

The  
**NAGA**  
Society



Dr. Chandrika Singh

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# 1

## A Unique Profile

The Naga society, proud of its historical base, is tribal in nature. The people of this land have been carrying out some notable sets of social values and good principles. The Naga society is unique in the real sense of the term, as it has been maintaining its social norms and values independently despite various inconveniences and difficulties. Before the arrival of the British in the land of the Nagas, the Naga society was unknown to the outside world. It succeeded in maintaining its separate identity because of its existence in the mountainous ranges covered with dense forests that served as a protective cover zone. No doubt, the early Nagas living near the foot-hills of Assam had some sort of relations with the Ahom rulers who tried to subjugate the Nagas, but the latter never allowed the Ahoms to establish their sovereignty over them and destroy their social as well as cultural norms and values. The relationship with the Ahoms and the Nagas proved short-lived and the Nagas maintained their own systems and values independently. History bears the testimony that many old cultures and civilizations lost their identities in the mighty wave of subjugation and assimilation by the powerful forces. However, in the case of the Naga society and its cultural as well as social norms and values, it never happened that the Naga people lost their identity. Even during the British rule the Naga society preserved its social norms and values and kept the social identity intact with the exception that it was affected by the current of modernization. This chapter traces out the origin

and growth of the Naga society and evaluates and examines customs, traditions, cultural as well as religious ethos and political system of the early Naga society.

## Society—Its Meaning and Nature

Before giving a description of the ancient Naga society, it would be convenient to have a cursory look at the meaning and nature of society. The word 'Society' is generally used to refer to an encompassing network of a social relationship that encloses some more specific phenomenon, which forms the object of the analysts. Analytical definitions of a society usually treat it "as a relatively independent or self-sufficient population characterized by internal organization, territoriality, cultural distinctiveness and sexual recruitment—self-sufficient group remains a constant element in most concepts of society."\* According to Abernethy and his colleagues, a society is a group of human beings sharing a self-sufficient system of action which is capable of existing longer than the life-span of an individual, the group being recruited at least in part by the sexual reproduction of the member. It means a society is not a temporary existence. A society is destroyed under two conditions—first, by a war of all against all and secondly by subjugation by another powerful society. For permanent existence of a social group the following elements are essential.

1. **Sexual Recruitment**—Sexual recruitment means blood relationship, the members of a social group should not be alien, but reproduced by the members of the same society.
2. **Adequate Relationship with the Environment**—A society exists in a territory, which has its environmental situation. The members of the society should not only be fully acquainted with the environment but also absorbed to the environment. His relationship with the existing environment must be adaptable to the group members.

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\* David L. Sills (ed), *International Encyclopedia*, vol. 13/14, pp. 577-78.

3. **Assignment of the members**—The members of the group must have assigned roles to support the society. Their performances must yield goods not only to the group members, but also to the whole world.
4. **Normative regulations of means and emotional expression**—For survival of the society certain normative regulations are needed to adjust the mutual relationship of the members and also the establishment of ways and means to express emotional feelings.
5. **Socialization**—Socialization is to train the members of the group towards adopted values of the society. It also means to persuade the members to believe in the adopted social norms and follow the social systems and perform the duties to strengthen them in the greater interests of all.
6. **Control of disruptive behaviours**—A society is a living being which has its growth and development. If there are some anti-social elements whose behaviour harms the society, it must be controlled. Social norms, which are established, must not be destroyed by some vested interests. Society needs to be governed in a full-fledged way so as to protect the social interests and create favourable circumstances for the growth and development of the society and its members.

The clear concept of society emerged during the eighteenth century with the rise and growth of rational liberal views. The liberal thinkers placed the society prior to the state. It was John Locke who separated society from the state and propounded that society has its independent existence before the state. State appeared in support of the society. Time came when the Church (religion) was also separated from the state. Philosophy of romanticism developed the theory of society based on conventionalism and put stress on the unity of the integrated whole. Society came to be viewed as organic growth, embodying the practical and profound wisdom of conventions and traditions. Abstract analytical segments cannot be separated from the whole and changed arbitrarily. If it is done, it will have to destroy the complex interdependence of the web of

the social life. This theory supported interdependent actions. In the early nineteenth century, August Comte developed the idea of cultural order as a constituent element of society. Comte argued reformation of society required the creation of a new scientifically based moral order. He liked reconstruction in religious, familial, educational and political institutions on scientific lines giving significance to moral order. He did not believe that barely a consciousness is a sufficient condition for organised collective life. The consensus must be organised in institutional order that symbolizes teachings, enforces and implements moral ideas and rules.\*

Thus, it is very much obvious that the concept about the society has been changing. During early period the proper term was group or community of the people which is a territorially bounded social system or a set of interlocking or an integrated functional sub-systems serving a resident population. The community concept does not include such characteristics as harmony, law, "we-feeling" or intimacy, which are sometimes nostalgically imputed to idealized pre-industrial communities (Foster, 1960-61). However, it includes a minimum of consensus. It means it lacks social cohesiveness, ideological spirit and consensus base. People live together and follow established norms and values.

With changing of time the idea about society was totally transformed. Society emerged as a powerful identity covering every aspect of life. The relationship between the society and the individual was defined. Though conflicting ideas related to the boundary line between the society and the individual emerged, the individual was saved from the grip of the society. The ideal type of the society is that which permits the individual to prosper irrespective of sex, birth, race, religion, place, etc. Civil society is a term which includes civilization and culture. Civilization means sense of social orders, institutional base and zeal as well as strong desire to maintain the social order. A civilized people are those who are organised socially, politically, economically and religiously and have that common sense to live and let others live. The civilized

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\* David L. Sills (ed), *International Encyclopedia*, vol. 14/14: pp.579-80.

people have certain socially recognized and legally protected autonomies and freedoms to prosper. Culture is also a set of civilization which is related to living standard and way of behaviours. Culture of a society includes the elements like social behaviours, religious rituals, family norms, ethical codes and social organizations. It teaches manners. Literature, arts, social rituals, customs, traditional conventions etc. are the constituent elements of culture.

