

## Crisis and Opportunities in Naga Peace Process: The Women's Question and Naga Peace Accords

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### Abstract

It is the return of the season of troubles in the Indo-Naga peace process which has been marked by a history of flawed and gender blind peace accords and ceasefire agreements. The gravitas of the long peace collapsing has provided openings for the revival of the dormant Naga civil society and especially of the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) to reassert their moral authority as peacekeepers and demand once again their legitimate claim to being equal stakeholders in the complex negotiations for peace in the struggle for Naga self rule. Also, it provides an opening to restart discussions around Naga women's citizenship rights, which were set back after the fierce patriarchal backlash of the last decade. The paper uses this catalytic moment to look back on NMA's journey so as to examine the scope of the women's question in an ethno-nationalist movement, and NMA's negotiations for inclusion in male monopolized peace processes.

### Author Profiles

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### Prologue: Naga Peace Accords Redux

Return of seasons of troubles in the Indo-Naga peace process especially since 2019 has threatened to crack the 22 years long frozen stalemate in arriving at a political settlement of India's longest self determination struggle. The crisis is over the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government uprooting India's settled praxis of peacemaking, that is of managing territorially focused national self determination struggles by granting constitutionally guaranteed special autonomies or federal arrangements (Suan Hausing 2014, 87-111; Manchanda and Bose 2015, 8-12). In August 2019, with the swiftness of a coup the government abrogated Article 370 which guaranteed the state of Jammu and Kashmir its special status, bifurcated the territory and dwarfed it into two Union Territories. The fallout on the states of the North East was immediate (Al Jazeera 6 October 2019), especially as special autonomies guaranteed under Article 371 A-J of the Constitution were integral to the architecture of peacemaking in Mizoram and Nagaland (Manchanda, Bose and Nag 2015).

The Naga crisis got centered precisely over the symbolic accouterments of a special identity which had been stripped away from Kashmir. The dominant national politico military 'rebel' group of the Naga movement, National Socialist Council of Nagaland Isak-Muivah (NSCN I-M) raised the issue of a separate Naga flag and constitution, symbolizing the 'unique' history and situation of the Nagas, as a deal breaker. The collective leadership of the NSCN I-M group asserted that these conditions were recognized in the (secret) Framework Agreement (Das 2018) negotiated with the government in 2015 (NSCN I-M Statement 3 March 2020). The Indian negotiator and Nagaland Governor, R.N. Ravi repudiated the claim and upped the ante by announcing a three-month ultimatum to unravel the Naga imbroglio and conclude the peace agreement with or without the dominant I-M group (Ravi 29 February 2020).

Meanwhile, R.N. Ravi reached out to subordinate Naga National Political Groups<sup>1</sup>, a conglomerate of seven political factions including NSCN Khaplang, which were excluded<sup>2</sup> in the bilateral Indo-Naga talks. Commentators in the media warned about a re-enactment of the disastrous history of the government concluding peace accords that divided the Nagas and led to renewed cycles of violence. The watershed 1960 Sixteen point agreement and the 1975 Shillong Peace Accord were undermined by peacemaking processes that sought to include some stakeholders and exclude others, with Indian state agencies propping up a subordinate group of "integrationists" and excluding dominant 'independents' (Bhaumik 2009; Baruah 2003).

The 2019 crisis struck when two decades of the long transition to a political settlement of India's longest self determination struggle had produced a material reality of deep state and

<sup>1</sup> Seven Naga National Political Groups (NNPG) include Naga National Council, GPRN/NSCN (Government of People's Republic of Nagaland), FGN (Federal Government of Nagaland), NSCN (Reformation), NPGN/NNC/NA (National People's Government of Nagaland (Non-accord) and NNC/GDRN/NA (Government Democratic Republic of Nagaland (Non Accord)).

<sup>2</sup> General V.S Atem of NSCN-IM speaking at UNPO in The Hague, 11/02/2011 quoted Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao saying, "Why should I talk with them [NSCN K]? The issue is not with them. The issue is with you. The people are with you, and so if we talk with you, we believe solution can be worked out..." Accessed at e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=18..160211.feb11

market penetration and competing circles of power within the context of a political economy of militarization. It had dulled the 'brightness' of a rebel army fighting for freedom in the jungle. As discussed elsewhere, the political stalemate accentuated further the imbalance of power between the state and a 'rebel' group (Manchanda and Bose 2015).

