

The Naga Women's Interventions For Peace

BY PAULA BANERJEE

Cet article examine les négociations des femmes dans les conflits au Nagaland (Inde) et leurs interventions pour instaurer la paix qui, fait remarquer l'auteure, ont non seulement redéfini la paix mais transformé les relations homme/femme dans cette région.

South Asia has witnessed immense turmoil in the last two decades. The region has seen an escalation of violence to an unprecedented scale. The energies with which smaller groups are claiming their rights to cultural survival against the state have seriously challenged the concept of the state as a neutral umpire in intra-state conflict. Very few studies have been done on intra-state conflicts in South Asia and even less have focused on women in conflict situations in the region. What we do know of are the rare experiences of exceptional women who have devoted their lives to political causes. Only recently has there been an effort to study women's multi-dimensional responses to some exceptional South Asian conflicts.¹

There is, however, no analysis of women's lived experiences in the Northeast. One reason may be that it is extremely difficult to work in the Northeast as the region presents a microcosm of all the problematic postcolonial developments that are currently existent in South Asia. It is a region with numerous tribal populations, each of whom speaking different languages and practice different religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. It is also on the border between India and four other states: China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. Often, tribes from this part share cultural affinities with people across the border. Nagaland, situated in the Northeast corner of India, is one of the smallest states of the sub-continent with a population of 1,209,546 (Census Report). The people of Nagaland argue that their region is really Western Nagaland and that Eastern Nagaland is somewhere in Myanmar. This confusion over national borders adds to the complexity of the Nagaland situation.

A study of the effects of violence on women in this region is particularly important because this is the longest theatre of insurgencies in India and it is from this region that the Government of India faced its first major challenge to its nation-building program when the Nagas revolted in 1947.² This article focuses on women's negotiations with conflict in Nagaland, especially their interventions for peace. These interventions have led to a redefinition of peace and transformed gender relations in Nagaland.

A short history of the political conflict in Nagaland

The British entered the region in 1826 during the Burmese invasions. Through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 they gained political control over what is today Northeast India. There was little effort by the British to either integrate, modernize, or administer this area. They hardly paid attention to the tribal people of the Northeast and did not even consider them as members of the political community of India. When in 1937 tribal leaders in Aizwal demanded representation in the legislature, their demand was not only ignored by the British, they were also imprisoned (Prasad).

It was the British who first referred to the, at least, 40 ethnic groups living between the Chindwin and the Brahmaputra plains as the Nagas (Hazarika). In so doing, they ignored the fact that these people had different tribal affiliations and consequently, different ways of life and customs. Among the more populous of the Naga tribes are the Angami, Ao, Rengma, Tangkhul, and Sema. They have a shared historical experience and a great love for independence, and despite being under British rule, demanded separation from India. The British, however, ignored their demands and Nagaland has since been marginalized from mainstream Indian politics. Among the nationalist leaders only Subhas Bose made any effort to incorporate the Naga question within his political agenda when he accepted Angami Zapu Phizo's,—leader of the Naga nationalist movement and the President of the Naga National Council—program for autonomy. Phizo inspired the Nagas to fight alongside the Indian National Army for independence. But when Bose disappeared from the Indian political scene, the Naga question for independence was forgotten.

After the independence of India, the Nagas were neither granted autonomy nor statehood. They were placed within the greater region of Assam. The Nagas remained dissatisfied and the Naga National Council (NNC), under the leadership of Phizo, launched a movement for freedom. Over the years the movement became extremely violent.

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An exceptional characteristic of the Naga movement for independence was the inclusion of women even among armed rebel groups. In 1960, as a response to this movement, the Naga Hill district and the former Tuensang division of the North Eastern Frontier Administration (NEFA) were constituted into a separate state called Nagaland.

Even after achieving statehood, however, Nagaland remained recalcitrant and increasingly strong protests were generated from that region. The Sino-Indian border war and the subsequent shift in Indian regional ambitions led to further efforts to militarize the border and the periphery. When this caused a backlash, the Border Security Forces were introduced.

In the early 1970s the army moved into Nagaland and has remained in the region to this day. In 1975 the Shillong Accord was signed with the insurgents, but proved to be a temporary settlement. The Accord resulted in a split into two factions of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)—the main insurgent group in Nagaland. One was led by T. H. Muiva and Isaac Swu (NSCN-IM) and the other by Khaplang (NSCN-K). The Khaplang faction received support from the Ao region of Mokokchung, the districts of Mon, and parts of Tuensang. The rest of the state is dominated by the Isaac-Muivah faction.

