

NAGA NATION : MYTH, ORIGIN AND ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Nagaland, one of the most beautiful states of the Indian Union, remained unnoticed by the historians. And was not even politically discussed by the common people or to a certain extent was not studied by the anthropologist for more than 18 centuries after Christ. Though mentioned by Ptolemy in Geographia and by some other explorers, but the name Naga or Naga people was still a part of mysterious and mythical pronouncements. For a justified analysis it will be correct to assume that the far eastern part of India was little explored and searched. And the rulers of medieval India and earlier empires made no efforts to identify the tribal people of India.

The following attempt addresses the idea of Naga Nation and how the people of Nagaland or "Nagalim" (The Naga Nationalists Expression) relate themselves to their Myths Folklore territory and environment and how these ideas and concepts enable them to build the idea of Naga Nation and how the above said concepts are related to their History and day to day life and how do the Nagas involve in a relationship with nature which governs the Naga values, beliefs and traditions and their life style. The present discussion is designed to emphasize Nagas and their love towards nature.

The discussion also attempts to identify who are the Nagas?, Where have they come from?, and how various scholars have analyzed that What it means to be a Naga?

Key Words: Naga Nation, Myths, Folklore, Environment and territory.

INTRODUCTION

After the efforts of Moderate Naga leaders Naga people convention held discussions and the result of these discussions led to the 16 point agreement which further created the 16th state of Indian Union. This state is situated in the north-eastern corner of the country. And is surrounded by Burma on the east, Arunachal Pradesh on the North, Assam on the West and Manipur on the South, located between 25.6' and 27.4' N Latitude and 93.20' and 95.15' E

Longitude The total geographical area is 16,527 sq Kms. [the area given here is relevant only for the state of Nagaland. And not includes the area inhabited by Nagas in Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. [for Naga nationalists the area in Myanmar is eastern Nagaland]]. Nature has provided the state with a beautiful natural set up, Mountains, Vallies, forests and streams are the picturesque site where the tribes of Nagaland have been dwelling for centuries.

About the Nagas, the famous anthropologist, Christophe Von Furer- Haimendorf wrote entering the Naga country one left behind the twentieth century and was surrounded by people who follow a way of life in some respects not very different from the style in which Neolithic man must have lived in great parts of the south East Asia¹. It shows that the Naga people had not yet acclimatized themselves with the modern world. Their culture and tradition is more towards tribal nature. In fact, almost all Nagas are a tribal population. Their way of life belongs to traditionalism and they are not at a pace from where to pick the modern world. It is not correct to say that the Nagas are slow at pace.

As Verrier Elwin says they are a fine people, proud, Strong and self-reliant with the free and independent outlook characteristic of highlanders, everywhere good to look at with an unerring instinct for color design, friendly and cheerful with a keen sense of humor, gifted with splendid dances and a love of song²

WHO THE NAGAS ARE?

The blanket term “Nagas” is used to refer to a group of people living mostly in the mountainous terrain of what is known as the Naga Hills during British Colonial Era. The people of this hill region share a common culture and are believed to have a common history and a language of their own i.e Nagamese which has developed only recently and is a mix of Assamese , Bengali and Hindi words. The language is a system of communication amongst various Naga tribes and the outside world.

Nagas are said to have been the head hunters but the arrival of Christian missionaries helped Nagas to leave such violent rituals. Infact the idea that the Naga people are the head hunters is a biased one because almost all the tribes adopt some amount of ritual violence. But Nagas are certainly considered more barbaric because they are associated with head-hunting .perhaps, it was a sign of victory and pride for Nagas as they found people outside their cultivable and living domain as enemies. Elwin notes that, “they are shifting the

gear from war to peace; the cessation of head hunting and the gradual disappearance of the Feasts of Merit”³. Phonm Naga tribes of Mon district were the last Naga tribe to withdraw from such practice. The archaic ritual though is lost in past memories, but, wood-carved dummies are still visible in some Naga houses. Reflecting the bravery with which Nagas have protected their culture and history.

THE MYTH OF ORIGIN OF NAGAS

Charles chaise who has contributed extensively through his writings for political history and the evolution of Nagaland, finds it unfortunate that all Naga tribes have their history not in written form, but, have handed down through generations by legends, folklore and oral traditions.⁴

The first half of the 19th century proved a turning point in the history of Nagas, as it brought the British expeditions to the Naga Hills, and from this period onwards ethnographers of British origin began to show interest in Naga history, culture, life style and language. Though the primary objective of the British was to colonize the Naga Hills for commercial purposes, but uniqueness of the people of hills and forest and of unknown world of Nagas led them to study Nagas. Nagas belong to mongoloyed race, and their language has its root in Tibeto Burman family of languages as philologist suggest. Industrious, amicable and the people of good humor, the Nagas have been read and studied by Many scholars who have tried to plunge into a stream from where they brought their own ideas about the origin of the word Naga. They attach their own justification of their idea. John Butler believes the people of the plains gave the name “Nagas”⁵ to the people who used to live in the hills. It does not bear a proper justification that for all the hill peoples are not known Nagas.

