

# Some Aspects of Social Development of the Phom Nagas during the Post-Independence Period

*Abdur Rahman*

As many as seventeen Naga tribes are found in Nagaland, each occupying a distinct area. The Phom tribe is one such tribe. The tribe has a population of 1,21,585<sup>1</sup> spreading over 35 censused villages in Longleng sub-division (ADC) of present Tuensang district. The Phom area comprises of three hilly terrains along with deep valleys, ranging from 650 to 2000 metres.<sup>2</sup> There are two E.A.C. head-quarters namely Yongya and Sakshi, one sub-division under S.D.O. (civil) Tamlu. Longleng is the sub-divisional head-quarters of the Phom headed by an Additional Deputy Commissioner.<sup>3</sup>

Except present Tamlu circle, other parts of the Phom territory remained unadministered during the colonial period. The developmental activities under the Indian Government began from 1950-51 when the area was made a part of the North East Frontier Tract. Longleng was then opened as an administrative headquarters for the Phom area.<sup>4</sup> An attempt shall be made in this paper to trace the pace of development of the Phom area during the post-Independence era.

Till 1950 a number of punitive expeditions and measures were taken by both the British authority and also Indian Government with a view to punish the offending Phom villages who had taken part in the head hunting campaigns. The last head hunting incident occurred in Phom area in 1950.<sup>5</sup> Having observed the progress among their neighbouring Ao tribe and partly due to government efforts a new spirit emerged among a few Phom leaders who, for the first time, could realise their mis-conception about the world as well as the superstitious head hunting practice. Finally, they gave up their age-old practice of head hunting and began to live in peace and tranquillity. It was on June 6, 1952 the rising Phom leaders took an oath where they erected a monolith on which the following lines were inscribed:

**“June sixth 1952, Phom day to witness this day wherein all Phoms have pledged themselves to be peaceful and loyal to government”.**<sup>6</sup> The

people have been celebrating Phom Day every year on this day since 1952 as a mark of cessation of the habit of head-hunting.

The growth rate of population in the Phom area seemed to be very low before 1951 but in the subsequent years the Phom population has been increasing rapidly. For instance, the population of the phom area was 13,385 in 1961 which rose to 1,21,585 in 2001.<sup>7</sup> The extension of modern medical facilities is one important factor for population increase in the Phom area. Many of the fast emerging rich Phom people have been settling down in the administrative head-quarters like-Kohima, Dimapur, Longleng and Tamlu.

On the eve of introduction of Christianity, the Phoms had a religion called 'Vaipu Vanglem' which in Phom Naga dialect means "The way of faith". For the Phoms, religion was a way of life.<sup>8</sup> On 22nd September 1929 three Phoms were baptized at Impur and a church was established at Kangching village.<sup>9</sup> During the period of NEFA administration (1951-57) the spread of Christianity got momentum among the Phoms. In 1952 the Phom church had 1,166 baptized members in twelve churches. The Phoms organised their own Association in 1953 viz, Phom Baptist Christian Association (PBCA). The church grew considerably in 1956 with eighteen churches and membership increased to 2, 631.<sup>10</sup> There were thirty-seven Phom Baptist Churches throughout Nagaland till 2001.<sup>11</sup> Besides the Baptist Churches, five Catholic Churches have grown up in the Phom area during the last two decades. The Phoms have translated the Gospel of Mark in Phom language and published it in 1954. The New Testament has also been translated and published in 1972.<sup>12</sup> Today most Phoms are Christians. Besides the conversion of the Phoms to Christianity, the missionaries have made other contribution like opening of schools, providing medical help, teaching cleanliness, performing marriage rituals in the churches, and eradicating enmity, superstitious belief, marriage price, tatooning customs and drinking rice beer.

In the olden days every village had a priest; and also a person called *Thibu* who was expert in preparing indigenous medicines as well as treatment of diseases.<sup>13</sup> The opening of hospitals in the Phom area have brought about changes in the people's attitude towards health and hygiene. At present in addition to three full fledged hospitals, there are seven sub-health centres in the Phom area.<sup>14</sup> The people are now aware of modern medicine which has minimized death-rate. Till about 1960 they laid the dead body in the branches of the banyan trees to be decomposed

for several days before finally burying the skull.<sup>15</sup> But the Phom people have gradually given up their old burial custom because of spread of modern education, Christianity and pressure from the administration.

In the Phom area the first primary school was established in 1884 at Tamlu by the British Gorkha Troops in which alphabets and numbers were taught in Assamese medium.<sup>16</sup> But the school did not exist long. In 1931 the same school was re-opened which was followed by the establishment of two more schools at Kangching and Tangha villages in 1938 and 1947 respectively.<sup>17</sup> In 1950-51 with the initiative of government and with public co-operation a lower primary school was opened at Longleng and students were collected forcefully to enrol in the school.<sup>18</sup> The same school was upgraded upto a middle school in 1957 and in 1972 it was further upgraded upto class X.<sup>19</sup> Thus a high school came into being for the first time in the Phom area. A collegiate institution at Longleng named Yingli College was established in 1992. According to 1991 census there were 50 primary schools, 13 middle schools, 3 high schools; each village having atleast one primary school.<sup>20</sup> Literacy percentage of Longleng R.D. Block as per 1991 census was 46.65 while literacy rate of Nagaland was 61.65.<sup>21</sup> The work of preparing text books in Phom language started during the NEFA administration.<sup>22</sup> Since the establishment of Text Book Production Branch of the Directorate of Education, Government of Nagaland, text books in Phom language were prepared up to class IV level.<sup>23</sup>

There has been a marked change among the Phoms in their dress, food habit, housing etc. Formerly Tuensang men used to wear loin cloth and the women a very short *mekhla* which hardly came down to the knee, and there was nothing to cover the upper part of the body, except many stringed necklace to partly cover the breasts.<sup>24</sup> Today the Phoms have adopted western dresses.