## **Early Naga Society**

The question is whether the early Naga society was, in fact, a society or it was simply a group of people belonging to a particular tribe having blood relationship. Here opinions vary. The British authors who had closely observed the Naga society during early nineteenth century are of the view that the Nagas were barbarous and uncivilized or semi-civilized. The different Naga tribes were disintegrated and inimical to each other. Their world was very much limited and they knew nothing about the outside world. No doubt, each tribe had some sort of social norms, cultural values and political institutions, but their behaviours towards other people were non-friendly and harmful. The British authors like A. Mackenzie, Hutton Robinson termed them 'savage', 'uncultured' and semi-civilized. It appears that their perception about the indigenous Nagas was based on their war-like nature and famous tradition of head-hunting. There are British authors like V. Elwin, J.S. Mill and Robert Reid who appreciated the democratic spirit and political wisdom of the early Nagas.

No doubt, the early Naga people were divided into various tribes and sub-tribes and lived nearby, but they lacked the skill to form a bigger polity to live together. However, to be true the early Naga people were not savage and uncivilized. Though their world was separate and limited, they knew how to live and how to prosper. If society means the set of social norms, cultural values, economic support, a zeal for survival and a desire for having independent social as well as political status, the early Naga society must be termed a society because they possessed all these requisites for a society. Their traditions, conventions, customary laws and social rituals etc., substantiate the fact that the early Nagas were not vagabonds or nomads.

The Naga society, a tribal one, consists of various tribes, sub-tribes and clans differing basically in their respective social and customary behaviours as well as their dialects. The common characteristics of the Nagas are their strong will to have and maintain their separate identity, dauntless courage to fight difficulties and face the enemies, a desire strong enough to have a free life and a bitter disliking for meddling of others in their internal affairs. It was the longing of the indigenous Nagas to have their own separate identity, which enabled them to overcome a number of difficulties and problems while searching for a permanent abode. The early Nagas lacked the knowledge of script and literature, no doubt, but they carried some sort of mythological tales of their past life, origin and development. Since there are no written documentary proofs about the past life of the Nagas, nothing scientifically and authentically can be said about their ancient life and behaviour. Written history of the Naga society begins with the arrival of the British and Christian missionaries in the land of the Nagas. Undoubtedly some mentions about the Naga people are available in the Ahoms' Buranjis. But it hardly speaks of the social, customary and religious behaviours of the Naga people. Various diverse viewpoints related to the origin, migration and nomenclature of the Nagas have been produced by different scholars. The fact that nothing can be ascertained who the Nagas are, why they are called the Naga and when did they arrive to the territories they are occupying presently. Their mythology and tales indicate that they possessed some values and norms, which enabled them to form a society of their own and maintain it in the greater interest of the community as a whole including the individual. The society was not open and the community was treated as the supreme. However, it does not mean that individual has no place in the community. Like early Greek society it was difficult to distinguish between the individual and the society. Both stood for each other.

### **Some Features**

The Naga people as a whole are simple, friendly and hard working. They are brave and have the courage to face the enemies. They love freedom and liberty. By nature they are straightforward,

jolly and cheerful. The society had been classless and casteless during its early phase, but their association with the British and Christian missionaries and also the arrival of modernity have stratified it creating a gap between the rich and the poor. Economic standard of the people has developed and their political consciousness has been sharpened. Advent of schools, colleges and university have helped the people to enrich themselves in the field of education and opened new avenues for employment. Traditionality, which was the basic feature of the Naga society, has changed into modernity not only widening the understanding of the Nagas, but also increasing their needs and changing their lifestyle. Though Christianity is the accepted religion of the Nagas, inclination of the Naga people towards material prosperity has overshadowed spiritual aspect of religion.

## **Geographic and Political Features**

The state of Nagaland, which is mostly hill territories, lies between  $25^{\circ} 60'$  and  $27^{\circ} 40'$  latitude north of the equator and between the longitudinal lines  $93^{\circ} 20'$  and  $95^{\circ} 15'$ .<sup>1</sup> Nagaland covers an area of 16,527 sq. km. with a population of 19, 88,636 according to the census of 2001. Out of this, 82.26% of the population is rural. The average density of population is 120 per sq. km.<sup>2</sup> Besides the people living in Nagaland, many Naga people are living in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Myanmar. The state is bounded by Assam in the north and west, by Myanmar and Arunachal Pradesh in the east and Manipur in the south and runs more or less parallel to the left bank of the Brahmaputra. The altitude varies between 194 meters and 3048 meters. The territory of the state is mostly hilly except some plain areas in Dimapur. The rolling mountains, the enchanting valleys, the swift flowing streams and the evergreen forests of the Naga Hills present scenic beauty. Its moderate climate and pollution-free environment attract visitors all round the year. It forms an irregular plateau with elevated ridges and peaks. The peaks of Nagaland vary in height from 350 meters to 3,000 meters above the sea level. The highest peak is Saramati (in Tuensang) with a height of 3,826 meters. The Dhansiri is the largest river of the state that flows through North Cachar and Kohima before it finally flows into the Brahmaputra in Assam. The

soil is fertile and yields varieties of agricultural and horticultural products. The forests are evergreen and rich in bamboo and timber.

The state of Nagaland is divided into as many as eleven districts, namely, Kohima, Mokokchung, Tuensang, Mon, Zunheboto, Khiphere, Longleng, Dimapur, Wokha, Pheck, and Peren. The state carries a chequered history behind its evolution. Kohima is the capital headquarters. Kohima, Mokokchung and Tuensang are oldest districts while other districts came into existence later on. Each district has been divided in administrative sub-divisions administered by the Additional Deputy Commissioners, Sub-divisional Officers and Extra Assistant commissioners. Besides, each district has different supporting administrative offices for development of the state.