Some other scholars have regarded that the word Naga derives from a Sanskrit word Nag which means a snake. L.W. Shakespeare & Robert Reid believe that the word derives from the word Naga the naked. This also does not prove that only the Naga tribes were the naked people. In a tribal

situation there is a specific custom or ritual attached to each tribe about their dressings?

Referring to Ptolemy, Asoso Yunou writes that he refers them as 'Nagalong', meaning the realm of the naked people, almost exactly where the Nagas are now.⁶

Ahaib-un-Disa Talish, the Mughal historian who accompanied the invasion of Mir Jumla, the Governor of Bengal, in Assam in 1662 refers to them as 'Nanga'⁷

The European traveler, Tavernier also mentions the, Nagas who wore pig's tusk on their caps, very few clothes on their bodies and great holes for ear-rings through the lobes of their ears.⁸

The Nagas have no written historical record about their origin and the route of migration to their present inhabitation; some writers believed that Nagas immigrated from three directions - North East, North West and South East. And Nagas settled in the area falling the west of modern Burma and in the eastern corner of India, including the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. However it is a general belief that the majority of the Nagas immigrated from south East through the corridor of Indo-Myanmar border to the Naga Hills.

About the migration of Nagas, in the present habitat, Yunou writes it is crystal clear that their ancestors most probably were the primeval non-Chinese of Ching tribes, who nomadised herding cattle,..... many centuries before the Christian era, and began to spread towards the east, west, north and south as the legend narrates , right in the western china , Indo-China, Malaya , Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Burma , Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal right up to Ladakh in the north west of India.⁹

W.C.Smith a sociologist proves an affinity of the Nagas with Dyaks and Kayans of Borneo, the Battack of Sumatra in Indonesia, The Igorots and Effigies of the Philippines and some tribal groups of Formosa in Cultural similarities with one another like head-hunting, dormitory, dwelling houses, disposal of the dead on raised plat forms, a great

freedom of intercourse between the sexes before marriage, betel chewing,....." ¹⁰

It proves that the Nagas are not the tribes who were concentrated at one place, especially in Naga Hills. They have a relationship not only in Myanmar or Thailand but further east and south-east of Asia as well. They share common culture with almost similar stock of people of Sumatra the Indo-Chinese geographical area and Borneo, etc.

In his book V.K. Nuh quotes Sumet Jumsai [Naga cultural origins in siam and west pacific 1988] views which suggest ,” that instead of the present Egyptians – whose early activities on the sea were rather sparse- the great sea faring culture of South East Asia were the most likely candidates for the Naga people, the origin of culture and people in Egypt. The primary contention is that the carriers of culture were Austric, and the origin of the culture could be anywhere from Sumeria and India to South-East Asia and Oceania”.¹¹

Helcombe and Peal hold that word Naga has its derivation in the word, “Nok” meaning the folk. According to Chandrika Singh this view seems logical and close to Nagas. But it cannot be said that only Nagas are folks. All tribes have a specific folk culture attached to them.¹²

S.K. Chatterjee attaches Nagas to Kratas of the Hindu mythology. Some other view regarding Naga origin are close to that of Christian origin. One of the views suggest that Nagas originated from the stone and other one relates their origin to a lake. But all these views are the myth and more or less religious belief which brings a specific kind of unity within the Naga people.¹³

NAGA NATION ENVIRONMENT AND TERRITORY

Although the term nation had a radically different meaning in the earlier times as well as in the modern world, there is one aspect common at which both assume the same regard as for the creation of a geographical unit. While arriving at the

concept on nation, geographers consider the factors of language ,race, tradition and independent governments , but at the same time persist with the idea of well defined environment giving paramountcy to natural centre, Hence the geographical structure becomes an eminent need for a nation.

Naga people do belong to a certain specified geographical structure to which they attach a profound adoration as “ their” earth.”It is mother Earth which / gives life to everything ; it is man that makes heaven or inferno of its: she keeps time to end Herself/ and everything dwelling therein shall perish”¹⁴.

Thus the above maxim represents that Naga people live in a specific, surroundings ; mountains, hills, streams, forests, animals and food and fruits, where lies their affection and on which they depend for sustainance of their life.

According to a story where Nagas establish a relation between themselves and the nature is worth telling in short as cited by Tezenlo Thong in his book colonization proselytization and identity. 2016 For the Nagas woman represents mother Earth the man represents humanity the Tiger signifies the realm of Animal and Nature and the Spirit symbolizes the extra terrestrial or celestial world as the Mother grew old and became weak however, there arose a conflict among the three Brothers leading to permanent animosity , Subsequently the Tiger left for the Jungle the Spirit went to North and the man became the head of the Village¹⁵.

