

CHRISTIANITY, THE FOUNDATION OF MODERN NAGA SOCIETY

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Abstract

This work explains in brief the nature of the Nagas society before they came in contact with the outside world. How the Christian missionaries set foot among these head hunting Naga tribes, and won over their confidence and transform the people and its society by converting them into new faith; Christianity. Within a short span of time almost the whole of Nagas embrace Christianity, and Christian values begins to replace their old values.

This resulted in the evolution of a new mechanism to govern and control the administration of various churches established in different villages and regions. The result is formation of different church associations based on common dialects which took the shape of the tribes later. As church was the only institution available among the Nagas that engages every Naga villages, the colonial powers as well as Independent India used church institutions to serve their interest.

After the statehood, so many social institutions were established based on tribal lines from tribal Hohos, students organizations/unions, women and mother's association/organizations etc. at various level based on the church pattern in structure and in functioning. The contemporary Naga society traced its origin in the institution of church.

Introduction

Nagaland, the homeland of Naga tribes is situated in the North-Eastern part of India. The term 'Nagas' has been defined by different scholars in different ways without any common acceptance, but it refers to a conglomeration of several tribes inhabiting the North Eastern part of India and North-Western part of Myanmar. Nagaland is home to sixteen officially recognized Naga tribes and many sub tribes within these sixteen tribes. It extends from 26°6' N to 27°4' N latitude and 93°20' E to 95°15' E longitude.²

The administrative unit known as the Naga Hills-Tuensang Area [NHTA] came into being on 1st December 1961, which was later made a full fledged state on 1st December 1963 becoming the 16th state of Indian Union. Nagaland with its territorial area of 16,579 sq. km has the largest Christian population in the Indian Union. The location of Nagaland, however, gets its importance out of all proportion to its size, for it has international frontiers with China in the North and

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² Statistical Handbook of Nagaland, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Nagaland, Kohima. p-.1

Myanmar in the East. The other neighbours are Assam in the North and Manipur in the south. As per the 2011 Census the population of the state is 19,80,602 with density population of 119 per sq. km.³

Administratively the state is divided into eleven districts. Most of these districts are inhabited by various tribes. An estimated more than fourteen lakhs of Nagas remain outside Nagaland and straddle the state boundaries of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and the international Burmese frontier. The entire state is a highland country except for a narrow belt of foot-hills of the lower ranges and the valleys along the river beds. The hill areas have a cool bracing, fresh and invigorating climate; but the low-lying areas with their tropical and sub-tropical climate are unhealthy and places like Dimapur valley though productive have an oppressively humid climate. The state has an annual average rainfall of 200 cm. distributed over a period of six months.⁴

Nature of Traditional Nagas Society before Christianity

The word 'Naga' is a term which was used to denote the people of this region when they came in contact with the outside world particularly with the arrival of the colonial power in the region in early 19th century. There are so many versions on the meaning of the term 'Naga', and the fact of the matter is none of these tribes used this term to identify one another. The word Naga was widely used only when the outsiders started using it as a way to address the tribals inhabiting this region. These people are known to each other by their villages. Every village was an independent state in itself just like the Greek City-State. For them the village was an end in itself; generally people in villages produced everything within the village; it was a kind of self sufficient economy. The people were uncivilized and unlettered yet they had a unique way of running their village polity, which bound them and kept the village community intact. There was no point of time in Naga history where all the tribes were governed under one ruler, or for that matter not even a single tribe. The kind of administration among Nagas varied from village to village with some similarities especially with those neighbouring villages.

It is generally assumed that Nagas have something in common which distinguishes them from many of the other tribes found in the Northeast India. They are marked by a very strong love for their village resulting in a strong common tie that binds them together as one people. These villages have their own well established customs, habits, manners and way of life. These

³ Census of India 2011: Paper 2, Volume II of 2011, Nagaland Series 14, p-20.

⁴ Horam, M., 1988, Naga Insurgency- The Last Thirty Years, p-2

traditional traits are passed on by the elders to the younger people through folksongs and folklores to conform to their culture and tradition. For these reasons the elders in Naga society command a special respect and are revered highly. They in return shape and mould the social fabric of the community. As a people they are ferocious and wild but not irrational. The Naga as a whole are unique from others for their earlier head-hunting practices. The Nagas as a society was unorganized but the village as an entity was well organized and well governed. Due to head-hunting practices, there were a great amount of doubts and suspicion among villages which resulted in limited trade and commerce among villages. This compelled the village to produce and manage the needs and requirements of the village within, making a village an end in itself.