The Phoms are non-vegetarians and their principal diet consists of rice and meat. They are fond of meat, dry fish, *bashtenga* (bamboo shoot juice), plain tea without mixing milk and sugar. In the past they did not drink milk but slowly the habit of taking milk is increasing among the educated people in the administrative head-quarters. Well-to-do families now take potato, pulses etc. regularly but the poor only occasionally. Many of these people have learnt the use of spice and mustard oil.

Before 1950, all the Phom people lived in thatched houses and the position of the houses was similar to the statement made by R.W.

Woodthrope during his survey tour of the area, "The houses in Nian, Kamahu, & c., are very closely packed on each side of long streets, the eaves touching and the projecting front gable-ends of opposite house often overlapping each other : the result is, that even in the middle of the brightest day the streets are wrapped in gloom, so great as to make it difficult to distinguish objects in the front verandahs, the few flecks of sunlight which fall upon the roadway here and there only serving to make the darkness greater".<sup>25</sup> A large part of the population today live in thatched houses but in better condition than earlier whereas the more well to do prefer hill type houses. According to an official report, in 1982 in twenty-six Phom villages there were 471 houses having C.G.I. roof sheets; the number increased to 522 in 1983.<sup>26</sup> In the recent years a few RCC buildings have come into existence at Longleng.

Rice is the staple crop of the Phom people. They practise traditional *jhum* cultivation from time immemorial and the cultivators often fail to produce sufficient crops for their domestic consumption. They had no knowledge of terrace cultivation earlier but the Government of Nagaland is trying to introduce it among them by providing subsidy. According to an official report, the total area under crops per hectare was 7,938 while the area under irrigation was 2, 574 per hectare.<sup>27</sup> A large quantity of rice is imported to make up the food scarcity.

Except a bridle path which was constructed by the British authority connecting Geleki in Assam and Mokokchung in Nagaland via Tamlu<sup>28</sup> and few village footpaths, there was no road communication throughout the Phom area before 1950. Now the thirty-four kms. of the Major District Road linking National Highway no. 61 at Changtongya with Longleng is the life-line of Longleng, Yongya and Sakshi circles. In addition to this there is a pucca road connecting National Highway no.61 at Merangkong with Tamlu circle. The road covering seventy-five kms. between Longleng and its district head-quarters Tuensang is in a deplorable condition and most of the time during summer season the road remains blocked due to land-slide. All the Phom villages, however, are now connected by motorable roads except few Phom villages bordering Assam which have foot-path links. Longleng has no telephone connection with the rest of the world. There is a Sub Post Office at Longleng and eight Extra Department Post Offices throughout the Phom area.<sup>29</sup>

Before the introduction of monetary economy in the Phom area, the people used to purchase dry fish, salt, tea, iron made materials etc. from

their neighbouring villages in exchange of their crops.<sup>30</sup> A number of shops have come into existence at Longleng since 1960s and most of the shopkeepers are Bengali and Biharis. Recently the Phom people started to open shops throughout the region. All sorts of essential commodities are being imported from Assam. Except timber which is sold at low price, nothing is sent outside. Of course, few petty Assamese traders do purchase betel leaf, ginger, broom, shawl, coal and bamboo made materials from Tamlu area. So, it goes without saying that there is a unfavourable balance of trade which they make up by the money they earn mostly as labourers, government service holder, through contract and business.

Prior to the introduction of modern administration in the Phom area, the people were expert in weaving, basket making, wood-carving decorative works, preparing earthen pot etc. At present, except the cottage industry i.e., weaving, carpentry, basket making, wood-carving, decorative works and some minor industries like-motor repairing, tailoring, rice mill etc. which have developed on the basis of local needs, there is no other modern industry. The Department of Industries and Commerce has one Sub-DIC headed by a Functional Manager at Longleng.<sup>31</sup> The department constructed twelve industrial sheds at Longleng for promotion of small scale industries but could not complete the project in view of the fund constraints following the Government of India's inability to release its share of 50 per cent till now.<sup>32</sup> In 1977, only three villages had electric connection.<sup>34</sup> Though all the villages are connected by electricity yet the power supply is irregular and maximum houses have no electric connection. Longleng has not acquired the status of a township according to 1991 and 2001 census because it has not fulfilled the township criteria.<sup>35</sup>

The preceding brief analysis reveals that the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the transformation of the traditional Phom society into a modern society which brought remarkable change in the structure of the society. Various developmental schemes have been undertaken by the Indian Government to bring the area to the level of acceptable living standard by preserving their valued culture. Notwithstanding, the society is still lagging behind in the field of industry, commerce, communication, agriculture etc. which need special attention to accelerate the socio-economic growth of the society.

### Notes and References

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31. *Annual Administrative Report, 2001-2002*, Department of Industries and Commerce, Kohima, p. 2.
32. *Ibid*, p. 3.
33. *Statistical Hand Book of Nagaland*, 1981, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Kohima, p. 175.
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35. According to the census of India the places which satisfy the following tests are considered as town : 1. All places with a municipality corporation on notified area, 2. A minimum population of 5,000. 3. At least 75% of the male working population should be non-agricultural and 4. A density of population of at least 400 per km<sup>2</sup> (i.e. 1000 per square mile).