) Asvatthaman, Minor character, in *Mahabhaata* but immortal and Semi-Naga supposed ancestor of Naga kings.
 24. (b) Kaundinya, An Indian adventurer, who founded Indo-Chinese Kingdom.
 25. H. H. Wilson, *Vishnu Puran*, Vol. V, London, 1864. *Mahabharata*, Drona Prava. Many Indian kings supported the four caste system (Chaturvarna), though some of them claimed descent from Nagas, or from Semi-Naga Asvatthaman of the Mahabharata. The first Indo-Chinese kingdom was similarly founded by a Brahmin adventurer named Kaundinya, whose superior prowess with the bow cowed local tribesmen and enabled him to wed the local Naga Chieftainess Soma.
 25. (a) J. Gernet and J. R. Foster, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, London, 1982, pp. 196-97. The leaders of Chinese mission to ancient Cambodia, Chu Ying and Kiang Tai, who met there an envoy from the Indian empire of the Kushanas, left travel notes. The former wrote a Treatise of the curiosities of Funan, the latter an Account of Foreign Kingdom in time of Kingdom of Wu and also a work on the custom of cambodia (Funan Tu-Su).
- The establishment of a Hindu Kingdom of Funan (later, Kambuja) is alluded to in the history of the Southern Thai, compiled in the beginning of the 5th century. It is recorded there as an ancient tradition. The story is as follows:- "Of old this country had for sovereign a woman of the name of Lieou-ye. Then there was a man of the country of Ki, Hoeun-Tien, who dreamt that God gave him a bow and bade him embark on a junk and go out on the sea. In the morning Hoeun-Tien went to the temple of the God and found a bow. Then he embarked on a junk and sailed towards Funan. Lieou-ye saw the junk and led her troops to resist him. But Houen-Tien raised his bow and shot an arrow which passing through the side of a boat struck somebody within. Lieou-ye was frightened and submitted. Hoeun-Tien married her. He wrapped her in a piece of cloth as she had no clothing"
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