It was a period of darkness in the grips and clutches of old animistic life, worshipping different spirits and natural objects which seemed strange to them in a form of sun, moon, stones, trees, fire, winds, thunder and lightning etc. Nagas celebrate different festivals throughout the year, some of the major festival are Sekrenyi, Sukrunye, Aoleang Monyu, Monyu, Moatsu, Naknyulem, Mongmong, Metemneo, Tuluni, Tsokum, Toku Emong, Nga-ngai, Ngada, Yemshe etc.⁵ All these festivals are as a part of the rituals towards these gods, to please and seek forgiveness from these gods and to seek their blessings. Every village seems to be having different but similar gods. For these reasons, Nagaland is also called the land of festivals in modern days.

The history of isolation caused by intermittent migration historically and subsequent headhunting culturally was what Nagas were before the arrival of Christianity. The environment was very complicated and complex to deal with the Nagas and making the matter worse different villages spoke different dialects. It was literally not easy to communicate and deal with the Nagas and the Christian Missionaries set foot and toiled in these dicey conditions to win souls.

The coming of British power and Christian Missionaries

The coming of the British Colonial power in the region in the early 19th century, the colonial raj encountered frequent raids and looting towards their subjects by the Naga tribes. The colonial power faced a unique situation to deal with these Naga tribes to stop disturbing their subjects. Considering the complexity of the socio-political nature among these various hill villages, the Britishers thought the best way to tame and contain the warring Naga tribes from harming their subjects was through religion. The American Baptist Missionaries who were working in Calcutta for eastern India were invited and brought in the region and by mid 19th century the

⁵ Ovung & Ao 2012 Nagaland :Land of Festivals. P- 20

missionaries came into contact with Nagas. The colonial ruler used the Christian Missionaries to serve their interest of governing their subjects smoothly. On the other hand it was a blessing in disguise for the Christian missionaries to sow the gospel in this virgin region where Christ is alien to them.⁶

The missionaries came and with much difficulty could convert some Nagas in later part of 19th century and the rest is the history. On 12th September 1847, under Sibsagar Mission the first Naga was baptized by Nathan Brown at Sibsagar. His name was Hubi, but he died the following October.⁷ Later in the year 1869, Rev. E.W Clark came to Sibsagar and restarted a mission called the Naga Mission from another Naga region called Dekha Haimong or Molungkimong. On 23rd Dec. 1872 Rev. Clark baptized fifteen new converts at Molungkimong village, and the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the Church which was built by the first group of Naga believers. Thus the first Church in Naga soil was established by Rev. Clark who along with the new converts established a new village, called Molungyimsen, near Dekha Haimong in 1876. Clark set up his Mission Station here until it was shifted to Impur in 1894.⁸

Impur Mission as the base, Rev. E.W Clark began to start sowing the seed of Christ among the head hunting Naga tribes from different locations. The mission encountered untold difficulties initially while penetrating new villages and new tribes, but once a person from a village or a community was converted the mission work became much easier. Gradually the membership grew in numbers and churches were established in various villages and regions among Nagas inhabited areas. Though Nagas consist of many tribes speaking different dialects yet their pattern of life and values are quite similar to one another particularly, their religion- animism.

From Impur mission the whole present Aos villages were covered, the present Eastern Nagas comprising of six tribes and some regions of Semas villages. Rev. E.W Clark considering Kohima as strategic location for the people of that region initiated a new Mission from Kohima under Rev. King in 1882 and the first church was founded through this mission on March 23rd 1883 among Angamis. This mission centre covered the regions in and around Angami villages and tribes, the whole of present Tenyimia regions and some part of Semas region. Rev. E.W Clark initiated another mission among Lothas through W.E.Witters at Wokha on April 9th 1885 which came to be known as Vankhosung Mission.