Since 1991, inter-factional conflict has escalated in Nagaland. The Nagas have also come into conflict with the Kukis of Nagaland and Manipur resulting in an even greater blood-bath. The international dimensions of this conflict have also escalated, and at different times, the Nagas have received support from China, Myanmar, and Pakistan. Some progress has been made in this time; when the NSCN received international recognition in The Hague in 1992 and were admitted into the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organizations, it was considered a tremendous coup (Achay).

In 1997 the NSCN (the Isaac-Muivah faction) and the Government of India signed a ceasefire. The Khaplang faction was not included. Women's groups were actively involved in the negotiations for a ceasefire, but these women were not members of the rebel groups, rather they were part of a number of different women's peace groups in Nagaland.

Condition of women in Nagaland

Every Naga tribe has its own tradition about women's place in society. For example, Mayon women sit in the

village council but women are not allowed to do so in any of the other tribes. An Angami matriarch can wield enormous influence within the family but not in clan meetings whereas Ao women may play a greater public role.

Even where gender indexes are concerned, women in Nagaland present a diverse picture. For example, they have one of the worst sex ratios in India with only 890 women to a thousand men (Census Report). Usually, in areas of prolonged political violence there is a higher female-to-male sex ratio as more men die because of ongoing conflict. This is not the case in Nagaland, where the female-to-male sex ratio has steadily decreased over the last 50 years.³ This points to the particularly difficult life women in Nagaland have as a result of the ongoing armed conflicts in this region and their continuous victimization by the army and by rival rebel groups.

Paradoxically, however, the status of women in Nagaland is not particularly low. In fact, the situation of the girl child is much better than in most other states in India. Girls have a better chance of acquiring an education in Nagaland than in other parts of India and over 56 per cent of Naga women are literate in a country where the national average is only 39.4 per cent (Census Report). The number of professional women is also on the increase and the number of female graduates of law schools has increased every year over the last ten years (Directorate of Economics and Statistics). The number of female teachers in the only law college has also doubled in the last five years. Even in primary schools there are almost equal numbers of male and female students (Directorate of Economics and Statistics).⁴

Another advantage is that women form the bulk of the cultivators in rural areas (Directorate of Economics and Statistics)⁵ which guarantees them a certain degree of economic self-sufficiency. The Nagas have, however, traditionally practiced *jhum*, or "slash and burn" cultivation. They are currently being forced to abandon this kind of cultivation as it leads to ecological disaster. As a result, greater numbers of women are joining the ranks of unemployed and the government has established no substantial program for women's alternative income-generation.

The Naga rebel groups are known to welcome women members and women in Nagaland are joining the insurgent groups in large numbers. All rebel groups have a women's faction. However, the number of women members cannot be ascertained due to the clandestine nature of the groups. According to insiders, the number is fairly high (over ten per cent). One reason why an increasing number of women are joining these groups may be the fact that it is an alternative means of economic sustenance. Another reason is rebel groups go out of their way to make special appeals to young women to join their ranks, often inserting ads in local newspapers (*North-East Herald*).

Women do not, however, form part of the leadership among these groups. This is not unusual as none of the Naga clan leaders are women. There are few women in

politics in Nagaland or in formal decision-making bodies. According to one observer "the participation of women in decision-making bodies has been a taboo since time immemorial" (Leo 14). Those who do take part in state or national electoral politics are largely members of political families such as the Shaizas. There are no women in traditional village councils other than among the Mayon who live in Manipur and have only two women in the city council of Kohima. Even here women are not elected but nominated by the Governor.

Neither formal politics nor the rebel groups have made any space for the political leadership of women. Yet, women have appropriated this space through their involvement with and domination of peace movements in the region.

Naga women's quest for peace

One of the outstanding feature of Naga women's interventions in conflict is the multiplicity of the peace movements that they have initiated. The best known among these organizations for peace is the Naga Mother's Association (NMA). The head office of the NMA is in the largely Angami city of Kohima. It was founded on February 14, 1984 out of Naga women's concern for the increasing problems in Naga society.

Membership of NMA is open to any adult Naga woman irrespective of whether she is married or single. Members can join through the women's organizations of their own tribes. There are ten officers including a President, three Vice Presidents, and a Secretary, who all are elected for a term of four years. The organization aims at upholding womanhood, human rights, and human values. It encourages human development through education and tries to eradicate social problems and economic exploitation as well as work towards peace and progress.

