

# Gendered power transformations in India's Northeast: Peace politics in Nagaland

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## Abstract

As the middle space for 'post ceasefire-cold peace' politics expanded in Nagaland in India's Northeast, the Naga women's question has emerged as symbolic of the intense social churning in traditional hierarchies around three sites of inequality: decision-making in the public sphere, patriarchal customary laws and property rights. The article tracks the shift in Naga women's peace politics, from motherhood politics to asserting more equal modes of citizenship, and explores the emancipatory potential of Naga women's emergence in the public sphere as key stakeholders in the peace process within a context of growing tensions in the relationship between gender and ethnicity.

## Keywords

Customary laws, ethnicity, gender, Naga, peace politics, power

## Longkhum village, Nagaland, August 2013

The fabled Naga village democracy was at work. About 150 Naga men, belonging to two clans of the Ao Nagas, had gathered in the *Morung* (meeting hall) to settle a dispute over hierarchy and status. Opposite them but beyond earshot, we sat in the home of Moatula (an alias), an active member of the Ao tribal women's body, Watsu Mongdang, discussing the organisation's struggle to assert women's entitlement to quotas in the Mokokchung district metropolitan and town councils. Naga women's opposition against their

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exclusion from governing bodies – traditional and modern – has polarised Naga society. But here, her daughter on vacation from Delhi University saw nothing contradictory in the juxtaposition of the two meetings, ours and theirs. So normalised was the practice of gendered exclusion that she took no notice of it. In Longkhum village, a Naga student of theology, Ayangla Longchar, who had accompanied us, told us that her family is still regarded as an ‘outsider’, despite a century of residence there. But the young woman had the last laugh: ‘the men harp on about safeguarding tradition, but are quick to don a tie-suit, whereas we women remain faithful to Naga dress, for all formal occasions’.

Our request to photograph the ‘elders’ inside the *Morung* was refused, nor were we allowed to approach close. This brought to mind the traditional proscription against Naga women walking past the *Morung*, lest snatches of the conversation of men fall upon women’s ears and be garbled in the re-telling. Ironically, during the conflict and ceasefire aftermath, Naga women became valued couriers, trusted interlocutors and channels for indirect communication between the top leaders of rival factions.

The Longkhum encounter provided a dramatic counterpoint to our research pursuit of exploring the empowering potential of Naga women’s practice of peace work and its implications for the contested relationship between gender, ethnicity and nation within the context of the unfolding conflict-peace continuum in Nagaland in India’s Northeast.<sup>1</sup> Naga women – who through their decades of peace work at the village and state level had emerged as stakeholders in the peace process – were now questioning their gendered exclusion in the public sphere, modern and tribal. Eighteen years of ceasefire<sup>2</sup> had accelerated the growth of a social grouping that approximated to a nascent ‘new middle class’<sup>3</sup> of educated professional women and men (Lobo and Shah, 2015). This small but influential educated, professional social grouping which straddles both the traditional tribal institutions and modern socio-economic structures is expanding the Naga public sphere and reshaping its society and politics (Manchanda and Bose, 2011).

We contend that 50 years of Naga statehood and market penetration, galvanised further by the long cold peace, post 1997, is producing a new order of elite stratification which is not only reworking the relations within traditional tribal hierarchies, but also class, youth and gender relations. Growth in state employment in the bureaucracy, public sector government suppliers, contractors and the security sector has produced a bloated state sector (Charles, 1999: 151; Swami, 2012). The ceasefire has created the conditions for nationalist Naga armed groups to become enthusiastic stakeholders in an explosion of neo-liberal development projects – oil extraction, agro-economic special economic zones, plantations and major changes in land use pattern and urban migration (Majumdar, 2014; Shimray, 2008). Penetration of the market has seen substantive privatisation of communal and quasi-communal lands, as village councillors have sold off hill-sides and individuals their rights over surrounding homestead fields. The political economy that sustained the communitarian societies of the borderless world of the Naga is rapidly transforming (Nongkynrih, 2009: 33–34). The once classless, casteless Naga society has changed, and new unequal social structures are emerging and unsettling tribal hierarchies and gendered power systems.