6 Dozo, Phuveyi, 2012, THE NAGAS: A Valid Reason to Live Together With A Vision *A Compendium On Nagas*, p-11

7 NBCC, 2012, One New Humanity , Celebrates Platinum Jubilee 1937-2012.,p-12.

8 Ibid.

These three mission centres as the base, the population of the church members began to grow in number and size leading to the establishment of churches in various villages among Nagas irrespective of tribes and regions. The increase and growth of the members and the churches was quite fast and spontaneous except at the initial period. As the people believed and accepted Christ as their Saviour and God, the inner transformation of individuals began from Christian perspectives. This change in an individual manifests even in the outer behavior of a person, which leads to loosening of the accepted social values and ethics. These new members of the Christian community of Nagas became agents of change and transformation took place among the nomadic and barbaric Nagas.

The rapid growth of churches

The Impur Mission, Kohima Mission and Vankhosung Mission as the main centers, the light of gospel started spreading among the Nagas like a wild fire; these tribes - the Aos, Angamis, Lothas started evangelizing their neighbouring villages and tribes and there was no turning back, the gospel reached every nook and corner of the Naga - inhabited areas particularly in present Nagaland. Within a short period, churches mushroomed in every village among the Nagas. The head hunting Nagas became the soul-hunting Nagas. People started embracing this new faith like a fashion leading to the transformation of their lives and the societies. The old value begins to erode dramatically and the new Christian value begins to germinate and take root among these tribes. The churches as the host, the missionaries began their evangelistic work among these nomadic and barbaric Naga tribes,

The growth of numerous churches in the villages became another challenge for the mission leaders to formulate a mechanism to supervise the functioning of the churches and also to constantly assist and help in nurturing in their new spiritual growth. These missions' leaders considering the diversity of dialects initiated grouping of churches on ground of same dialects under common sub-unit for better supervision and communication, which later took the shape of different tribes' church associations and councils. The establishment of the churches had far reaching consequences on the social fabric of the society, replacing the values and transformed the society all together in terms of structure and substance.

These tribes' churches association or councils were supervised through Naga Hills Baptist Church Advisory Board which was organized in 1935 at Kohima and was renamed as Naga Hills Baptist Church Council in 1937. The present Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) which

was reorganized in 1953 takes 1937 as the formation day of this apex body⁹. NBCC as the apex body at present as per NBCC Statistics report presented on 2011 to NBCC Annual Meeting at Zeme Baptist Church, Kohima February 4th -5th 2012, the total number of associations under NBCC, the total numbers of churches under each association and the total number of Baptist membership of each associations and over all figures of NBCC are given below.

Associations, Churches and the Baptist Membership in 2011 based on presentation at the NBCC Annual Meeting at Zeme Baptist Church, Kohima February 4th -5th 2012¹⁰

Sl No	Name of Association	No.of Churches	Noof Baptist members
1	Angami Baptist Church Council (ABCC)	105	31,032
2	Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang (ABAM)	149	93,678
3	Chakhesang Baptist Church Council (CBCC)	98	43,180
4	Chang Baptist Lashong Thangyen (CBLT)	52	23,150
5	Khaimniungan Baptist Churches Association (KBCA)	45	15,743
6	Konyak Baptist Bumeinok Bangjum (KBBB)	113	58,102
7	Kuki Baptist Church Association (KBCA)	15	3,191
8	Liangmai Baptist Association (LBA)	18	4,368
9	Kyong Baptist Ekhumkho Sanrhyutsu (KBES)	144	64,356
10	Nagaland Police Baptist Churches Association (NPBCA)	30	13,800
11	Phom Baptist Church Association (PBCA)	41	22,698
12	Pochury Baptist Church Council (PBCC)	29	5,156
13	Council of Rengma Baptist Churches (CRBC)	40	12,507
14	United Sangtam Baptist Lithroti Ashimukhong (USBLA)	76	25,619
15	Sümi Aphuyemi Baptist Akukuhou Küqhakulu (SABAK)	27	6,302
16	Sümi Baptist Akukuhou Küqhakulu (SBAK)	147	30,417
17	Western Sümi Baptist Akukuhou Küqhakulu (WSBAK)	159	27,857
18	Yimchungru Baptist Boru Amukhungto (YBBA)	86	19,417
19	Zeme Baptist Association-N (ZBA-N)	23	2,207
20	Zeme Baptist Church Council (ZBCC)	62	13,247
	Total	1,454	5,15,384

9 1'Walking the Path of Despair and Hope: Understanding and Justifying the Ways of God' NBCC's Endeavour on Peace and Reconciliation Volume 1 p-41.

10 <http://www.nbcc.in/statistics.html>, Accessed on 3/2/15.