Exacerbating instability, the influential Naga apex civil society bodies - Naga HoHo, Naga Students Federation, Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights and Naga Mothers Association - had weakened. In the early ceasefire years, 1997 in particular, the middle space for non-partisan action had widened and seen Naga apex bodies emerge as significant stakeholders in the peace process (Manchanda and Bose 2011, Vero 2001). However, in the long political stalemate inter-tribalism had fractioned the Naga apex bodies. Additionally, NMA was recovering from a major setback in the wake of the patriarchal backlash of the tribal authorities over Naga women asserting equal rights to citizenship in the form of representation in urban local bodies. It had splintered NMA along tribal lines.

Moreover, the protracted deadlock over a final settlement and disillusionment with the NSCN I-M leadership following the secretive Indo-Naga interim Framework Agreement (2015) had resulted in many of the civil society bodies distancing themselves (*Morung Express* 2019).

The 2019 crisis saw a rallying around of the flattened civil society bodies against a feared disruption of the peace process. Appeals came thick and strong from the panoply of Naga civil society bodies and especially the Naga churches. Injecting a worrying edge into a tense situation, Nagaland governor and interlocutor R. N. Ravi appeared to be luring subordinate NNPGs into concluding an agreement that would bypass the dominant I-M group. These Naga political factions had been left out of the bilateral GOI -I M peace talks. Now the Groups saw an opportunity and declared readiness to sign a peace agreement "with or without the I-M" (*The Economic Times* 10/03/20). Scholars of Naga contemporary politics warned against a replay of the government enacting accords that divided the Nagas and led to cycles of violence (Bhushan 2019).

### **Naga Civil Society: Reasserting their stake in Peacemaking**

The gravitas of a peace process collapsing has provided openings for Naga civil society and especially Naga Mothers Association to reassert their moral authority as peacekeepers and their claim as legitimate stakeholders in any political settlement. Also, it has cracked the impasse over the discussions around Naga women's rights as equal citizens which were setback after the fierce patriarchal backlash of the last decade over women's quotas. The paper uses this turbulent moment in the peace process to look back on NMA's long journey so as to examine the scope of the women's question in an ethno-nationalist movement. Arguably, it is predicated on navigating a balance between their embeddedness in community identity struggles and their gendered struggle to imagine more equal modes of citizenship in patriarchal tribal societies. The paper spans NMA's emergence as stakeholders within the logic of motherhood politics, their transgression of gendered tribal exclusions and finally the reassertion of their moral authority as peacemakers and as equal citizens claiming participation in negotiating a political agreement that affects women's rights. The history of the multiple Naga peace accords, in their view, is a history of gender blind accords.

Naga peace agreements, like the vast majority of global peace agreements have been largely ceasefire and power sharing agreements between armed groups and political authorities. Women have not been considered relevant to peace processes<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, Naga tribal communities have a rigid gendered public-private divide. Historically, women were excluded from voting in the 1951 Naga plebiscite for self rule and from subsequent 1960, 1975 and 1997 Indo-Naga Accords. The 1975 Shillong and 1997 accords are largely ceasefire agreements negotiated by armed groups and political authorities. For instance, the 1975 accord was negotiated by six top ranking Naga armed commanders with the backing of a self empowered (all male) Naga Peace Council. In three terse clauses, the signatories agreed to disarm. The accord precipitated a split in the NNC, the emergence of NSCN and continuing violence. In contrast, the 1960 Sixteen point agreement was relatively more representative<sup>4</sup> of a section of the Naga peoples though it failed to bring in the armed group of the Naga National Council. However, the three Naga Peace Conventions preceding the accord were democratizing moments. They empowered a civil society group of 15 (all male) to negotiate with the Indian government the 1960 accord which delivered Naga statehood (Manchanda and Bose 2015, 58).

Women were absent from these processes. The consequences of which, as Rosemary Dzvichu, Advisor to NMA observed, was the inclusion of gender discriminatory customary laws. Article 7 of the Sixteen point agreement provides for respect of Naga customary law and procedures, which subsequently was guaranteed in Art 371A<sup>5</sup> of the Indian constitution. Determined that this time Naga women's rights will not be ignored in the negotiation of a political settlement, she said "we, women have never had a voice in any of the negotiations for these peace agreements, that's why customary laws have been guaranteed without any reservation, ignoring international norms of protection of women's rights" (quoted in Manchanda 2017, 41)

Following the 1997 ceasefire agreement and the expansion of middle space for civic action Naga women have asserted their claim for inclusion as stakeholders in formal and informal dialogue structures towards a peace settlement such as Ceasefire Monitoring Action Committee, the Forum for Naga Reconciliation and the Committee for Alternative Engagement. Arguably, the exclusion of civil society bodies, including women's groups, from the 2015 'secret' GOI-NSCN I-M Framework Agreement has contributed to making the agreement a highly contested one and significantly, exposed the vulnerabilities inherent in peacemaking between two asymmetric parties, as discussed below.