Amidst this social churning, a new generation of educated and professional tribal women have emerged many of whom are linked with national and international women’s movements, and are seeking more equal modes of imagining citizenship (Aier, 2014;

Chhakchhuak, 2012). Importantly, there are convergences between the modern and traditionally rooted women's associations. The coalescing of these social developments has produced new assertions and contestations especially in the area of (1) Naga women's exclusion from decision making, (2) customary law and traditions that trivialise violence against women and (3) expanding property rights for women.

The patriarchal backlash targets Naga women as threatening the Naga community identity by undermining Naga customary laws and practices. These are integrally related to community identity and constitute the ideological foundation of the Naga national struggle. We argue that the tensions inherent in the relationship between gender, ethnicity and nation are coming to a head as a consequence of the intense social and political churning in Naga society, particularly telescoped in the last 18 years of ceasefire and 'pacification' (Francis, 2010).

Feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the complex ways in which the ideological construct and practices of 'nation' and 'ethnicity' intersect with patriarchy (De Mel, 2001; Enloe, 1993: 250; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Gendered narratives of the nation state and of autonomies have focused particular attention on the ways in which post conflict, male and female differences are reinforced. Indeed 'new' states (especially ethnically organised entities) have formulated rights and obligations that have strengthened the masculinity of the public sphere and the femininity of the private sphere (Moghadam, 2000). In the Northeast, a majority of peace accords to resolve ethno-nationalist conflicts, including the 1960 Agreement creating Nagaland state, specifically guaranteed customary laws and practices to govern land and social relations.

Scholars have argued that the reification of tradition and customary laws in these self-governing states/councils has turned women into 'internal minorities' in the Northeast (Bhattacharjee, 2002: 133; Chakraborty, 2008). However, as Samir Das (2008), a student of peace accords, reminds us:

Women's democratic struggle are in many ways embedded in ethnicity and ethnic movements and the success of their struggle depends not so much on their ability to stand alone (for that is what seldom happens in any society) but very much on how they steer and negotiate their way through conflict between their gender identities as women and as members of some particular ethnic communities. (p. 56)

As discussed in this article, there is nothing to suggest that the women leaders believe in the possibility or even desirability of pursuing an autonomous woman's agenda – unaffected by indigenous/ethnic or nationalist ones. As feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn emphasises, 'we are always not just women but a woman who has to deal one way or another with "being" a Serb, an English woman or an Indian' (Cockburn, 2008: 287).

## **Singularity of the Naga movement and Naga women's empowerment**

The Naga 'national' movement is the 'oldest' self-determination struggle against post-independence India's efforts at nationally integrating communities which are ethnically

and historically separate from the Indian nation. The movement, which started in the 1950s, is also paradigmatic of the effective limits of both the Indian state's militarist counter insurgency strategy, and the flaws in the peace-making strategy of 'Integration through Re-organisation' as articulated in a succession of flawed peace accords. In particular, the 1960 Naga peace accord laid the template for the grand strategy of power sharing and devolution of power to territorially focused, ethnically delimited autonomies. The strategy succeeded in dividing the national movement but establishing a Naga state did not end the violence. More than four decades later, the Indo-Naga Framework Agreement (2015) is the Indian state's latest demarche in peace-making in the unquiet Naga hills.

From a gendered perspective, Naga social dynamics provides an opportunity to examine within the overall social churning in traditional hierarchies and structures of authority, the opening up of spaces for re-working gender relations. In the Northeast, there is a rich narrative of women's groups in the forefront of struggles against state militarisation, defending human rights and building peace, but the Naga women's trajectory is singular in that it demonstrates the scope and limits of peace politics being empowering and enhancing women's rights. This contrasts with the more limited agency of the Manipur valley based Meitei women's groups, the *Meira Paibis*, who 'for all their energy, talent and enterprise are too raw to grow beyond a grassroots organization', states Manipur scholar journalist Pradip Phanjoubam (2008).