Associate Member Associations			
Sl No	Name of Association	No.of Churches	Noof Baptist members
1	City Church, Kohima	1	80
2	Naga Christian Fellowship, Delhi	1	
3	Association of Gorkha Baptist Churches, Nagaland	61	3,000
4	Nagamese Baptist Churches Association	36	1,500
Grand total		1,553	5,19,964

As stated above within a short period the Christian population has grown rapidly. The first Naga to be converted was on 12th September 1847 and members have now grown to 5,19,964 as per February 2012, NBCC Report.¹¹ The membership for Baptist Church is counted after baptism by the Church.

In modern context among Naga villages, church buildings has become a symbol of community prosperity and prestige. One notices a church building from a far distance because churches are built on the most prominent spot in the villages or towns. Generally the church buildings are the best and biggest in Nagas villages and towns.

At present under NBCC, there are twenty churches associations and four associate associations from various tribes governing 1,454 (one thousand four hundred fifty four) churches from 20 (twenty) associations and 99 (ninety nine) churches from associate associations, commanding a membership of 5,19,964 (five lakh, nineteen thousand, nine hundred sixty four). These associations are formed and organized on tribal lines except some and for four associate associations the congregations are mixed. All these associations and associate associations function as per the directives and guidelines laid down by the apex body NBCC annually.

Church as an agent in the evolution of Naga Society

The main purpose of the Christian missionaries working in the region and particularly among the Nagas was to spread the great gospel: The Good News to them. To introduce the saviour of mankind and to bring them out from the darkness to the light, many heard and believed; and embraced Jesus Christ as their saviour and God and followed this new faith.

The present church structure and administration of the whole system was not consciously designed or created by the then church leaders. It evolved gradually to where it is today in terms

¹¹ Ibid.

of structure and functioning. During the course of years the churches have undergone various level of changes from apex body to its federating associations and unit churches. There were instances where associations had to be created from the existing association and even more churches were created from one church, due to factors like distance, over population, difference in dialect etc. But in all these changes the substance remained intact, the mechanism for spreading the Good News changed depending on the circumstances, and this is what happened to the churches among the Nagas.

One very important aspect, which the reader needs to keep reminding oneself, is that prior to the church institution among Nagas there were no other institutions, be it political, social or religious that engages these villages or communities as a whole. The villages were confined in their own world, suspicion and distrust was the norm of the head-hunting era. Evangelizing the people of the region and establishment of churches in various villages and regions was the factor why we have the community called Nagas. The growth of the churches among the Nagas was so rapid that within a short span of time nearly the whole Naga community was brought under one big banner that is - church. For the first time, the Naga community through church was able to live and work under one entity that is as a Christian community. Through the church platform the gospel begins to instill and vibrate among Nagas bringing this new community closer physically and psychologically in thinking in line with Christian values. These processes unconsciously integrate the Nagas together as one entity as there was none prior to it. Church unconsciously laid a sound foundation for the establishment of easy and smooth modern social institution among the Nagas.

Subsequently, the colonial power and later the Government of India took the institution of church in reaching out to the Nagas, as church was the only established institution available. The Colonial power, the Government of India as well as Nagas themselves used church for various purposes. Apart from spreading the gospel, any information be it social/political for the Nagas were disseminated through churches, which was the only effective means to reach out.

Conclusion

In the post independence era many social institutions have mushroomed among the Nagas. One witnessed the establishment and the growth of institutions as many as the numbers of tribes and villages. The present Naga social institutions apart from governmental agencies, has its roots firmly infested in the church whether Hohos, students unions/conferences, women associations,

mother associations etc. at various levels from top to bottom manifest the church patterns of structure and functioning. Every tribal Hoho established and functioning are similar to the tribal churches associations under Nagaland Baptist Church Council. The student's organizations are no different. So also the women associations and Naga Mothers Associations. All these institutions established and developed on the tribal lines, the structure and style of functioning is very similar to one another irrespective of any associations or unions, reflecting the church in every aspect except the substance.

In the present Naga Society, the church as an institution has led and grown tall and it commands an indisputable position of respect among the Nagas. In the present context to visualize a Naga society minus the Church will be incomplete in every sense. The modern Naga society has grown with the church which will remain the nerve of the society till and alternative comes in its place. The church has become a part and parcel of Naga society.

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