### *Motherhood Politics and Naga Women as Peacekeepers*

Naga women's experiences of surviving five decades of violent conflict and keeping the peace during the long ceasefire encapsulates a dialectics of victimhood and agency. In the national struggle, every Naga was involved and every Naga was held suspect in the brutal military

<sup>3</sup> Data sheet of women's roles in major peace processes from 1992-2018 reveals that women make up 3% of mediators, 4% of signatories and 13% of negotiators. Only one woman has ever signed a peace accord as chief negotiator. In a vast majority of peace agreements signed since 1990 there are no references to women. Data source: UN Women and Council on Foreign Relations <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the 1957 Naga Peace Convention in Kohima convened 1765 representatives of different tribes and 2000 observers. See Manchanda, Bose, Nag 2015. 'Bridging State and Nation: Peace Accords in India's Northeast, p.58

<sup>5</sup> The Article states that no Act of Parliament in respect of Naga customary law and procedure shall apply to the state of Nagaland unless the Legislative Assembly of the state by a resolution decides to adopt it.

repression. Naga women's bodies were brutally assaulted and mutilated in accordance with the patriarchal ideology of teaching the community a lesson, humiliating it for failing to 'protect' their women and 'spoiling' the reproducer of the community. In an inversion of body politics was Naga women's politics of resistance. They used their bodies to confront a more powerful opponent by shaming the 'protector' authority (the state). Their bodies became human shields to prevent violent clashes between state forces and armed cadres of Naga national groups (Haksar 2009).

The watershed moment in NMA's evolutionary transformation from a grassroots welfare organization to an apex body of frontline peace activists was 1994. Fratricidal violence among Naga groups pushed NMA into taking responsibility for stopping Nagas killing Nagas. Its campaign around the motto "Shed No Blood" involved sending out non-partisan 'peace teams' of Mothers to talk to tribal factions. (Manchanda 2004: 39). Social sanction for Naga women's peace activism was rooted in their traditional role as peace makers between warring villages from the head hunting days when a *demi* or a *pukrelia* would step forward in the midst of battle and halt the violence (2004: 43). Women's everyday activities were politicized. Mothers used 'kitchen politics' structured around the comfort of hearth and food to talk local leaders into ending violence.

Once the Ceasefire Agreement (1997) was negotiated between the government and the dominant Naga armed group NSCN I-M, there was an expansion of the non partisan middle space for civil society between two armed patriarchies (Banerjee 2001, Manchanda and Bose 2011). That the ceasefire has held these two decades has a lot to do with the peace work of Naga apex organizations, Naga Hoho, NSF and NMA in creating a society wide consensus in support of a contested peace process and negotiating its many contradictions. Peacemaking involved countering the power imbalance in asymmetric peacemaking between Indian state and a 'rebel' group. Also hanging over the peace process was 'Who represents the Nagas' as at the time of the ceasefire agreement? NSCN (IM) was the dominant armed group, but other armed Naga factions, especially NSCN K continued to enjoy support and control territory. Contested too was the demand for '*integration*' of trans border Naga peoples raising the specter of salami slicing of neighboring states' territory (Baruah 2003).

NMA and Manipur based sister group Naga Women's Union (NWU) kept open channels of communication between rival factions. They widened the ambit of the ceasefire to encompass excluded factions. At crucial moments during the long ceasefire, NMA and NWU leaders would undertake the arduous trek across the border into Myanmar and then via bike and boat to NSCN K camps, so as to break the group's isolation and facilitate an indirect channel of communication. In 1999 NMA and NWU tried to persuade Khaplant to join the ceasefire. When factional violence spiked in 2006-2008, NMA and NWU joined Naga Hoho and the churches to launch the Forum for Naga Reconciliation, a non-partisan civil society initiative. It birthed the Joint Working Group, a mechanism for face to face communication among warring factions so as to reduce inter factional violence. FNR convened Peoples Convention in 2012 seemed to provide an opportunity for all 'underground' factions to share a stage without hostility and take the Naga people in confidence. But the internal dynamics of politico military groups rooted in an underground culture, militated against transparency and democratization, weakening civil society efforts (Das 2018, 47-48).