### **Origin, Migration and Permanent Settlement of the Nagas**

The Naga people follow their different tongues, cultures, social behaviours and historical legends and mythologies, which help one to understand their early life. If the Naga people have something in common, then these are their physical appearance, customary laws, simplicity and generosity. They all belong to the same blood that is Indo-Mongolian. They migrated to the present territory in different phases from Central Asia. The tribes, who entered into the hilly region of the northeastern part of India crossing the rivers Chindwin and Irawaddi, "were not homogenous one, but deadly of different races divided into numerous tribes, sub-tribes and clans under the 'Mongoloid' race, different in origin, distinct in language, diverse in physique, character, culture and society, depending upon the peripheral geographical locality, although basically they were more or less the same having much in common affiliations, common heritage, religious values, norms, common ideas of liberty and decencies."<sup>3</sup>

The cause of multiplicity of tribes in the Naga society is, perhaps, due to their migration to the present geographical areas in different phases and in different groups and also their permanent settlement in different hilly terrains.<sup>4</sup> It seems that they migrated to the present place, sometime in B.C. era when other tribes like Caren, Shan,

Chin, Singpho and Koyans of Indonesia, Myanmar and Philippines who bear the similarity in physique with the Nagas, migrated from the same place (Central Asia) and settled where they found unoccupied lands. Smith is of the view that the Naga tribes belong to the same blood which is found in the people of Burma (Myanmar), Sikkim, Bhutan and other hilly areas of North East India.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the Naga tribes were a bit late to reach the north eastern part of India. Before they reached, some other tribes like Ahom, Singpho and Miri had already settled in the plains of North East. It was the north east frontiers, which were still unoccupied with the result that the different bands of the Naga tribes found it convenient to occupy the unoccupied lands. After permanent settlement, they earmarked their respective occupied territories with stone, rivers and mountains as boundary lines. They established their respective tiny sovereign state-village maintaining separate identity. Though they were not yet fully civilized, they developed some common social norms based on their customary practices. Asoso Yonuo is also of the view that "These Nagas with a fairly well developed culture established permanently small village states similar to those of the Greek City-State in the hilly and mountainous ranges or spurs, high above the valley."<sup>6</sup>

The most lamentable part on the history of the ancient Nagas is that they lacked the skill of diplomacy and feeling of unity. All the tribes remained separate from each other and preferred isolation. Consequently, they remained far behind to form a nation-state comprising all the Naga tribes. This is because of the fact that the Nagas by nature are skeptical, suspicious and doubtful about the activities of others. They preferred separation and isolation because they did not like any sort of intervention in their internal affairs. To preserve their separate identity and meet the outside danger they maintained warriorship selecting young and brave youths. Since their needs were limited, they managed every thing for survival without outside contact.

The question whether the Naga people are original settlers of India or they migrated from different places to the part which they have been occupying since time immemorial, is still controversial. Several viewpoints have been developed in this regard.

Some Indian thinkers like S.K. Chatterjee are of the view that these Nagas are original settlers since the Vedic period and were known as the *Kiratas*. However, this view is not an authentic one.

The theories and facts related to the origin, migration, nomenclature of the term 'Naga', their settlement in the present territories, religion etc., are not dissimilar. The facts, which have been attracting others to know about the Nagas, are their traditional culture and social values and also their ancient political organizations. The various Naga tribes divided in sub-tribes and clans follow their respective traditions and social practices. What these people have in common are their history, feelings, aspirations and pains and pleasure, which they have experienced from time immemorial. Despite various anthropological and sociological researches about the origin of the Nagas, their migration, permanent settlement and nomenclature of their name as 'Naga', no reliable truth has been established so far. There are divergent views which lead nowhere in this respect. As a result, the past history of the Naga people is shrouded in mystery.

Despite all these, there is no denying the fact that the Naga society is one of the oldest tribal societies, carrying out notable set of customary practices with social, political and religious moorings. The expressions about the nomenclature, migration and occupation of the present territories by the Nagas are all based on legendary and mythological statements. The reality is that the different waves of the Naga tribes migrated to the northeastern part of India in B.C. era. Another established fact is that the Naga people belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race.<sup>7</sup> These Mongoloid tribes originally known as 'Non-Chinese Chiang Tribes', migrated from the central Asia in B.C. era due to inhospitable land and environment they had been occupying. First, they migrated to north-west border of China and later on they spread over to China, Indonesia, Philippines, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nagaland.<sup>8</sup> This view is evident from the fact that the Naga people bear similarity with some tribal groups like Dyaks and Koyans of Indo-Chinese countries. Supporting this view W.C. Smith says that the social customs and culture of the Nagas somehow resemble those of the Dyaks and Koyans—the tribal people belonging to Indonesia and Philippines. He also

believed that the type of blood of the peoples of Burma (Myanmar), Sikkim, Bhutan and other hilly peoples of southern part of Asia, is akin to that belonging to the Naga tribes.<sup>9</sup>

## **Head-Hunting War and its Consequences**

The head-hunting war among various ancient Naga tribes is the dark feature of the Naga society. It was this inhuman practice, which convinced the foreigners to call the Nagas uncultured, uncivilized and savage people. It is evident that various Naga tribes migrated to the hills of the northeastern part of India in different waves and occupied the vacant territories as per their convenience, earmarking the boundary lines. Though they lived adjacent to each other, they hardly tried to integrate various Naga tribes to form a common polity. Rather they remained separate and disliked each other, which indulged them in 'head-hunting wars' till the British occupied their land and forced them to stop such dirty and inhuman practice. At the same time the Christian missionaries taught them that there is no justice of murdering their own people. Perhaps it was the suspicious nature of the tribes and their separatist attitude, which could not allow them to live together. It is true that each tribe maintained its own political and social organizations based on its respective traditions and culture, but none of the tribes was ready to establish link with others and follow a common way of life. Rather they remained proud of their own respective traditional living and cultural values. Such parochial as well as separatist attitude of the ancient Nagas resulted in frequent head-hunting wars destroying the lives of thousands of innocent people.

Head-hunting war, a common feature among the ancient Naga tribes, was in fact, an ominous sign, which hardly allowed the indigenous Nagas to come together and unite to develop a common platform from where they could exercise their wisdom in the interest of the people of their own land. The head-hunting war among the Nagas was a traditional and customary practice. It was an established custom of taking human heads to prove the warriorship of the Nagas and also of the Naga tribe. The custom allowed the people of a tribe to hunt heads either in a regular warfare, raids or in a casual surprise. The custom was not only universal among the Nagas, but it had its historical base.