From the time of its formation, the NMA has actively worked towards achieving peace. It mediated between the Government of Nagaland and the Naga Student's Federation over the age limit for jobs and came to an equitable settlement. The NSF had wanted the age limit for jobs to be increased to 30 years and to lower the pensionable age to 57 years. After mediation, the Government decided to recognize the demand for the minimum pensionable age.

Another NMA achievement is the formation of the Peace Team in October 1994 to confront the deteriorating political situation. Their theme was "Shed No More Blood." The NMA peace workers initiated dialogues with the State Government and with the rebel groups to stop the violence and bloodshed. They also organized public rallies with religious leaders to appeal for peace.

The NMA spoke against killings not only by the army but also by the militants. In a pamphlet released on 25th May 1995 the representatives of NMA wrote that "the way in which our society is being run whether by the over-ground government or the underground government, has become

simply intolerable." The NMA appealed to both the parties to stop killing, as the,

assassinated man may be a husband, a father, a son, or a brother. His whole family is shattered by his violent liquidation no matter what reasons his liquidators choose to give for snuffing out his life.

The Naga mothers have realized that one of the root causes of conflict stems from the chronic under-development of the people. They have tried to address the issue by becoming involved with developmental problems and have had enormous success in this area. They have addressed the issues such as malnutrition among children and provided pioneering services for the care of patients afflicted with AIDS, establishing facilities for anonymous testing. They are the first group to counsel pregnant HIV-women. The NMA has also taken up the initiative to fight against rampant drug abuse and alcoholism. Through its efforts, Nagaland was declared a dry state. Nevertheless, the NMA continues to be confronted by a burgeoning drug problem. They have set up a rehabilitation center, Mount Geliad Home, which operates in collaboration with the Kripa Foundation in Mumbai. Sometimes, members of the NMA are threatened by drug peddlers because they are effectively working to shut down the drug trade in Nagaland. The NMA leadership remains unruffled by this opposition.

The success of the NMA can be measured by the extent to which large groups of women have accepted them as their voice of protest. NMA rallies are always well represented by different tribal groups. The NMA has actively participated in the meetings for a ceasefire between the Government of India (GOI) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Isaac Swu and Thuingeliong Muivah faction (NSCN-IM).⁶ Along with the NSF, the Naga *Hobos* (Tribal Councils), and the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights, the NMA representatives visited Delhi to facilitate discussions for peace. Today, however, the NMA is disgruntled because it believes that when one of its members was abused by the security personnel in Kohima, the government turned a blind eye.

Although it is the largest, the NMA is not the only women's group working towards peace in Nagaland. There are a number of others; among them an important organization called the Watsu Mongdung.

An extraordinary case catapulted the Watsu Mongdung to fame. The incident took place on 27th December 1997 in Mokokchung town. Ten members of the Assam Rifles

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and 16 members of the militia entered the town and carried out indiscriminate, numerous rapes as well as arson. The Naga Human Rights Commission entrusted Watsu Mongdung to investigate and identify the victims. They formed a special committee to investigate the matter and identified eight victims, then reconstructed the attacks after a thorough discussion with each of the women. None of the other social organizations wanted to take this matter up. Therefore, members of the Watsu Mongdung

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decided to litigate on behalf of the rape victims. To date, the case is still pending.

Watsu Mongdung began as an initiative of the church in Mokokchung. The town and its adjoining areas are the stronghold of NSCN-Khaplon. As I indicated earlier, the Khaplang faction is not one of the parties that agreed to the ceasefire. Although Watsu Mongdung has one of its offices at Kohima, it is largely a Mokokchung-based organization which is formed by the Ao women. The organization was established to recreate interest in traditional socio-cultural values and to assist women in maintaining their self-identity and self-reliance.

The organization embraces all Naga women over the age of 18.

In the beginning the members of Watsu Mongdung, a voluntary organization, devoted itself to community work. It went on to become involved with developmental programs for the village. It would send food to families where there were no male members who could help to maintain the household, or to those who did not have any resources at all. Slowly, the organization got drawn into issues of women's rights. They would discuss folktales of women who were great strategists, solve community problems in an equitable manner, organize street plays based on stories of women's valour and other legends. They began to intervene in social disputes (such as disputes over property) and their community center has become a place where Ao women could come together and rediscover their self-identity.