NMA continued to work with other civil society groups when the Indo-Naga Framework Agreement was signed in 2015 so as to counter divisive propaganda delegitimizing the interim accord as an Indo-NSCN (IM) one (Das 2018, 53). They intervened when resurgent tribalism stoked a xenophobic discourse emphasizing Muivah's outsider identity as a Tangkul Naga from Manipur. In 2015, when Myanmar based Khaplang group abrogated the GOI-NSCN K ceasefire agreement (2001), the Mothers went to their camps in Myanmar. On their return, NMA told the Union Home Minister that “ [neither] bounties on the heads of the NSCN (K) leaders nor a ban on the group, would work as a solution for peace, because no matter what, they are also freedom fighters, and our sons and brothers, and not terrorists” (NMA Adviser Dzuvichu quoted by Saikia 2019)

For NMA it has been a long journey, from a tribal women's group concerned at the grassroots with witch hunting, hounding drug peddlers, rehabilitating drug addicts and moral policing to emerge as a Naga women apex body, and stakeholders in the peace process. So much so that at every civil society consultation, the collective leadership of NSCN has included NMA and NWU. Not only is NMA an integral constituent of civil society interventions such as FNR (Manchanda and Bose 2015), but it has lobbied with some success for the inclusion of women of the I-M even in the peace negotiations (Saikia 2019; Manchanda 2004).

In all of this work, mobilizing around 'motherhood' provided social acceptability for women's everyday micro politics and positioned the apex body's intervention in the public sphere as apolitical – a stretching of their traditional roles. Mothers' strategies of resistance and peacekeeping were in accordance with a patriarchal script that women internalized no less than men. In the early ceasefire years, NMA's political strategist Neidonuo Angami held back from commenting on the political agenda, saying 'the decision has to be theirs [leaders], our job is to take advantage of ceasefire period to facilitate a peaceful atmosphere so that a permanent solution may follow on what they decide.' (Manchanda 2004, 71) Arguably, the position was a tactical one, much like the mobilization of motherhood, aimed at retaining the trust of all sides. A showdown was to be avoided. Social acceptance for women's activism in the public sphere was circumscribed. Even NMA's reorientation towards peace politics in 1990s met with a volley of negativity although it was framed within the logic of motherhood politics.

### **Gendered Transgressions: Apolitical Engagement to Political Assertion**

The ethno-conflict mosaic of India's North East is remarkable for myriad ethnic women's collectives defending human rights and working for peace with justice (Kolas 2014; Ara Begum and Samaddar 2014). Within that landscape Naga women's collectives are singular because the dynamics of their mobilization has created space for gender consciousness and assertion. Notably, they have demonstrated capacity to translate their moral authority at the grassroots level as peacekeepers into claiming formal authority in the sphere of representative politics, modern and tribal. The transition from subsuming gender consciousness in an identity based mobilization to pushing for inclusion and equal rights has provoked fierce patriarchal resistance. Naga women's story raises uneasy questions about ethno nationalist conflicts instrumentalizing women and squeezing the space for an emancipatory democratic politics (Nongbri 2011; Vamuzo 2012). The patriarchal backlash against women's assertion for democratic inclusion converges with feminist writing on ways in which 'nation' and 'ethnicity'

intersect with patriarchy (Enloe 1993, 250; Yuval-Davis 1997; de Mel 2001).

### *Social Churning: Shifts in Elite Stratification*

Naga women assertiveness in claiming equal rights as political subjects should be located within the overall context of social churning in Naga society. Shifts in elite stratification are unsettling tribal hierarchies, inter generational structures of authority and gendered power exclusions. In Nagaland, modern state governance structures coexist with traditional tribal structures of authority and their more recent and competing avatars, the apex bodies: Naga Hoho (1994) and NMA (1984) or NPMHR (1977). Moreover, the protracted ceasefire has produced an over-ground presence of competing politico-military groups paralleled by panoply of state security forces.

Six decades of state and market penetration of the contested land of the Naga tribes has widened the circle of stakeholders in the existing Indian state system and increasing capitalization of the communitarian political economy. For instance, North East Network field study revealed visible changes in ownership of community, clan and household levels in rural areas. Of the 113 sampled households, 57% of Jhum<sup>6</sup> fields and 69% terrace fields were owned by individual households, indicating a gradual increase in privatization of community land (NEN 2016, 112, 133). Class has entered the once classless Naga tribal society.