Such inhuman customary practice reflects two major facts. First, it reflects that the indigenous Nagas could hardly reconcile their rivals whosoever they might be. Secondly, such practice became a permanent feature due to the attitude of revenge. Peal, a British administrator, noted that there were certain causes of head-hunting war, but by no means always. According to Peal the major cause of head-hunting was: "The Nagas to obtain tattoo on body and to obtain this certificate of manhood, must present their Raja with a human head... belonging to a tribe, not related." In the opinion of Peal the purpose of the head-hunting was to establish bravery or warriorship. It had become a fashion among the Nagas having the support of the entire community. A tribe wanted to establish their superiority over others by creating terror and fear in the minds of others. It was this practice, which compelled each tribe to develop skill and tactics of warriorship to meet any such eventuality or to attack inimical tribes. Another cause of head-hunting may be to establish superiority over other tribes in the field of bravery. However, history bears the truth that no tribe attacked other tribes with a view to establishing their sovereignty over others. It shows that the early Nagas had either no idea of imperialism or disliked to assimilate with other tribes.

They practised "such inhuman act (head-hunting war) not as a part of barbarism, but they did it all to establish their warriorship over other tribes... . Moreover, such practice was followed as a part of tribal-rivalry and also to take revenge."<sup>10</sup> Dr Horam is of the view that the Naga used to commit head-hunting wars "to have his success first recognized, then praised, and finally awarded by the group." According to him the Nagas used "to take a head, bring it home in triumph, to be feted as a warrior, gain the privilege of wearing the coveted warrior's ornaments and at last having proved his worth and manhood, acquire a pride."<sup>11</sup> The practice of head-hunting never allowed the ancient Naga people to have peace. Rather it "drove them and their villages to greater isolation" and compelled them to fortify the villages for safety and security. It is evident from the fact that each early Naga village was set up at the top of the mountain well-bounded and protected by sentries who guarded the village day and night having close watch over outsiders.

The practice of head-hunting war among the ancient Nagas was, in fact, inhuman practice based on cruelty. It was this practice, which forced the Naga people to live in constant fear and terror. While attending their services in the agricultural fields, they were afraid of any eventuality and losing their heads. Even women were not spared. It was certainly a barbarous practice, which helped the British administrators and Christian missionaries to consider the Naga people uncivilized and barbarous. The ancient Nagas, no doubt carried too much social values, but such practice of head-hunting created the feeling in general that the early Nagas were uncivilized, uncultured, barbarous, rough, cruel and revengeful.

Barbarism has remained the part of the uncivilized community. A barbaric people are uncultured, cruel and shortsighted. They lack the vision. The practice of head-hunting war among the Nagas even after the arrival of the British in their land raises the question as to whether the early Nagas were really barbarous. The question is not so easy to answer. It is true that the cruel practice of head-hunting war by the Naga people forces one to form the opinion that they were barbarous. But at the same time the social organization of the Nagas and their democratic style of life overturns the former opinion. The early Nagas carried a lot of good habits and social values. Except the head-hunting war, the Naga people practised so many good things, which indicates that they knew the meaning of life and value of good life. They adopted the habit of head-hunting as a form of patriotic as well as chauvinistic heroism. It was the established means to prove heroism and earn reputation in the society. Head-hunting war was not a cause, but a fashion approved and supported by the concerned community. If there was any cause, it was to register the superiority of one tribe over others. It was this practice or habit, which made the Nagas brave and bold to fight fearlessly.

### **Nomenclature of the term 'Naga'**

Behind the nomenclature of the term 'Naga' there are various beliefs and assumptions. According to John Butler, it was the people of the plains of India who used to call them Nagas because they

were found naked. W.C. Smith is of the view that the root word of the Naga is 'Noga', which itself has been derived from the word 'Nok', which means people. It was the term Nok, which in due course of time became Naga. Sir Gait also agrees with the same view and regards the word 'Nok' as the root of the term Naga.<sup>12</sup> Butler and Hutton both relate the term Naga to the Hindi word 'Nanga' (naked) or the Bengali word 'Nangta'. Elwin finds the origin of the term Naga in the local tongue as 'Nok,' which means people, that is similar in Tibeto-Burman languages.<sup>13</sup>

However, all these views are non-acceptable to the Naga people because they were never naked. Phizo, the most prominent leader of the Naga people, believed that the word 'Naka' was the origin of the word Naga. In the Burmese language 'Na' means ear and 'Ka' means pierced—one whose ears are pierced or those who bear earrings. Since the Naga people during olden period used to pierce their ears for wearing flowers, as they were lovers of flowers, the term Naga is closely related to the Burmese word 'Noka'. This view, in fact, appears convincing and realistic.

## **Religious Faith of Indigenous Nagas**

So far the religion of the Naga people is concerned, today, almost all the Nagas are Christian by faith. The Christianity came in North East India with the arrival of the western Christian missionaries and establishment of the British rule. It was the organized effort of the missionaries who took enough trouble and risk to bring the Nagas under the faith of the Christianity. Since there is an independent chapter on it, the facts would be discussed in detail there. Here it is notable that there is no village in Nagaland which has not got a church nicely organized and maintained. Today, the faith of the Nagas is fully determined in Christianity no doubt, but the Nagas before the arrival of the missionaries and the British in their land were animist by faith.

Animism is a kind of religion, which carries the ideal of soul or spirit. Soul has been the fundamental concept of the tribal religion all over the world. The animists are not atheists. They believe that every object has a soul. The myth, which teaches that the supreme being works and reveals mysteries through creation, is the base of

animism. The ancient Naga people having strong faith in natural forces were animist by their faith. Each Naga tribe carried religious myth, which contained religious scriptures and creeds written in the minds and hearts of the people in the absence of any prescribed religion. The animism helped them not only to understand the environment and universe but also to shape their social and cultural life.

