



SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL STATUS OF NAGA WOMEN

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ABSTRACT The Nagas are the most singular race of Nagaland. The origin of the word 'Naga' is interpreted different ways. One belief that it is derived from the Assamese word 'naga' Sanskrit word 'nagna' meaning 'naked', for the reason that the Nagas were comparatively ill-clad. It could also be from the vernacular 'nag' which means a mountain. The Nagas are scattered over the hill districts of Manipur but chiefly to the west, North and North-east. Nagas are one of the indigenous tribes of the North East India. Nagas who inhabits the extreme eastern part of India form a living and vibrating culture with great values of life. It is very difficult to give a general account of the many tribes covered by the word "Naga" for there are both differences and similarities among them just as there are many aspects of their life and culture which can be paralleled by tribes in other parts of india. The Nagas according to R.R.Shimray "are stalwart athletic and of medium size with broad shoulder and high cheek bones. Their colour is like that of the Burmese, the Indonesians, the Malaysians, the Thais, the Japanese and the Chinese.

KEYWORDS

The **Naga people** are a conglomeration of several tribes inhabiting the North Eastern part of India and north-western Burma. The tribes have similar cultures and traditions, and form the majority ethnic group in Indian state of Nagaland, with significant presence in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and some small population in Assam.

The Naga speak various distinct Tibeto-Burman languages, including Lotha, Angami, Pochuri, Ao, Poula (Poumai Naga), Inpui, Rongmei (Ruangmei), Tangkhul, Thangal, Maram, and Zeme. In addition, they have developed Nagamese Creole, which they use between tribes and villages, which each have their own dialect of language.

Das writes "Generally the Naga tribes live in compact big sized villages in east, north and west districts of Manipur. Naga society as found in its villages was a well-knit society where rigid customs and discipline were observed. As the village was an independent unit, customary laws were supreme and dispensation of punishment was very fast and quick. The Nagas once settled in a place were almost glued to it and rarely moved out to a new place from cradle to grave and identified himself with his village.

Role in Society:

In Naga society, family is the basic social institution. Naga society is also both patriarchal and patrilineal and thus descent is traced from father's side. This proved that women are not equal to men in status concerning certain aspects. Women are considered physically weaker than a man which is the reason why the Naga men feel responsible towards women.

As a daughter, wife and mother, Naga women play a vital role. They are given full authority regarding the domestic affairs. Men keep themselves away from the domestic affairs since they consider it below their dignity to indulge in such activities. In traditional Naga society, normally the daughters are very close to their parents, especially to the mothers. A mother plays a significant role in the family as she performs all household chores apart from growing vegetables, educating her children the art of weaving and handicrafts. She also helps her husband and is the real partner of her husband. She is very hard working and accompanies her husband everywhere except in hunting.

Inequality between men and women is linked to a complex historical process and is manifested in ways and varied as social and cultural conditions of the community. Women whether literate and illiterate and employed or unemployed, were found to perform similar roles and duties where domestic work was concerned. According to Mills "They weave the clothing required for the family, work in the fields, cut and bring in firewood and perform all manners of drudgery."

In Naga society a woman has no share in landed properties of her father and of her husband except otherwise acquired by her husband after her marriage with them. The Naga society is so stringent in following the patrilineal system that women are not permitted to have a share in the property even in the absence of a son. In such cases property goes to the

nearest male clan of her father's clan.

Widow re-marriage is not prohibited, however if she chooses to remain in her late husband's house to look after their children no restriction is imposed. Polygamy is unknown in the Naga society.

They are industrious but the unpleasant task which makes up the daily round all fell to the women, who take at least their fair share in the work of cultivation. Due to the hard working she takes no further care about her personal appearance.

As a wife Naga women have considerable freedom to take important decisions about any family matters in the absence of male family members. In her husband's home also she occupies a high position and her children treated her well. Among the Maram and Tangkhul Naga Tribes "Ava Pamkhong" meaning Mother's seat or throne was given only to the mother. No one could trespass on the seat of the mother. She enjoys a high place in the family.

In the famous book "*Nagas Old Ways New Trends*", M .Horam mentions Naga women enjoy the same status as the man and suffer no discrimination on account of sex. Widows are allowed to remarry without any stigma. Being a classless society, Naga women enjoy rights and privileges guaranteed under the Naga customary laws of their respective tribes.

In the Nagas' society "there was no dowry system, no sati, no purdah system, no child marriage no bride burning, no female child infanticide." Bride price is also paid by the bridegroom to the bride's family. This system is called Chaman lubo in Zeliangrong Naga. Divorce was rare among the Nagas but sometimes this led to many unpleasant wars between the villages. Divorce system also varies from tribe to tribe among the Nagas. A girl could be divorced on grounds of barrenness, personal incompatibility differences and infidelity.

Women were considered as subordinate to men in Zeliangrong Naga society. Traditionally, women were free from danger and physical tortures during the time of intervillage feuds. In traditional Naga society boys and girls after the attainment of puberty, lived in their respective youth chambers or dormitory called Morung till they were married.

Role in Economy:

The status of women in the society is intimately connected with its position. Naga women are hard -working and from childhood, a girl is taught domestic chores. She is expected to get up at dawn, and to do all the household chores. Therefore, a woman in Naga society is happy if she had a baby girl as the first child. With regard to the economic condition of the Naga women, it was not that pathetic and miserable, for women did enjoy a considerable economic right. Dowry is absent in the Naga society but at the time of her marriage her parents can give her property both movable and immovable which become more or less her

absolute property. However, ancestral property cannot be given to the daughter.