Elsewhere Bose and I have argued that the ceasefire has accelerated the conditions for the growth of a new middle class in terms of urban location, education and, profession (Manchanda, Bose, Nag 2015, 42-44, 92-93). They are exposed to democratizing ideologies and national and international networks. This post-colonial middle class has emerged from a different relationship with the Indian state than the colonial 'middle class' elite that spearheaded the Naga national movement and was anchored in traditional tribal structures (Misra 1983).

Alongside, a generation of educated, professional Naga women have emerged who straddle the worlds of tradition and modernity and are at home in Kohima/Ukhrul, as in Delhi and Amsterdam. They are confronting local patriarchies sustained by customary laws and practices. A new found assertiveness is reflected in the generational difference between the consensual style and content of the politics of former NMA President Neidonuo Angami, and the assertiveness of the current office bearers of NMA and their Advisers (Manchanda and Kakran 2017). Significantly, Angami has been ambivalent if not negative on the demand for women's quotas.

### *Women's Status & Naga Customary Practices*

Naga women, as elsewhere in tribal society, occupy a subordinate status, particularly in relation to property rights and exclusion from decision making structures. Traditionally, Naga societies were geared to readiness for war and masculine war-like qualities were valorised. In modern times gender inequality continues to be justified in the name of Naga customary practices. Special constitutional provision agreed to as part of the social compact at the time of the

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<sup>6</sup> Jhum cultivation or shifting cultivation involves cultivating a piece of land for a season and then leaving it to revert to its natural vegetation.

creation of Nagaland state: Article 371A ensures the precedence of Naga customary law over the laws of the Indian Union (Aier 2014; Kikon 2017).

Recent sociological studies have demystified earlier impressionistic beliefs about the high status of Naga women derived from their greater freedom of movement and role in the *jhum* economy, as ritual custodian of granary barns. While customary law differs for different tribes, however as NEN study on "Enquiry into Status of Naga Women" (NEN 2016) reveals gender discriminatory practices prevailed from birth of a girl child, education, family and marriage laws, land rights, access to justice and citizenship rights.

Women do not inherit immovable property and have no inheritance rights over ancestral property or clan lands. A father can 'gift' acquired wealth to a daughter but on her death it reverts to the 'male' heirs. As long as there was common ownership of property resources women had some control over livelihood security but that has been threatened by market penetration, privatization of clan lands and cash driven agriculture (Sridhar et al 2017). In the all male Village Councils that interpret land laws, women are barred from intervening on issues of land or property, which directly impinge on their identity as permanent citizens of any tribe. Tribal bodies raise little objection to the flouting of customary norms of land ownership in relation to privatization, but women's right to ownership is strongly opposed in the name of the same customary laws (NEN 2016, 133).

Similarly, customary dispute settlement mechanisms of the tribe favor males. Violence against women is trivialized. National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB) statistics for 2018 highlight Nagaland's low rate of crimes against women. Arguably, social cohesion at the village level is a deterrent, but militarization, modernity, market, urbanization and migration has disrupted settled social landscapes. Decades of living between two armed patriarchies and a culture of impunity under Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act has produced a social context of women confronting multiple insecurities (Kikon 2014). Naga anthropologist Dolly Kikon's anatomy of a young daughter's continuing violation by her father, a UG cadre, reveals a social context of patriarchal norms of family intersected by factional rivalries, which converge to render her more vulnerable. In this context it is noteworthy that NMA and NWU have repeatedly appealed to top Naga leaders to act against armed cadres involved in assaulting women. But subordinate status of women makes action for accountability quite rare in a social milieu where wife beating and incest are common though rarely reported.

'Why approach the tribal elders' arbitration courts only to be told: "it's your fault, you must have asked for it". In all probability, the person will be given a warning and pay a fine. Then life goes on,' observed Monalisa Changkija, owner editor of Nagaland Page (Interview 26/08/2013). The people who sit in the customary courts are all men. There are no jails, only punitive fines, excommunication and expulsion. Even in the case of the 2015 Dimapur lynching, where contested narratives render more obscure the incident of the mob attack on a Bengali speaking migrant resident of Dimapur blamed for the rape of a Naga girl, it is common to find Naga women blaming not only the man but also the girl. (NEN 2016, 140)

Akum Longchari, founder of *Morung Express* was explicit about the double standards in the way customary law was used. 'There is a culture of impunity in customary law. Those in



positions of power, get away with it. What is convenient is termed customary! (Interview 26/08/2013). The politicization of customary law is exemplified in the controversy which flared up over the Ao women's collective, Watsu Mongdang in taking the 'law' in its hand and publicly shaming an Ao tribesman for raping a girl from the Chang tribe. The tribal apex body Ao Seden upbraided the women for interfering and excommunicated them for a year for disrupting tribal arbitration procedures. Interviews with Ao women showed them correlating the Ao Seden's punitive action with their displeasure at Watsu Mongdang's pro active role in demanding women's quota in the urban local bodies (ULB) elections.

