

Emergence of the middle class in Nagaland

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The Nagas have gone through a period of rapid change in their recent history. In the 19th century when the Nagas first came into contact with the British, Mr S E Peal had predicted that the Naga tribes would soon become "reformed and hopelessly sophisticated". J H Hutton, the British administrator and scholar who served in the Naga Hills had noted the remarkable rapidity with which the Nagas were changing and commented that in the first 50 years of their contact with the Europeans, the Nagas had gone through "a period of rapid change such as humanity has probably never before experienced"².

A brief study of the mechanisms, changes and forces which were involved in creating the new middle class as a result of this transition is attempted in this paper.

The British military expedition in this area and the American missionary activities commenced almost simultaneously. In 1832 the first military expedition to the Naga Hills was undertaken and the first batch of missionaries made their appearance in the area in 1836⁶. Generally our sources illustrate that the transition from the traditional to contemporary society was accompanied by various forces of confrontation and conflict. The Naga tribal society was tempted by the manifestations of colonial culture on one hand, but was keen to preserve their autonomy, tribal organization and indigenous culture on the other, as has been the case with many tribal societies in the world⁴. But one finds that the transition from the pre-modern to modern was always historically inevitable. This historical inevitability was further strengthened by the occupation of the Naga Hills by the British in the 19th century⁵. The Nagas until then had not been exposed to the temptations of material culture which their neighbours both in Burma and in India

had experienced for centuries under various changin dynasties and maharajahs.

Among the various operative forces which penetrated this region with the British entrance, ecclesiology has played a very important role in the entire process of social change among the Nagas. To quote Terhuja, "If one responsible dynamic factor were to be singled out for an overall change in the life of the Nagas, it would undoubtedly be the introduction of Christianity among them".⁶

In the course of time, missionaries with their firm determination operated carefully taking note of various problems facing the Nagas. They opened up schools and stressed medical care. These developmental activities of the missionaries associated with the religious cause left a deep impression on tribal minds. We find that in the last days of the British rule and only a decade after they left, the number of Naga christians rose tremendously. The general education of the people at the hands of the missionaries opened up the eyes of the Nagas to a new world. The education of the tribes which forms one of the major themes of the process of conversion laid down the basis for future development and thus helped to create a new educated elite. After acquiring a good education a number of Nagas entered Civil Services under the British India Government. Mr A Kevichusa became the first Naga graduate in 1924 and went on to become a Deputy Commissioner⁸. Entering these various professions not only provided an impetus to shift to a new lifestyle but gave employment opportunities to supplement their outlook, and they imbibed new ideas for improving their agriculture, various arts and crafts, and exploitation of the forest resources. Obviously, the economic development within the Naga society expanded the social divisor of labour and served to modify the tribal organisation of settled agricultural villages. Side by

side, efforts to enhance the opportunities of carrying out trades with distant areas and the importing of various articles of daily use also improved. This increased the mobility within the Naga society together with the help of the British administrators which led to the construction of roads that linked up the various areas in Naga Hills. All these measures monetized the economy and gradually undermined the barter system.

Another factor for the transition of the Naga society was the contact with the Europeans during the first World War. Thousands of Nagas went to Europe with the Labour Corps to serve with the Allied Forces. This exposure created an impact on their minds especially an awareness of their own emerging identity. Their European experience fostered a new sense of unity and oneness. Some of these war veterans also returned home with enough money to become petty landlords.

All these developments were slowly, consciously or unconsciously leading to the emergence of an elite in the entire Naga society. The introduction of the institutionalised form of religion, the effects of education, the economic developments and the change in social organisation all gradually emerged into a new form and pattern. The British administrators introduced to the Nagas the concept of a kind of Hierarchy based on their own bureaucratic organisation. Further, this, coupled with the influence of the American missionaries exposed the Nagas to changes in mode of dress, the institution of marriage, the social coordination, and displaced old festivals and customs, thereby completing the transitional phase.

The Second World War also traumatically affected the transition of the Naga society when the Japanese and the British fought the bloodiest battle of the war in the Naga Hills.¹⁰ As a result of this war the Nagas suffered extremely. But on the other hand, some Nagas bagged the advantages of the situation which had a serious impact. The sudden war-time construction activity, posting

of military supplies and other necessities brought a lot of money into the Naga Hills. This brought into being a new rich class of contractors thus creating a small middle class in Nagaland.

But undoubtedly the single most important factor responsible for the emergence of the middle class in Nagaland was the creation of Nagaland State in 1963 which was created as a result of insurgency. The most important factor that quickened the pace of development and the transition from a tribal organisation to a class based society among the Nagas was the problem of insurgency and the attitude of the Indian Government. In order to pacify the elements involved in the insurgency the Government of India provided immense funds from time to time but State officials and ministers acted as an intermediate body between the insurgents and the Government. These ministers and officials in the State did little to achieve the goals set by the government of India but did exploit the frequently floating easy money for owning various establishments as their means of production. It was these developments which introduced a market in land and business and set in motion the growing transformation of middle class. Huge amount of funds were pumped into the new state for the purpose of development. This sudden flow of easy money had grave repercussions. The officials responsible for handling these large sums of money became corrupted as they succumbed to the temptation of quick wealth. This corruption became, in a sense, a way of life as there was no accountability for these funds. It was the British who predicted in the 19th century that the Nagas would become "hopelessly sophisticated". Yet it was the creation of Nagaland State that has made them hopelessly corrupted. The influx of Panjabis, Marwaris and non-local business communities with their shops and godowns in Dimapur also spread to other areas, reaping the advantages of this fresh frontier of economic enterprise.

New industrial establishments were formed and extension of bureaucracy following statehood created new employment facilities. The growth of transport, communications and other construction activities were carried out. This resulted in the giving of permits for various enterprises and industries. The opportunities for education, social welfare and medical facilities improved. The setting up of social welfare institutions, schools, colleges and even a university campus greatly changed the social structure. Rail communication and air services made it easy for the Nagas to venture more¹² freely into travel to other states and countries.

All these changes had accentuated the formation of a Nouveau Riche class. The net result of the process of modernisation particularly after statehood was the emergence of an uneven social structure. Because all these developments did not affect much change at the grassroot level, it was only a small part of the urban population which benefited from these developments and emerged as a new middle class. The progress of trade and commerce and the nature of political activities were mainly responsible for the emergence of the bourgeoisie and this provided them the initial capital to invest further the multiplication of their resources through business, transport or construction works.

The emergence of the middle class on a socio-economic basis due to increasing flow of money into the state has disturbed the rhythm of the Naga tribal production. This led to the intense social stratification based on material strength which was completely absent prior to this. The entire Naga tribal society has not been assimilated fully by this phenomenon into a complete transformed class society. The middle class as the Marxists define it has not fully emerged as the two historic tendencies of class formation - bourgeoisification and proletarianisation¹³ - has not taken place in its true form.

The old tribal social organisation is still deeply entrenched in the minds of the people and all the social ramifications of class are not so pronounced. However, the process has set in through the growing trend of capitalism which has linked the entire society with the world capitalism in terms of trade and other influences.

Notes & References

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