Tribal religion is basically a community religion, where individual life and community life is inseparable. Here both faith and action are interdependent. The rituals and religious practices, which developed among the different Naga tribes, are all based on the faith of animism. According to M.M. Thomas, the world view about the tribal religion is that "There is the sense of spiritual continuum within which the dead and the living natural objects, spirits and gods, the individual, the clan, the tribe, animals, plants, minerals and man form an unbroken hierarchical unity of spiritual force. The self of man is not an individual self, but an extended universal self present and actively participating in all the parts of totality."<sup>14</sup> Since the reasoned faculty of the tribal people under such situation was not sharp, they could hardly distinguish between sacred and the secular, between religious and non-religious, between spiritual and the material areas of the life. That is the reason that all of their cultural components were closely inter-related.

The Naga people while passing through the phase of animism, believed in a power superior to all and capable of doing anything for the good or bad. Since they believed that such power is omnipotent and omnipresent, they believed its reflection through various agencies and means such as trees, stones, ponds and mountains. That is why the ancient Nagas believed their origin through the stones or mountains and trees roots, etc. They realized the nearness of such power and adopted some forms of worship to please such force with a view to avoiding curse and obtaining blessing. That belief is floating among the Nagas even today. During the ceremonial festivals they still practise such things.

It was such belief or faith in supreme power, which moulded the Nagas towards a life of decency and discipline on the one hand and set up religious rituals and social functions on the other.

This made them habituated to worship gods, ancestral souls and natural objects. This formed the base of their moral and ethical conducts making them honest, sincere, simple and obedient. Robinson wrote that the faith of the Nagas in superior natural force brought for them "more just and adequate conceptions of the power that presided the nature." The Nagas began to feel that "There must be some universal cause to whom all things are indebted for their being. They also acknowledged the divine power to be the maker of the world and the disposer of all events."<sup>15</sup> The undeveloped reasoning faculty of the ancient Nagas was not in a position to enlarge the meaning of superior power and explain its manifestation. However, their faith was firm in the assumption that "If they had good and worthy lives on this earth and abstained from all coarse food and specially had abstained from eating flesh, after death their spirits would fly away into the realms above, and there became stars."<sup>16</sup> This statement clearly indicates that the ancient Nagas believed in continuation of the circle of life and rebirth. They also had the idea of salvation, for which one had to live the life of purity and prudence.

One of the common features of the ancient Naga people was celebration of religious rituals in common. That is why religious faith became a common faith, common practice and common celebration. While celebrating religious ceremonies all the members of a community joined their hands. They enjoyed celebrations in participating common singing and common dance, which is still practised. Common dance and common singing became common feature of the Naga community. Later on, singing and dancing became a way of life whether it was celebration of birth or marriage. Horam has rightly observed that "if dancing, singing, eating and drinking are minused from the Naga life, their life would be dull and idle."<sup>17</sup>

### **System of Governance**

The basis of the ancient governing system of the different Naga tribes was the sovereign village state. Each village had developed the system of governance based on their customary laws with the purpose to manage common affairs, maintain law and order,

provide justice and protect the people from alien aggressions. The political institutions, which they developed, were generally democratic in spirit because the Naga people from the beginning believed in equality, liberty and fraternity. The forms of the governance might be aristocratic, republican or monarchic, but the spirit of these governing institutions was democratic. Each village had a government comprising a Council of Elders which was chosen by the adult villagers. It was the Council which used to be responsible for village administration and to do justice to the people. The Council had the power of legislation and adjudication both. A village was established under a distinct leader who was a warrior and a man of capacity to command and protect the people.

A study of the ancient political system of the Naga people reveals the truth that they had enough wisdom to manage their affairs in the common interests and develop social values. Though they lacked the wisdom to frame a constitution, they used their customs as the code of the laws. The customs did not allow the people to defy authority. People were loyal and obedient to their rulers. This is all because the customs were based on long experienced wisdom containing enough social as well as political values. Being the head or chieftain of the village, he always remembered that he was the repository of God's favour and people's obedience. The behaviour of the rulers towards their subjects was sound and appreciable. As a custom the people obeyed the orders of the rulers "so far as they were in accordance with the customs and the wishes of the community at large." In the words of Asoso Yonuo the ruler acted "as the sagacious agent of the people". This was possible due to "age-honoured customs" which served as "a great measure of order, peace and stability to the Nagas." The customs, which were debased on collective wisdom, made the Nagas sane. Horam also writes that to the ancient Nagas "ethics were not different from religion." To the Nagas "to obey was piety; to destroy was impious, and the rule of obedience was enforced upon each individual by the will of the community to which he belonged".

There was no similarity in the system of governance among the Naga tribes. They practised different types of governance, no doubt, but they gave much significance to the spirit of democracy.

Among the Konyak, the Angs (king) possessed greater arbitrary powers whose words were treated as laws. Among the Semas, the monarchy was the form of governance. The king had the absolute power, no doubt, but there was a Council of Elders to assist him. The Angamis, Lothas, Rengmas etc., practised peculiar type of democracy with a little variation in the nature of composition of political institutions. According to Asoso Yonuo they were nominally governed by two kings or chieftains of their respective villages who were chosen for "their bravery in a war, skilful democracy, richness in the farm of cattle and land, or power of oratory in contrast to the hereditary system in which the office of the king passes to the eldest son on the death of his father."<sup>18</sup>

Among other Naga tribes the Ao people who are well known for the governing system based on purely democratic norms, were the first to develop well organized polity. The faith of the ancient Aos was unshakable in democracy. A study of ancient political institution of the Ao during the early period shows that among other Naga tribes the political system which the Ao community possessed, was more democratic and well advanced. It was all because their social culture was highly developed. The ancient Ao had staunch faith in the democratic principles like equality, liberty and fraternity. The ancient Ao villages were the symbols of republican form of the government. Entire social and political system of the Aos was structured under the system of Putu Menden (the Council of Elders). The system was so sound, democratic and attractive that various British administrators and authors have highly appreciated it. For instance, E. Elwin, wrote, "Each village amongst the Aos is a small republic, and each man is as good as his neighbours, indeed, it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communities. Head men, Tatars, so existed but their authority are very small." Hutton, too, while appreciating the Ao's system of governance wrote, "The least that can be said of the Nagas is that in general he has mental outlook and mental process for more consistent with those of the Europeans than has the ordinary native of India."<sup>19</sup>

The Naga villages are the most permanent social and political unit for all practical purposes including the governance. In the past it was a miniature state having a republican form of government

with a well-established Putu Menden by the chosen representatives of various clans. Among the Ao villages the Putu Menden had certain varieties, having much difference in their objectives and formations especially between the Chungli and Mongsen. Generally, the Chungli group follows a longer period tenure system based on a fixed duration of 30 years for its Putu Menden. On the other hand, the Mongsen's system of the Putu Menden is more flexible with tenure of six or five years. Moreover, in some villages of the Mongsen Ao group the Shamen Menchen system is practised which is like the Putu Menden.