### *Re-imagining Equality and Inclusion*

In the name of customary laws and practices, women are absent in the village councils, district, state and national politics. Over 18 state assembly elections have been held in the state from 1964-2018, and not a single women got elected. In this public wasteland the exception is Rano Shaiza elected to Parliament on her husband's death. The setting up of Village Development Boards (1978 Act) with 25 percent quota for women offered the possibility of overturning gender exclusion. It was circumvented by creating separate women wings.

Women members are rarely informed about VDB meetings and NEN study quotes a member saying, "...if I know that some funds are missing, I would question them...Because of that, they don't inform or call me for meetings". VDBs and even more so the ULB are responsible for managing sizeable funds. However, as NEN study observed, "In local politics family honour and male authority intersect, so as to deny local women leaders support from other women and own families (NEN 2016, 135). Arguably, this contributed to the vehemence of the anti reservation stir and why many women from advanced tribes: Ao and Angami opposed gender quotas.

Rosemary Dzuwichu, who was spearheading the women's struggle for recognition as political subjects was blunt about systems of corruption which gender quotas threatened. "The Naga Municipal Act provides that the majority of state and central funds will go to the towns and municipalities for development. With no elected councils, the state government continues to hold all the funds. Their circle of cronies in the bureaucracy and the tribal Hoho share in that growing pile of non-accountable wealth. With women coming in, who are not their wives, mothers and sisters but candidates put up by mobilized women's groups, obviously they are hostile." (Interview 29/08/13)

### *Women's Quotas*

India's revolution in local self-government was not extended to tribal areas which had their own self governing village institutions such as in Nagaland. Evolving exigencies of urbanization saw the government enact Nagaland Municipal Act (2001) constituting Urban Local Bodies (ULB). Five years later, 33 percent reservation for women was incorporated in the Act in 2006. Technically, ULBs are outside the purview of customary laws which govern Naga village life. But so fierce was the opposition of tribal authorities to women's quota, that the government indefinitely postponed ULB elections across Nagaland.

NMA led Joint Action Committee (JAC) on women's reservations took their case to Guwahati High Court. Despite the favorable order, the government procrastinated. Tribal authorities framed their opposition to women's rights as a conflict between 'traditional' world of the Nagas and hegemonic influences of 'modern' India. The recourse of educated professional Naga women to the Indian courts was criticized as undermining customary practices of arbitration and reconciliation. Under pressure from Naga Hoho and Eastern Naga Peoples Organisation (ENPO), in September 2012 Nagaland state assembly declared the 2006 Amendment in violation of Naga customary laws guaranteed under Art 371 A. Quota provision was invalidated. JAC appealed to the Supreme Court.

The gravitas of the women's challenge is evinced in the fact that Art 371A has been invoked only once before when Nagaland claimed special rights to control its oil resources, overriding Union government's claims. Tribal authorities maintained that at stake is Naga identity. However, at issue was no simple tradition versus modern divide as revealed in the micro dynamics at work in metropolitan Mokokchung which witnessed fierce resistance. For instance, the head of Ao Senden was Dean of Social Sciences, Mokokchung University, a member of the new middle class. His wife, an office bearer of Watsu Mongdang, was well-educated. "We need to carry the older generation with us", he defensively explained (Manchanda and Kakran 2017, 77).

### *Backlash of Local Patriarchies*

Directed by the Supreme Court, Nagaland government announced elections in February 2017. In the intervening weeks a sustained disinformation campaign about the relation between women's quota and Article 371A created a combustible situation. It exploded with volunteer mobs enforcing a month long bandh, vandalizing and looting property, and setting vehicles on fire in the commercial capital Dimapur. Women candidates were intimidated, forced to withdraw their nomination, and threatened with excommunication from their tribes and villages. Death ultimatums were issued against NMA leaders. In the frenzy three persons were killed. The groups blamed NMA and the state government for precipitating the crisis, though it had long since called off elections.