The journey of the Naga women's groups has taken them from village-based grassroots tribal organisations to apex bodies: Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and Naga Women's Union (NWU). From being a women's group concerned with witch hunting and hounding drug peddlers and 'prostitutes', NMA has re-imagined itself as frontline 'peacekeeper' and stakeholder in the peace process, integral participant in important civil society initiatives such as the 'Forum for Naga Reconciliation' (FNR) and Committee for Alternative Agreement (CAA). We argue that NMA is demonstrating a capacity to translate its local power into formal authority in the public sphere. NMA's transformational journey is mirrored in the changes in the working style and thinking of the NMA as revealed in the contrasting response of two Naga women professionals belonging to two different generations. The journalist Monalisa Changkija, back from University in the 1980s, declined to join NMA, alienated from its activities and functioning style. Two decades later, Professor Rosemary Dzuwichu is a consultant with NMA, and steering the campaign of an expanding generation of educated, professional tribal women challenging women's exclusion in decision making and customary law arbitration practices that reinforce violence against women in a social context of deep militarisation and impunity. (Chhakchuak, 2012; Kikon, 2014). While these women are comfortable in both the traditional world of the Nagas and the modern world of a nationally and globally integrated education grid, labour market and global ideas, the class contradictions and cosmopolitan-local divisions emerging in Naga society are producing tensions. This is evidenced in the pulls and pressures by the tribal elders to reassert control over dynamic civil society initiatives, FNR and CAA steered by new middle-class circle of elite professionals (Manchanda and Bose, 2015: 43). Notwithstanding these tensions, what is striking is the unity of Naga women in the sustained campaign for gender quotas to challenge women's exclusion (Sharma, 2016).

This article explores the shifting forms and expressions of Naga women's agency from motherhood politics to women's assertions. It teases out their shifting agendas – from subsuming gender consciousness in an identity-based mobilisation to pushing for inclusion and equal rights that challenges customary practices, and from an apolitical engagement to political activism for transforming the nature of inequality, exploitation and exclusion. We examine the thesis that ethno-nationalist mobilizations instrumentalise and marginalise women and explore the possibility of an emancipatory democratic politics in the Naga context (Nongbri, 2011).

The article supplements existing literature on the issue with intensive interviews conducted in August 2013 in Nagaland (Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha and Mokokchung) with a wide range of civil society groups: NMA, Watsu Mongdang, Lotha Elo, Naga Hoho, Ao and Lotha Public Organisations, women in public administration, the police, the church and Naga women politicians, educationists, journalists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Finally, the authors bring to the study the depth of years of their participatory research engagement and advocacy work in the Northeast.

## Women in Naga tradition

In Naga tribal society, women are said to have enjoyed more freedom of movement and choice than the caste-ridden Hindu women subject to layered socio-religious oppression. As Christopher Von Fürer-Haimendorf, the Austrian anthropologist observed,

Many women in the more civilized parts in India may well envy the women of Naga Hills their high status and their free happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Naga as savages. (Xaxa, 2008: 114)

Contemporary Naga women like the anthropologist Dolly Kikon (2002) are challenging the myth of the high status of Naga women in casteless egalitarian tribal societies. Traditionally, Naga societies were geared to readiness for war and masculine war-like qualities were valorised. Women were debarred from touching a weapon or participating in public life. According to Dolly Kikon,

Every Naga woman has experienced humiliation and insults from the men on the basis of her womanhood. These men are not outsiders or strangers. They are their 'respected' uncles, cousins and in some cases their fathers and brothers who never fail to remind them about the predestined inferior roles that have already been slated out for them. (Kikon, 2002: 179)

While there is no overt discrimination on the birth of a girl child, it is significant that the Ao boy child is welcomed by the clan 'as one of ours', the girl child as 'one of theirs' (North East Network (NEN) Survey, 2016).

Whereas customary laws and practices differ among the more than 40 Naga tribes, a patriarchal bias is common. For instance, the Lotha Nagas believe men possess six kinds of strength and women five, which make them unsuitable for responsible jobs. Lotha women were not allowed to go past a public hall where the elders conferred lest they overheard and while 'gossiping' distorted information. The status of Angami Naga males

rose in accordance with their extra-marital affairs, whereas women accused of adultery were punished by physical defacement of nose, slicing off the heel or cutting off their hair. The Zeme Nagas consider it derogatory to eat the meat of an animal killed by women. The Moyon Nagas of Manipur consider women as 'unprincipled and unreliable' because they do not have a permanent clan; their clans change into that of their husbands when they marry (Nag, 2006).