Putu Menden is the highest authority of the Ao village. Putu Menden, Tatar Menden and Shamen Menden all are the same in meaning and objectives. The word Tatar means 'the chosen leader/entitlement'. Putu means one generation that refers to a term of 30 years and Menden means a seat. Thus, the Tatar Putu Menden means "the persons who sit upon the seat of generation to rule for thirty years, where only the persons who are entitled can occupy that seat of administration."<sup>20</sup> The system of Putu Menden was started in the first Naga village, Chungliyimti, on the practice of meat sharing, which is followed even today among the Aos. To quote Talitemjen and Lanunungsang once more, "the fundamental basis of the Ao system of administration is based on the share of meat sharing system, which is entitled to every clan. Acceptance of a share of meat signifies the registration in Putu Menden."<sup>21</sup> The Mongsen group called the village governing institution as Shamen Tatar Menchen or Shamen Menchen, which means the seat of fundamental basis of meat eating/sharing.

Tatars are the members who are elected from within the village on the merit of their personal influence, ability to present a case in traditional manner and also from the 1st class citizen called 'impurchanu' (original settler) in Ao dialect. The meeting of the Putu Menden is held when majority of members is present. The continuous absence from the meeting makes him lose his seat and is replaced by others. All matters of common interests are placed before it and nothing can be done without its approval and sanction. It has the powers in various fields like legislative, executive and judiciary.

With the advent of the British rule and spread of Christianity in Nagaland, the significance of the village organizations including Putu Menden began to decline. Though the British administrators did a little interference in the local affairs of the Nagas, the new set of rules and administration, which was imposed on the Nagas by the British, attracted the Nagas towards them broadening their mind. Moreover, the Christianity which made a deep dent in the Naga society tried its level best to erode the customary practices of the Nagas making them more and more responsive to the new set of social organizations and religious faith. The new religion (Christianity) asked the Naga believers to part with all their old culture and follow the new European or American culture in almost all aspects of life. The missionaries “condemned our (Naga’s) old culture as most sinful, godless and useless.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Social Organisations**

The Naga villages were well organized not only politically but socially also. Each Ao village had the *Ariju*, popularly known as ‘dormitory’ or bachelors’ house,’ which is called as *Morong* in the Assamese language. Arr means enemies and Ju means to watch. Therefore Ariju means ‘the watch place of enemy’. J.P. Mills called it as ‘Public School’ because it used to impart experiences of the elders and social values.<sup>23</sup> The institution (Ariju) served as the base of the learning place of the youths and also the meeting place of the people where they used to take vital decisions. This bears the significance of its popularity being as the oldest and strongest means of social control. It served as the agent of social security and was popular for training and disciplined personnel. That is why Talitemjen has termed it ‘University or military headquarters’ because of its functions, nature of training and propagation of ideas. It was also a bachelor’s sleeping place where they used to get together and learn from the experience of each other. Asoo Yonuo observed the significance of the *Morong* as “an important educational, political and social institution” where the youngsters of the village “learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies living in it.”<sup>24</sup> It had been a school for the young “to learn the art

of livelihood, responsibility and cooperation before the Nagas came in contact with modern education and life."<sup>25</sup>

As the years rolled by and population increased, the number of the Morongs also developed. Its significance was so high that each clan developed its own Morong. Whenever a new village came into being, the Morong was constructed within the village circle and membership of this social institution was extended to all the members irrespective of their status who were at least 12 or 13 years old. Each Morong had certain groups of members according to their age group. The basic objectives of the Morong were to defend village for which training system to the youth was developed. Besides that, the members of the Morong had to perform various functions ranging from social security, civil administration, manpower training, personal development, promotion and preservation of culture, etc. The most notable fact is that the married person were not permitted to sleep in the Ao Arijū. The entrance to it for women was totally prohibited. Today, the need and significance of Arijū/Morong have declined due to changing social pattern of the Aos and also due to adoption of Christianity by them.

The most attractive social institution of the Naga people was the Morong, a commonplace of assemblage of the village youth. It also served as a village educational institution to impart social, cultural and educational values to the youth. The Morong was known by different names in different communities. In the southern group of western Angami it was called *Rensi* while in the northern group it was popular as *Azughu*. The Morong has remained the centre of traditional social life and fulfilling a number of purposes to the society. Morongs existed separately for the boys and girls. According to the practice the youngsters used to get together daily in the morong and they listened to the old legends told by the elders. The elders used to share their experiences and opinions with the young fellows. It served as a means to communicate the experience and knowledge of the people from generation to generation and prepare the youth to shoulder the responsibility in their life. For the womenfolk the morong was taboo. However, during festival days they would come with their children to the

open ground in front of the morong and watch dancing and other performances from a distance.

In a real sense the Morong served multi-purpose services of the Naga society. In olden days when there was neither any school nor any educational institution, the Morong was the place of common sitting and teaching as well as meeting of the young generation. It was a sanctuary where the new young generation used to receive good sermons from their elders. The village elders used to not only tell the youngsters the happenings of the past but also teach some moral and ethical values for decent life. It was an established principle that no criminal whether of that village or a fugitive from another could be harmed in a morong. No insulting or abusive words could be used while talking in a morong. The morong was given high regard. It was like a temple of the village, which did not permit any kind of ill-will and violent acts. It was the place of piety and purity of thought and behaviour. Even a murderer could not be harmed in the morong. In the words of Malda Ganguli (1984), "Any stranger on entering a morong must be treated politely and cannot on any account be refused a night's shelter." Appreciating the value of the Naga morong, Asoso Yonuo (1975) writes that it is "an important educational, political and social institution" where the youngsters of the village "learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies living in it". It also has been the school for the youths "to learn the art of livelihood, responsibility and cooperation before the Nagas came in contact with the modern education and life".