Under pressure from tribal bodies, the Mothers Associations of Angami, Sumi, Chakesang and Lotha tribes dissociated themselves from NMA. It was NMA's lowest moment. Solidarity messages came from national and international feminist and civil liberties groups but within Nagaland, isolation of the women who had dared to imagine equality, seemed complete. Dzuvichu in hiding from death threats, expressed her desolation,

*For a community who lived and thrived in the glories of war, here we are again, women of the twenty first century, being abused, defamed, ridiculed, insulted by men . . . They have declared a war on us and for those of us who live within close knit societies and not in towns and cities, will have to bear the brunt of the war. (cited in Kumar 2017 from Nagaland Page 09/01/2017).*

The public distancing of women from literate and advanced tribes, and evidence of more advanced districts witnessing the brunt of the anti reservation stir, led some media commentators to remark on the visible "intra- and inter-tribal (political) conflicts that shaped the anti-women's

reservation protests” (Kumar 2017). The realignment of local electoral and non-electoral politics in the backdrop of the agitation revealed that the anti-reservation stir was a proxy. The goal was to pressure the incumbent Zeliang government to resign.

Lost in the heat and noise of violence and the emotion charged discourse around Naga identity, were critical reflections about the discriminatory instrumentalization of Art 371A. For instance, tribal feminist and anthropologist Dolly Kikon was blunt, “Article 371 (A) is breached also in the ongoing coal mining operations and the oil exploration negotiations in Nagaland. Naga politicians, landowners, village councils, and business families have all interpreted the provision for their benefit to mine for minerals and not be held accountable for the environmental degradation. But it is only when women may enter the decision-making process (and potentially reverse such policies) that Article 371 suddenly becomes sacrosanct” (Kikon 2017).

Changkija is explicit about the linkage between anti reservation stir and pushback on women's economic rights “Empowering women has an economic connotation. This is what the men fear” (Changkija quoted by Bhandare 2017). Women's lack of financial autonomy is recognized as holding women back from contesting general seats. In the understanding of a village level youth group, quoted in the NEN study, the few women who did contest district and state level elections failed because “they were not wealthy enough” (NEN 2016, 133).

In Naga society patriarchy has been internalized by women no less than men. NEN study quotes women justifying their absence in local bodies. “Women do not occupy any high post because women do not have enough education as compared to men”. That men serving in the Village Council are equally uneducated, does not matter, because, “Men are confident. They know how to deal with different situations ...” (NEN 2016, 133). Women do not vote for women. It is a lesson that Dr Yangerala Ao (independent) candidate from Mokokchung (state's most literate district) and Rakhila Lakiumong (Bharatiya Janata Party) from Tuensang (most backward district) learned in 2013 assembly elections. Women who made up 45 percent of the electorate, did not support them (Shrinivasan 2013).

### *Women Re-group*

In the months, since the setback to women's assertion for equal citizenship, a bruised NMA has tried to recoup its core strength, its moral authority as peacekeepers. The 2019 political crisis which threatened to split open the peace process, confronted NMA (and other Naga apex bodies) with an opportunity and a challenge. It was an opening for reasserting their value and authority as legitimate stakeholders in the peace process. But it was at a time when Naga civil society groups had fallen prey to festering inter tribalism which had divided not only Naga national movement, but also Naga civil society. It was evident in the thinning out of the Naga Hoho in the last few years with only four or five out of the sixteen Naga tribes of state of Nagaland still constituent members of Naga Hoho (Mannen 2020). NMA too is without such powerful constituents as tribal women bodies of Angamis, Sumi and Chakesang.

In the 2019 crisis, Naga civil society is challenged by machinations to further divide the Nagas. For instance, Indian interlocutor R.N. Ravi convened a consultation of civil society groups

at Kohima in November 2019 to garner support for a peace deal. Included were the apex leadership of 14 Naga tribes, minority non-Naga tribes, Nagaland Goan Burah Federation, Nagaland Tribes Council and Church leaders. Excluded were the influential Naga Hoho, NSF, NPMHR and NMA. Naga Mothers boldly upbraided the Governor for playing “divisive politics and of selectively excluding in consultative meetings with primary stakeholders influential civil society bodies that have played a crucial role in the peace process for decades”. (NMA Statement 2019).