The material reality of Naga women's lower status is that women have no inheritance rights over community or clan lands. This is despite Naga woman's pro-active role in the *jhum* (shifting cultivation) economy. While customary law differs with tribes and there is no codification, the common practice is that women cannot inherit immovable property, though they can lease for use during their lifetime. A father can 'gift' acquired wealth to a daughter during his lifetime, which remains hers till death, after which it reverts to the 'male' heirs. A widow remains in her husband's family as guardian of the minors but cannot inherit his property. On divorce an Ao husband can appropriate his wife's ornaments and claim a penalty of a head of cattle and repayment of the bride price from her family plus a fine from her lover. In case of rape, traditional arbitration courts encourage settlement and fine the rapist (or even murderer) a pig or two.

This is not to deny that indigenous socio-cultural systems provided greater freedom of movement and choice to women. There was choice in selecting partners, divorce and widow remarriage, and once the man had identified the field for *jhum* cultivation (slash and burn agriculture), it was the woman who decided on the division of labour of the collective engaged in clearing the field, and women had multiple economic roles in the house and community.<sup>4</sup> As long as there was common ownership of property resources women had some control over livelihood and freedom of movement was assured. Moreover, as our Naga male interlocutors emphasised, the gendered public-private divide made women sovereign in the home but excluded her participation in the Naga village tribal authority and the tribal courts. The colonial encounter and the interface with the Baptist Christian Missions strengthened the patriarchal ethos and introduced aspects of Victorian morality.<sup>5</sup>

## The social upheaval of conflict

The Naga nationalist struggle for survival required the mobilisation of the whole community. Every Naga was involved. Every Naga was 'suspect'. Churches were desecrated, villages razed, 'rice barns' and field crops burnt. The counter insurgency strategy uprooted and herded people into 'strategic hamlets', keeping them on subsistence rations, forcing them to do 'porterage', imposing collective fines and punitive curfews at harvest time. Those identified as relatives of 'undergrounds' – women, children, and elders alike – were grouped into concentration camps, beaten and starved (Manchanda, 2004: 4).

As in many identity-based struggles, women the purveyors and reproducers of the community were targeted, their bodies became the symbolic terrain of battle. Sexual torture was widespread and impunity absolute. A rare exception in breaking the silence was the initiative of Dr Yangerala Ao and Watsu Mongdang, the Ao tribal women's organisation, in persuading four rape survivors to testify before the National Human Rights Commission. On 27 December 1994, in Mokokchung market, soldiers of the

Manipur Light Infantry and Assam Rifles had opened fire in a reprisal attack for an ambush by Naga militants. Nine people were shot dead, 89 shops and 48 houses looted and gutted. Women were stripped and sexually assaulted. Yangerala, Director of Health in Mokokchung, testified to having medically examined 15 rape victims (Khala, 2003).

It is beyond the scope of the article to detail the gendered narrative of violence and devastation, however, an analysis of the scope of gendered power shifts and the possibility, 'post-conflict',<sup>6</sup> of the emergence of more inclusive and equal societies requires some contextualisation. The ceasefire saw women overturning gender stereotypes, breaching the public–private divide and creating the conditions for women with moral authority at the local level to lay claim to participation in formal politics. The social impact of women joining the armed groups seemed to have been minimal, although the chairperson of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) (I-M) women's wing, Salim (an alias), claimed that women made up 20%–30% of the armed cadres. However, far from being role models, Rosemary Dzuwichu, advisor to the NMA, dismissed the women cadres as school drop outs with low capacity.<sup>7</sup>

## Women's peace work

Narratives of her-story of the Naga conflict are strewn with incidents of women shielding men, physically lying on the road and using their bodies to block trucks loaded with the village boys from being driven away by security forces. Bloody reprisals for militant ambushes would see women in the villages beating a drum to sound the alert, rushing down the hills to form a wall between the security forces and their men. A village woman of Jotsoma (Phizo's village) spoke with pride:

When the Indian Army came, it was women who stepped forward between the soldiers and villagers. It is only women who can intervene. We constantly had to talk to the army. We mothers would go to the warring factions, walk to their camps and plead with them not to kill each other, not to harass villagers. (Manchanda, 2004: 37–38)