As of 1994, the Watsu Mongdung has found a new role. They started mediating between the people of Mokokchung and the army to help women to litigate against the army if they have been raped or abused in any way. In 1997, they took up the issue of the rape of minors and formed a United Naga Women's Forum to protest against such incidents. They have tried to mobilize social groups in Mokokchung town to negotiate peace. Where there have been indiscriminate arrests, they have spoken to the army and influenced them to release civilians. When any *Bastis* (settlements) were burnt down, they

went in with aid. They continue to carry out relief work during man-made calamities and natural disasters. They have led protests against almost every kind of oppression and violence. Once during a combing operation (army operations to weed out insurgents) in Mokokchung, when the army wanted to separate the men from the women, they refused to be separated as they feared the army would kill the men. Ultimately, the army had to interrogate men and women together and then released most of them.

Yet another women's group is the Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL) which operates both in Nagaland and Manipur. The TSL works predominantly in Ukhrul district, but has members from many other districts as well. It has branches in all the Tangkhul Naga villages. In July 1997 after an ambush by the NSCN-IM, the Assam Rifles went on a rampage in Ukhrul town, beating up all the men including schoolteachers. People were so traumatized that life came to a standstill in Ukhrul town. The TSL not only spoke to the army and convinced them to release over 40 civilians, but they also tried to instill confidence among the people of the town and its adjoining villages. They helped the people of the area to return to normal life by requesting the shopkeepers to open their shops. They also appealed to stranded people to return to their homes which brought some semblance of normalcy back to the town.

A final outstanding Naga women's group is the Naga Women's Union in Manipur. The Nagas in Manipur have tried to join the state of Nagaland which has led to violent repression against the community as a whole. The Naga Women's Union has come out strongly in favour of peace even though they realize that it might make them unpopular in their own community. They feel that solutions lie in political negotiations and not in violence. They have tried to initiate three dialogues with the Kuki women but to no avail. In an interview, their President stated that they are open to even third-party negotiations for a dialogue between the Naga and the Kuki women (personal interview). This took tremendous courage on their part because, as a minority group, they have hardly any support from the State Government or the rebel groups who are largely in favour of armed settlements.

As this article has shown, it is common for Naga women to participate in protests against army operations. The Angami Women's Organization has organized marches on a number of occasions. In August 1996, they staged silent protest marches in the town of Kohima. There are other women who have strongly protested against the killing of the common people by gun-wielding maniacs who take the law into their own hands (Changkija).

Thus, Naga women are not afraid to make political statements for peace. However, they do have problems working together. The rivalries between different groups are translated into rivalries on women's issues. Ao and the Angamis, for example have a traditional rivalry. The problems between the Watsu Mongdung, an organization of Ao women, and the NMA, largely made up of Angami

women, can be traced back to an incident where an Ao woman, arrested by police for drug peddling, was taken into custody by the NMA which tried her according to Angami common law. Some members of the Watsu Mongdung were convinced of her innocence. Others felt that even if she was guilty, she should have been tried according to Ao common law. Their inability to work out a solution in the case continues to affect the extent of interventions that women are able to make with respect to peace negotiation.

Despite these drawbacks, an extraordinary feature of the peace groups in Nagaland is their longevity. Most other women's peace groups in the Northeast find it extremely difficult to survive. For example, the Matri Manch (Mother's Front) in Assam lasted only a year.

One reason women's peace groups in Nagaland remain effective for longer periods is that they are able to blend the political with the social. The NMA has intelligently moved from political to social issues. They have protested against all kinds of violence and human rights abuses and have also made themselves indispensable in matters of drug rehabilitation. Their involvement in developmental activities has increased both their effectiveness and their acceptance in Naga society. They have earned so much esteem in the eyes of the people of Nagaland that they are now trying to negotiate some form of dialogue between the warring NSCN factions. They have come out strongly against factional rivalries and violence. They utilize an apolitical image of Naga women when they appeal to either the Isaac-Muivah faction or the Khaplang faction to end violence. They appear not to take sides but appeal as mothers to end the shedding of Naga blood. They have been extremely successful in negotiating access to all the power groups in Nagaland including the army. They have also successfully avoided the politicization of peace.

Naga women's peace groups have also increased their effectiveness by situating themselves in traditional venues. The Watsu Mongdung, for example, started in a church. The church is part of women's realm in Nagaland and the peace groups have used this traditional space for their meetings. By situating themselves in churches, women are able to uphold their legitimacy to congregate in this space even in times of political crisis or when curfew is declared, which in Nagaland happens every evening. When women from these groups come to know about impending army operations, they gather in churches because such a venue is seldom targeted and violated. Furthermore, gatherings in the churches are never questioned.