All theorists of nationalism irrespective of their fields attribute great significance to territory in the formation and existence of a nation. There is a close and interlocking relationship between territory and nation. “Nations were originally formed in a narrow geographical area between natural boundaries while the Nation emerged as a product of geography , the national territory at the same time was affected by the development of the nation”¹⁶.

Nagas do believe in a central geographical structure in which they are scattered in Naga hills of Manipur, in the North Cachar and Mikir hills, Lakhimpur,Sibsagar and Nowgong of Assam, in the north-east of Arunachal Pradesh, the Somra tract and its contiguous parts of Burma.

Nagas are fond of their land and would like to relate anything which sprouts in their land to their culture. Their folk stories, songs, symbols, customs etc. do praise their land and thence enhancing the love of the home land”¹⁷. But Naga advocates argue that the first the Britishers and then the Indians succeeded in splitting the Nagas into five zones, four in India(in four separate states) and one in Burma¹⁸.

Joseph Stalin asserts that territory is an important component for the existence of Nation. At the out set he questions that inspite of a common language why do there exist two different nations (U.K. and U.S.A.)? While responding , he says, “because they do not live together but inhabit different territories . A nation is formed only as a result of lengthy and systematic intercourse, as a result of people living together generation after generation. But people cannot live together for lengthy periods unless they have a common territory”¹⁹.Nagas for centuries have been living in a specific geographical settlement and they have maintained a common history and a common culture for a long time.

Although territory is an essential aspect yet scholars have been able to curtail the importance of territory but in a philosophical sense. As Synder would put it , “ although territory is an essential element in the existence of a nation it cannot be regarded as the absolute due to the meaning of a nation. The key factor remains the human selection of possibilities in a given environment . If a Trinitarian formula for historical development were sought , it would have to consist of territory , stomach , and mind”²⁰.

However it should be mentioned that geographical setting has not necessarily always been an important factor for nation or nationalism.

For Polish nationalism, geographical setting did not matter Snyder reveals, "Polish nationalism from the time of the partitions in 1772, 1793, and 1795 until the creation of the Polish state in 1919 existed without a geographical setting"²¹.

Finally the eminent scholar Anthony D. Smith finds modern nationalism as "territorial" in character. Hence "the nation is a human population that is territorially bounded with mobility throughout that territory and whose members belong to a particular territory which is recognized as "theirs" by right"²². Whilst Hayes finds that the idea of natural frontiers between nationalities is a myth²³.

CONCLUSION

To conclude one must add that the term Naga is a collective noun for many tribes living in the Naga Hills including present day Nagaland, Manipur Naga Hills, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar in the provinces of Kachin and Sagaing. Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Sema, Lotha, Pochury, Rengma, Konyak, Sangtam, Yimchungru and Zekiang are the major Naga tribes living in this area. These people belong to Mongoloid Race and speak languages of Tibeto-Burman family and each tribe has its own language (Nagamese is the language of the market place and for the common communication among the Nagas)

It is said that the present day Nagas situation is an offshoot of British Colonialism and is a result of the policy of Divide and Rule. It is argued that before the arrival of the British people the Nagas originally did not exist as a distinct people and had no contact with the outer world, "Through British categorization and the drawing of Administrative boundaries the people of the hills became The Nagas, now separated from the people of the plains. In short, the British and the Missionaries then made the Nagas into Christian

Nationalists and implanted in them their hatred for the Indians"²⁴.

"At the end of the colonial rule the Nagas had an elite that was conscious of its own Nation-being and could consequently form themselves into a National Organization"²⁵. Not only this Nagas were separated with other Nagas by British policies. A feeling of alienation grew among the Naga people. When India got Independence the Nagas were not intending to be a part of India. Naga Independence League was established and they declared their Independence a day before 15th August 1947. Naga National Council however carried the demand forward for Naga Nationalism. In 1975 Shilong Accord was signed between the Government of India and Naga National Council but Naga Nationalist Movement is still going on for a separate and sovereign Nagalim.

Naga struggle is a strive to gain power, and Naga Nationalism is a means for it. For development, or protection of their identity, or for safeguarding their traditions, land, language, etc, they need to promote conducive atmosphere which would prepare a congenial ground for their self-determination, power, or at least a share of power, which would enable them to enhance their interest.

Though Nagas have been provided with the best of the opportunities, yet they have not been fully satisfied with the provisions which they are receiving. The paramount question which hinders the progress of the said areas and the integrity with India is primarily not the development opportunities, but the question of granting complete independence to Nagaland or from the Naga point of view, the safeguarding of Naga identity, culture, customs, traditions and their common history with the principal object of attaining political power or independence.

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