Cultivation is the main occupation among the Naga tribes. Tending livestock like pigs, poultry, cattle, etc. are also an indispensable source of income. Therefore, domestic animals play an important part in the economy of the villages. Apart from the management of kitchen and bringing up the children which exert tremendous stress on them they have to look after the rearing and feeding of domestic animals. Mothers on leaving for their work, charged the older daughter, on the first alarm of war, to seize the little one's and flee at once to some hiding place.

The work-field of the Nagas is land and forest, on whose blossom they depend for their livelihood. Agriculture being the mainstay of the economy women's work in the field continues till cropping of grains be it in tilling, sowing, transplanting, weeding or harvesting. Threshing was done by men on huge mats spread on the field and women collected paddy in bundles. Women were entrusted to give the final touch of threshing and winnowing. Both men and women carry paddy in bags then stored in the family granary (Machum in Tangkhul). It is the duty of the women to pound and husk paddy for the family's consumption. Sometimes surplus paddy was sold by barter system in the nearby village. It is also the duty of the women to see that essential varieties of crops and vegetables for their household consumption are grown in their fields or gardens such as ginger, maize, brinjal, garlic, tomato, peas, etc.

Besides, it was their sole responsibility to collect firewood fetch water from the sources of which are often far and steep. Income from cash crops was usually considered as family fund although it was managed by the women.

Weaving is also another conspicuous economic activity of the Naga women because weaving industry was considered as a main source of income in traditional Naga society. The art of weaving and dyeing was solely carried out by women. They spin and weave varieties of traditional Naga society. The art of weaving and dyeing was solely carried out by women. They spin weave varieties of traditional handloom clothes for the family and also for sale. Handicrafts work was done mostly during off-season of cultivation.

So, Naga women were the sustainer and manager of the home. They stand equal to man in every sphere of life and need not entirely depend on their husband's earning. With the progress in the field of education more and more women are becoming salaried wives and daughters. The conservative view has slackened giving more scope to girl education. Many women work in unorganized sector or informal sector selling vegetables, firewood, tea, sweets, meat, second hand clothes etc. These are the main sources of income of the Naga women.

Role in Religion:

Naga people are religious though they do not have the name of their religion. Naga live close to nature and sense its mysterious powers in the belief of the existence of a single supreme God, who was the creation and sustainer of the universe. Fear was certainly the most outstanding characteristic of their religion. Their ordeals, superstitions, belief and taboos were chiefly based on the emotion of fear. They believe that all objects were inhabited by these gods or spirits. When people were in trouble or in fear or in happiness they invoked the gods or Kameo.

Naga religion, which is animistic, laid emphasis on the existence and manifestation of spirits, both benevolent and malevolent. Ignorance about nature increased the fear among the Nagas and thus to appease the anger of the deities and gods, sacrifices were made. It is the fear of the wrath of gods which appears to be the primary reason for the sacrifices.

The real religion of the Nagas according to M.Horam was "ancestor-worship". Nagas worship their ancestors and their tribal clan ancestor. The first is the religion of the home and the second is the religion of the local divinity.

Christianity has taken root in some Naga tribes, but it has by no means eclipsed traditional Religious beliefs. The Angami religious system features belief in a number of spirits and supernatural forces associated with the cycle of life. Animate and inanimate objects may be regarded

as embodied spirits, and there is a distinction drawn between the gods and the souls of dead humans. Among the vast number of *terhoma* ("deities") the following should be noted: Kenopfu (the creator god); Rutzeh (the giver of sudden death); Maweno (god of fruitfulness); Telepfu (a mischievous god); Tsuko and Dzurawu (husband and wife dwarf gods presiding over wild animals); Metsimo (guardian of the gate leading to paradise); Tekhu-rho (god of tigers); and Ayepi (a god who lives in Angami houses and brings prosperity). Supernatural forces are believed to possess both benevolent and malicious qualities and, when occasion demands, Angami belief provides for prayer to be made to them and for their propitiation or challenge by humans.

Angami religious practitioners are the *kemovo*^o; the *zhevo*^o; the *tsakro*^o; and the *lidepfu*^o. All of these practitioners are public functionaries. Other Religious specialists, whose realm of activity is confined to the private domain, are known as well. These include: the *themuma*, whose knowledge may range from competence in particular kinds of divination to knowledge of poisons; the *zhumma* ("invulnerables"), who reportedly can be harmed neither by bullet nor spear; the *kihupfuma*^o; and the *terhope*^o. A similar hierarchy of practitioners obtains in many other Naga tribes.

Thus, we can see that Naga women are wiser and more determined about the removal of the oppressive structure of the society. Many traditional practices have been discarded and some kept, but the practices like the inheritance law which causes greater evil are still upheld as positive part of culture and tradition. The fact that that women are not subordinate beings but are also human beings created in the image of God along with men must be recognized.

- # *Who directs public Ceremonies and is the repository of historical traditions and Genealogical information.*
- ## *who functions as integral part of the performance of personal gennas, and who also is called on in times of sickness to advise an appropriate Ceremonial course of action to cure the disease.*
- ### *an old man who inaugurates the sowing of crops.*
- #### *an old woman who inaugurates the reaping of crops.*
- ##### *individuals gifted with powers to cause illness and bad fortune.*
- ##### *Women who dream in order to foretell the outcome of various endeavors.*

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