### **Economic Base of Society**

The Naga community has been rural based where cultivation and animal husbandry have been basic occupation of the people. In ancient society the land was considered as the gift of Almighty. The common properties were occupied by different villages and in due course of time those villagers who established their hold over the land and forests, claimed their private ownership. The private ownership of land in Nagaland emerged "when men cultivating plots of land obtained perspective rights for ownership

of cultivable plots of neutral land. Some of the common lands were divided among the families of the clans enabling each family to have some plots of land.<sup>26</sup>

In the Ao area there are three types of land—common villageland, clan-land and individual family land. The common land was managed by the Putu Menden. The villageland holds large area of forest lands which are divided among each individual or every clan into specific tracts within their territory for the purpose of cultivation. Landless people are allowed to cultivate on such lands on payment of rent. Clanlands vest with the clan members of the village in perpetuity. The rights over the land pass from generation to generation and the land is held in common by the clan members as a whole. Allotment is made by the elders. The title to the individual land vests with the head of the family. These are self-acquired land. Hence the individual has the right of possession. After the death of the head of the family, the eldest son inherits the land in his capacity as the head of the family. Each type of land has its boundary. In case of any disputes regarding the boundaries of lands, the matter is referred to the Putu Menden in the presence of both the parties whose right is in jeopardy. The right to inheritance is also available among the Aos. The individual has his absolute right over his earned properties. When the individual migrate to another village permanently, he may sell his private property. However, he cannot sell out ancestral land because in such situation, he loses all his rights and title to it. But this rule is, however, not applicable to an Ao emigrant to towns and cities.<sup>27</sup> The notable point is that despite the right to individual land and also the right to inheritance, there was no scope for “big landlords, no extreme paupers, no millionaires, no slums and no beggars” because the concept of landlordism was yet far away among the people.<sup>28</sup> The society was still classless.

The Naga society has been rural based. Animal husbandry has been the basic side occupation of the people. The system of cultivation has been collective type. Barter system was rarely found. The people worshiped work and every one used to work in the field without any hesitation. No doubt, the system of private ownership existed, but not so strong. Most of the cultivated or

waste land belonged to clans or villages in common. It was a belief that land was the gift of the Almighty. It was thought to be common property meant to be communally held. Due to rise and growth of more villages and increase in population the common land property was occupied by different villages and in due course of time those villagers who established their hold over the land and forests, claimed their private ownership. Thus the Naga economy, in the words of Yonuo "began with a measure of family communism and separated with a measure of rude capitalism". Among the Changs, Semas, Kukis, Lushais etc. the land belonged to the chiefs of the villages.

Private ownership of land in Nagaland according to Tajenyuba (1957) emerged: "When men cultivating plots of land obtained perspective rights for ownership of cultivable plots of neutral land. Some of the common clan-lands were divided among the family of the clan enabling each family to have some plots of land."<sup>29</sup> Some of the lands owned by a village became private property when the individual established his right by cultivating such land. Since there was enough land available at the time, there was no objection, which encouraged the conscious Nagas to establish his hold over such extra land. To quote once again Tajenyuba: "If any member of the family was heavily in debt and he had no personal property to pay up the debt, he transferred or mortgaged his share of common family property to cover his debt, which was thus an origin of private ownership."<sup>30</sup>

Thus, emergence of private ownership paved the way for growth of inequality in Naga society. Those who were landless were forced to depend upon the land-holders. On the death of the father his children were entitled to inherit the father's property equally. However, this right is prohibited to the widows and daughters. The notable point is that despite the emergence of private ownership among the Nagas, there was enough scope for "big landlords, no extreme paupers, no slums and no beggars".<sup>31</sup> It was all because of non-existence of bourgeois nature of the property system and lack of industrialisation. Every Naga was self-sufficient. Their wants were limited and their conduct was yet honest and sincere. The concept like exploitation and high social dignity was not known to

the ancient Nagas. They all were brothers and dedicated to the community life. They were God-fearing people and very much prone to the ethics like which ask us not to commit adultery, theft, robbery, stealing and speak lies. They were not cheaters. They have learnt to work hard, respect elders, help needy persons, worship God and live the life of decency. No doubt they were violent by nature, but not to the friends, but to the enemies. They practise head-hunting war, no doubt, but not against their villagers.

## **Mariage and Divorce**

In the ancient society the husband had dominant position over the wife because the society was matrilineal and patriarchal. However, it does not mean that the position of the ladies was inferior. They were considered as the mistresses of the family. Again, monogamy has been the established norm of marriage system. Polygamy and bigamy both are totally prohibited among the Nagas. If such system is violated, the violator is severely punished. According to Talitemjen, the custom of compulsory marriage with a wife's sister or with the widow of a brother, older or younger, is not prevalent among the Aos, but the brother's widow can be married by his elder or younger brother. Similarly, a deceased wife's sister may be married by the widower.<sup>32</sup>

Divorce among the Nagas is permissible, no doubt, but on the valid reason. However, divorce is a rare case even today. J.P. Mills while writing about the system of divorce among the Ao Nagas, says, "Divorce is very rarely that one meets an Ao of any age who has been married only once."<sup>33</sup> Divorce is allowed on the grounds of death of the either party to the marriage or at the instance of the parties. The causes such as unsound mind, incurable disease, sodomy, rape, adultery, cruelty, desertion, barrenness, mutual incompatibility of temperament, taste, ideas, interest and careless management of households, are considered as the valid grounds for divorce. Adultery is regarded as a serious offence on the part of the wife as well as the husband. It is a punishable offence under the customary law. The customary law permits both the wife and the husband to look after the children after divorce, no doubt, but when they become grown up, they are regarded as the property

of the father. The case of the divorce is decided first by the family members, then by the clan members in the presence of both the parties. An appeal lies in the hands of the Putu Menden who is the final authority in the matter. When the case is referred to the Putu Menden, the hearing is held in public. There is also a provision for re-marriage of the divorcee if he or she likes so. There is no fixed period to wait for re-marriage. Thus the way is opened to reunite the parties who divorced each other. The divorced women have the right to claim their maintenance.