Naga women do not operate independent of social value systems. Most Naga women respect, or at least appear to respect, the demands of the insurgent groups. They seem to retain their faith in the "Cause." They appeal for peace in spite of that. The Nagas believe that Western Nagaland in India and Eastern Nagaland in Myanmar should become unified and form a larger Nagaland, independent from either country. Unlike in

India, the majority religion in Nagaland is Christianity, which has strengthened the Naga belief that they are different from Indians.⁷ Their call for self-determination is based on their exclusivity. Such a situation makes it impossible for Naga women to challenge their traditional roles because in doing so they may appear to question their traditional values and hence the very basis of their demand for independence. They do not appeal for peace at the cost of their "Cause" neither do they appeal for freedom at the cost of peace. They urge both the army and the rebel leaders to favour political negotiations over violence. While doing so, they invoke traditional images of women's opposition to violence.

Despite the enormous success attained by Naga peace groups, formal representational politics has failed to attract women. Women who will gladly initiate dialogues with the rebel Naga or Kuki leaders will not attempt to enter into state level elections. They say that politics does not fall within their traditional roles.⁸ In private discussions, they have stated that such elections go against their clan and tribal ethos. Their apathy against electoral politics can be interpreted as protest against the Indian state. Their sense of alienation from the Indian state is, in fact, very strong. They believe Indian representational politics do not respect the traditions of indigenous people. Since their battle for self-determination is based on this sense of tradition, they will do nothing to jeopardize it. They claim that Naga women are not political, yet they will participate in political negotiations such as ceasefires. To justify their participation in these kinds of negotiation, they avoid the politicization of peace by giving it a much larger meaning. Peace to Naga women is not confined to political negotiations, protest marches, and making statements in defense of human rights. It is also working for the rehabilitation of the youth and performing community services, such as caring for the sick and the elderly.

It can be argued that one reason the Naga women in peace movements have achieved such success is that these movements do not challenge the traditional role of women but instead negotiate spaces within these roles. Peacemaking in the family has always fallen on women's shoulders; it is part of their traditional role. The Naga women have appropriated this aspect of their traditional role for present-day political purposes. They appeal for peace as mothers, wives, and sisters. Their rhetoric is always personal. Their leadership in these organizations is thus accepted without recriminations because they do not appear to challenge traditional gender roles. In reality, however, they do challenge such roles and are slowly

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beginning to enter public life in a more official capacity.

Women's experiences in peace organizations have helped them learn to question, and in certain cases, even to address their absence from decision-making bodies. One member of NMA, Ms. Abieu, stood for election and became the first chairperson of the Kohima City Council. Another member of NWU has become the first woman to sit in the Moyon Village Council. This suggests that women in peace movements not only redefine peace but also have the potential for reworking gender stereotypes that exclude them from power. By defining peace-making as a woman's job they have carved out a space for themselves in the public domain. During the ceasefire negotiations neither the GOI nor the rebel groups could ignore their voice and the women had to be included in the official proceedings. Peace-making allowed the women to carve out a niche for themselves within the formalized political process. They successfully appropriated a voice in decision-making.

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¹Veena Das's work on the memory of Sikh women and the Delhi riots of 1983 falls within this genre. Recently, studies by Urvashi Bhutalia, as well as Rita Menon and Kamala Bhasin on Partition have offered rare insights into the lived experiences of women in conflict zones.

²The tribal people in Tripura, under the leadership of the Undivided Communist Party of India, revolted before the Nagas did. However, neither their movement nor their rhetoric was secessionist.

³In 1961, there were 933 women to a thousand men. In 1991, there were only 890 women to a thousand men (Census Report).

⁴In 1994, there were only two women graduates, but in 1997 the number rose to six (Directorate of Economics and Statistics).

⁵In 1991, there were 178,974 male cultivators while there were 192,623 female cultivators in Nagaland (Directorate of Economics and Statistics).

⁶Muivah was arrested by the GOA on January 20, 2000.

⁷This view has been aired by more than 90 per cent of all the respondents interviewed by the author from January to June 1999 in Nagaland. Although India is a secular state, the dominant religion is Hinduism.

⁸Among the 50 women interviewed who are professionals, including college teachers, lawyers, doctors, and women with post-graduate degrees, 47 say that formal politics is

not part of women's "traditional" domain. Women in public charity organizations, however, overwhelmingly support the entry of women into formal politics. Such a view is epitomized by Rano Shaiza, the first woman Member of Parliament in Nagaland. These are some of the findings of a project conducted under the auspices of Mahanirvan Calcutta Research Group.

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