The peace process hung by a thread. The possibility of the government signing an accord only with working group of subordinate NNPGs (without NSCN I-M group) was an imminent threat. The church, Naga apex bodies including NMA appealed for unity and the inclusion of all stakeholders. Importantly, they backed I-M group's insistence on a separate flag and constitution as symbolic of Naga identity. “The Nagas' legitimate rights for integration, separate Naga flag and constitution is neither honourable nor acceptable to the Nagas” NMA with the others emphasized. (*The Economic Times* 18/10/19)

The rallying around of Naga civil society bodies helped to ease the crisis. Acknowledging this NSCN I-M leader Th. Muivah said, “We Nagas have had enough of divisive politics and you all have reminded Ravi to stay clear of playing divisive based solution. This is the testing time for the Nagas to present ourselves as one in our political aspiration notwithstanding petty politics of lapses...” (*Morung Express* 27/10/2019). The statement is all the more significant because of NSCN I-M leadership's own retreat from engaging with civil society bodies including the FNR mechanism after the Framework Agreement in 2015. The Indo-Naga talks leading upto the Framework Agreement were obscured in secrecy. Admittedly, the logic of summit level negotiations discouraged the involvement of civil society groups. Equally, the momentum of the FNR process had flagged because of the inability of the armed groups to let go a habituated ‘UG’ (underground) culture of secretiveness and distrust rooted in long years of hiding in the jungle. It conflicted with the civil society requirements of transparency and trust. I-M groups' critical statement that “RN Ravi had failed utterly to consult the apex CSOs (civil society organisations) of the Nagas”, (*The Times of India* 27/10/19) reverberates beyond the government negotiator on to the I-M group as well. The crisis foregrounded the importance of the competition of the state and the ‘rebel’ group to control the middle space of civil society during the long transition (Manchanda and Bose 2011, 54).

Meanwhile NMA worked with the other tribal bodies to build an inclusive peace by reaching out to all stakeholders. In 2018 and again in 2019, NMA leaders crossed into Myanmar and visited NSCN K camps, breaking the isolation of the new leadership that had taken over the Myanmar based NSCN K after Khaplang's death.

### **Reclaiming the Struggle for Equality**

After the anti reservation stir NMA is a much weaker apex body and some of the more influential and advanced women's organizations have stopped associating or cannot and will not associate themselves with the NMA in future. In an interview, Changkija reminded that Watsu Mongdang, Ao women's group had distanced itself from NMA years ago, but that had not come in the way of its association with NMA on multiple occasions including filing the

Special Leave Petition (SLP) in the Supreme Court on women's quota. NMA executives from Angami, Chakesang and Lotha tribes still work with women's collectives. (Changkija 2017).

There is little evidence of tribal patriarchies yielding especially on gendered power roles. Historically, ethno-nationalist struggles have been hostile to women's assertion of gendered identity (Manchanda and Bose 2015, 144). Naga women's struggle substantiates that theorization. Also, in view of shifts in elite stratification and inter-generational challenges, gender exclusion is likely to be defended as the last bastion to crumble. Gender equality activists are clear about the high stakes involved, not least economic ones especially women's right to land and property. Already gender confrontation over economic resources is increasing as the present generation of professional women create wealth and are blocked by the men of the clan from disposing it' observed Nagaland's senior-most woman civil servant, Banou Jamit (Interview 28/08/2013, Manchanda and Kakran 2017, 74).

The stakes for women to be part of decision making institutions are increasing, particularly in the wake of market penetration of agriculture, simultaneously with rising proportion of women: 72.5 percent dependent on agriculture. The shift away from community ownership of lands has increased livelihood insecurity for women, so much so that the NEN study warns that, "The threat of women becoming completely asset less is a glaring reality and if there is no immediate discourse on the current land ownership practices in Nagaland, there might be disastrous consequences on the rural economy and rural women in the long run" (NEN 2016, 144).

However, as evident in the gender quota saga, Naga women do not question subordination because as Changkija stated, "keeping the peace" within the home and the tribe becomes more important and imperative than gender justice. (Changkija 2017) During the author's own field work in Mokokchung district in 2013, a chance encounter in Longkhum village, revealed the wide gap between the confident assertiveness of the frontline women on gender quotas and an altogether different dynamics at work at the village level. Two clans of all male Ao Nagas were meeting at the Morung (hall) in front of the home we were visiting to discuss with a member of the Ao women's group gender quotas. Neither mother, nor daughter, a student at Delhi University, saw anything contradictory between the two meetings, ours and theirs. So normalized was the practice of gendered exclusion that they took no notice of it (Manchanda and Kakran 2017, 64). Was this internalization of gender exclusion responsible for why Naga women failed to vote for women candidates in 2013 election? Then what is the explanation for the crowd of some 400 women who flocked to contest ULB elections in the districts in 2017.

Perhaps the last word should be that of the sagacious Neidonuo Angami, former President NMA, "There was a time when women were not even allowed to participate in the public sphere, but I believe things are slowly changing for the better. We will surely take part in politics and other decision bodies too. It is a matter of time." (Saikia 2019)



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