### **Traditions, Customs and Rituals**

Traditions, customs and conventions have remained the founding stone of the tribal society but a tribal society in which customs and traditions have been healthy and reasonable is regarded as the most advanced. In the case of the Ao tribal society it has the credit to claim its advanced and matured traditions and customs which were founded by their ancestors long ago. That is why the Ao people are proud of their traditions and customs. The whole fabric of ancient Naga society was woven in social, religious and political customs. The impact of such customs and traditions may easily be discerned even today upon the people. However, the rigidity of the customs, sometimes, creates problem. For instance, the practice of exogamy marriage among the Aos, in the words of Talitemjen, "It is a problem for young boys and girls of predominant clan to get suitable partners. And it is a fact that many of them spoil their life career."<sup>34</sup>

The crime of adultery and seduction are still treated with utmost severity. The offenders are brought before the assembly of the people to investigate the offence. But punishment is prescribed after full verification of the crime.

Religious customs or religious superstitions of the Nagas had no place for individuality. Participation in such ceremonies was essential for all. The faith in natural power paved the way for the emergence of various ceremonies among them where common dining, singing and dancing created the impact of unity and integrity. Such practices never disappeared from the Naga society as a whole. The Naga society which claims itself to be modern today has not

separated itself totally from its ancient norms and practices, though the ancient good values have been missing to a great extent. The impact of early customary practices in their social, cultural and religious life may easily be marked even today. This is another fact that these practices are losing the binding effect. The system of marriage among the Naga tribes has been modified, no doubt, but it still contains the relics of old practices.

Customary funeral practices among the Naga people are based on reason and religious faith. The people from the beginning believe in survival of souls even after death. That is why the dead body of a person is buried with honour and dignity. According to established practice the dead body of a man is washed by his son and then covered with white cloths. At the side of the dead body some baskets full of food-grains along with garlic are placed. Before disposing off the dead body a funeral feast is arranged generally in the afternoon. The dead body is put in the coffin along with some weapons like dao and spear. The coffin is carried to the burial place followed by the family members, relatives, friends and villagers. Besides these, many rituals are followed, which are participated by relatives and friends.

The cultural values what the Naga people have today are the common properties of their ancestral gifts. In the words of Horam, to the ancient Nagas, "Ethics were not different from religion... Every person was subject to law of tradition. To obey was piety, to destroy was impious and the rule of obedience was enforced upon each individual by the will of the community to which he belonged." The commitment to the community for the Ao was based on the idea that a community is the custodian of individual's security and safety. The community belonged to the individual and the individual belonged to the community. The community gave the individual the full freedom to express his/her will and act freely, no doubt, but at the same time every one was bound to obey the decision of the community, which was taken after full deliberations amid the presence of the elders. Describing the culture and habit of the Naga people, Puthenpurkal writes, "Once a decision is arrived at, a Naga is ready to obey it because he had great respect for his village elders and tribal chieftains."<sup>35</sup>

Thus, it is very much obvious that the ancestors of the Naga people possessed all the skill and arts to manage their social affairs living independently. The social and cultural values, which they possessed, were unique and useful to all. They believed in truth and honesty. Their life was simple and full of joys and enthusiasm. Cooperation, mutual understanding and straightforwardness were the way of the life of the early Naga people. They did possess neither any script for language nor any written set of religious scriptures and creeds, but they were more religious and ethical. The code of customary laws, which they had developed in due course of time, enabled them enough to live peacefully and happily. They were self-reliant and self-sufficient. They had developed the art to produce what they needed at the time. The evils like selfishness, greediness, avarice and jealousy had no place in the mind of the ancient Aos. Their wants were limited and their conduct was honest. The concept like exploitation, high social dignity and status did not exist at all in the ancient Ao Naga society. As a whole, they were God-fearing people. They were active, alert, brave, hard working and farsighted. They had no knowledge of the outside world, but they were satisfied with the world of their own.

All the cultural values and ethos of the Nagas began to disappear gradually with the arrival of the British rule and Christian missionaries in their land, which brought to them a new set of social, political as well as cultural values. In the words of Elwin, "The activities of the Baptist mission among the Nagas have demoralised the people, destroyed tribal solidarity and forbidden the joys and feasting, the decoration and romance of communal life."<sup>36</sup> According to Horam, Christianity while giving the Naga people new things damaged the old image and cultural values of the Naga people. It destroyed Naga's religious and cultural values, threatening family norms, social ethics and cultural/religious meanings in the name of modernisation.

With the arrival of the British rule and Christian Missionaries in Nagaland, which worked hard to modernise the Naga society, all the ancient cultural, social and religious values of the indigenous Nagas began to erode gradually. Practice of Christianity made the Naga people averse to animism, which they had been following

and practising. New social values and western education damaged considerably the ancient values of the Naga society. The rise of new economic system and spread of modern education and western civilization changed the mind of new generation. The educated Nagas began to change their behaviour very fast with a view to catching up the race of modernization giving up their old social, religious and cultural values.

After India's independence and creation of Nagaland state, the scenario totally changed in Nagaland. The introduction of various Acts and Regulations by the government of Nagaland undermined the authorities of the traditional institutions to a great extent. The creation of Nagaland Village and Area Act, 1978 and the Village Development Boards Model Rules, 1980, brought about new agencies, which began to play better role than the traditional one with the result that people's faith and interest in traditional governing agencies began to decline. Today, the Putu Menden, Council of Elders etc., are still in existence, no doubt, but their earlier fervor and enthusiasm are not seen. Their roles and performances are limited to the field of welfare of the people and resolve the petty disputes in villages. The new order ushered in a period of tremendous changes. The main agent of such changes is the government itself. The impact of modernity on the Naga people as a whole has not only transformed the society affecting the old cultural values and traditional institutions but also changed the character, habits, behaviour and mind of the Nagas.

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