Naga women from the start of the conflict in 1950s to now, the time of ceasefire, used their bodies as human shields to prevent violent clashes between the state forces and the armed cadres of the national self-determination movement, the NSCN. In the 2010 stand-off at Mao Gate on the Nagaland-Manipur border, Naga women for days outfaced the Manipur armed police in protest sit-in, prayers and marches. In the 2009 Shirui siege, Naga women physically interposed their bodies to avert clashes as the state paramilitary force, the Assam Rifles laid siege to the NSCN camp and the village. 'We're just doing our job as peace keepers', the women told the exasperated commanding officer. For 15 days, women from the neighbouring villages, in relays of 50, kept up a 24-hour vigil, repeatedly appealing to the armed forces to withdraw (Haksar, 2009). In conflict, 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 turn, Naga women used their bodies to confront a more powerful opponent by shaming the 'protector' authority (the state) and embarrassing soldiers to desist from breaking their physical cordon. They

leveraged their helplessness as women to negotiate the release of sons and husbands in threatening situations. Both aspects are part of a common patriarchal script which women no less than men have internalised. Such strategies reinforce stereotypes of gendered subordination and raise troubling questions about the empowering aspects of peace politics.

Social sanction for Naga women's peace activism is 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. Its contemporary version is the apocryphal story of Neidonuo Angami, then president of NMA, intervening between two fighting factions in Phek district and saying, 'Listen to your mother before you kill your brother' (Manchanda, 2004: 43).

Spiralling fratricidal violence in 1980 and 1990s pushed the welfare oriented Naga women's organisations into taking responsibility for stopping Nagas killing Nagas. Daily the morning brought bodies lying unclaimed in the bazars. NMA in alliance with the churches came forward to perform dignified funerals by wrapping the body in the tribe's distinct *shawl* and affirming the value of all life. In 1994, NMA launched a 'Stop all Bloodshed' campaign with non-partisan 'Peace Teams' fanning out to the district headquarters. Through their tribal affiliation the Mothers reached out to the tribal segregated factions, listening to their grievances like a 'mother' and talking them to reconciliation. Nearly a decade later with the 'unity' question back in the foreground and stymying the peace process, NMA at its 7th General Assembly in 2003 again called for national reconciliation. As factional violence surged in the years 2006–2008,<sup>8</sup> NMA and its Manipur-based sister organisation Naga Women's Union (NWU) along with other key Naga social organisations constituted the FNR (2008). NMA's peace work is focused on keeping channels of communication open between rival factions from the top leadership to the cadres.

It is significant that some of the most influential pan-Naga civil society organisations – NMA, NWU and Naga Hoho – are of recent vintage (1984, 1994 and 1998, respectively). While they derive their authority from traditional tribal institutions, the apex bodies straddle both the traditional and modern worlds, and their changing composition reflects the generational shifts in social stratification in Naga society. In understanding the morphing of the NMA focus from welfare to peace activism and then strategic rights, 1994 is a key evolutionary moment. According to Kheslie Chisi, former President NMA, 'the situation demanded it'.<sup>9</sup> Also, the pressure of the churches to intervene for peace was significant.

Attention should also be drawn to the ideational influence of modern organisations like the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), which had important connections with democratic rights-based movements in India and internationally with the Asian Indigenous Peoples' Pact. NPMHR had challenged the constitutional validity of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the Supreme Court (1987–1997). Naga human rights activists not only participated in the Vienna World Human Rights Conference in 1993, but the Naga question was raised in the UN Human Rights Council. Also, ideas about civil society and its potential for peacebuilding were spreading across borders, especially from the Sri Lanka conflict and borne on the shoulders of visiting Indian human rights activists (Manchanda and Bose, 2015).

## Motherhood politics

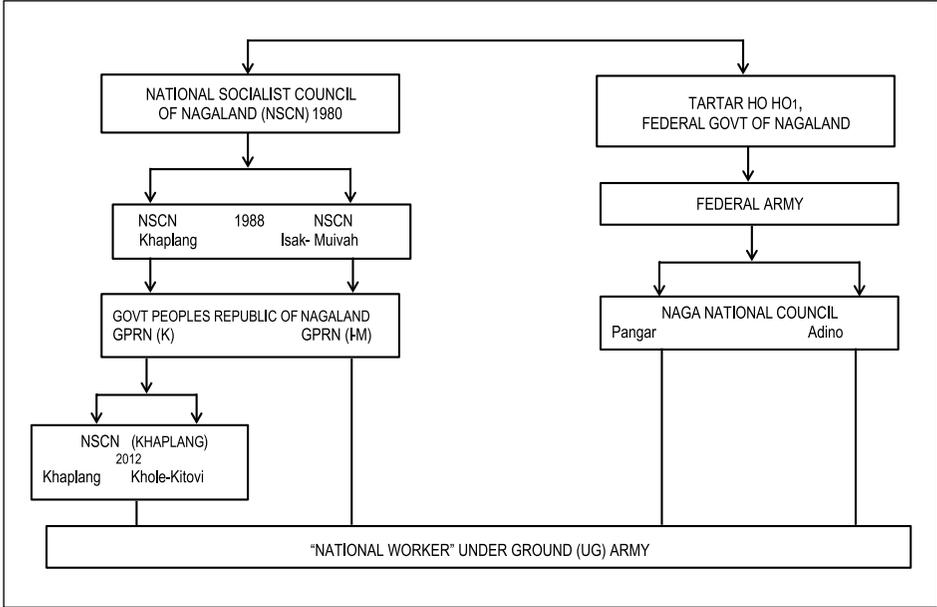
Mobilising around 'motherhood' provided the context for women's everyday micro-politics. It positioned their intervention in the public sphere as a stretching of their traditional roles, that is, 'kitchen politics', appealing to the armed factions to stop violence. Local leaders would be invited for a meal in the kitchen, the heart of the Naga home. As mothers they would scold errant sons. 'Who are you fighting for? Not for the 50–70 of you, but for us, not for your today but for our tomorrow', Yangerla Ao reprimanded young armed cadres against enforcing protracted curfews that disrupted schools and businesses (Manchanda, 2004: 39). NMA claimed that as Mothers they were trusted by all sides, 'For women there are no factions. We are still united. It is the men who have misunderstandings. Struggle for power has divided them', said a Jotsoma village woman (Manchanda, 2004: 42).

However, by depoliticising women's activism, 'motherhood' politics undermined their authority to assert their right to be part of decision-making institutions. Defending that strategic choice NMA President Neidonuo Angami was stoical. 'We have our roles to play as mothers, they theirs' (Manchanda, 2004: 28). That gendered division of labour meant, according to Dr. Akang Ao, deputy speaker of the Naga Hoho, that 'we call them (NMA) when it concerns them. When it is Hoho business, there is no need to call them' (Manchanda, 2004: 21). It ghettoised women as speaking only on and for women. Importantly, the new generation of NMA leaders holds up as role model, Rosemary Dzuvichu's mother, a former nominated (but voting) member of the Kohima Village Council who was outspoken and not only on women's issues.<sup>10</sup> It should be added that in the 1990s, NMA's reorientation from a social welfare organisation to one engaged in peace politics, albeit couched in motherhood politics, provoked vociferous comments about social transgression.

That reaction may explain why NMA in Nagaland held back while its sister organisation in Manipur, NWU (1994) boldly pursued a women's rights agenda, reflecting the concerns of the professional women who were its office bearers. NWU's General Assembly resolutions asserted women's rights on marriage, divorce, property and representation in elected bodies, including the Naga apex body United Naga Council (UNC) of Manipur. NWU resolutions from the 1990s asserted that there was nothing in Naga customary laws which prohibited women's participation and demanded women's inclusion in local village councils and UNC. It would take 10 years for NMA in Nagaland to catch up and voice a similar gender equality agenda. The different working styles of NMA and NWU are a reminder of the very different political terrains in which the two women's groups operate (Ray, 2000). Statehood in Nagaland, despite continuing militarisation, has created for the women a stake in the status quo. In Manipur, the Nagas are a discriminated minority, struggling to change the socio-political status quo.

## Sustaining the ceasefire and peace process

In July 1997, the government of India signed the Indo-Naga Ceasefire Agreement with the dominant Naga national armed group, the NSCN (Isak-Muivah). On the political front, however, talks got stuck on the demands for exceptional autonomy or shared



**Figure 1.** Naga National Council 1946.

sovereignty and integration of the divided Naga habitat. The unity question proved equally contentious. Decades of fratricidal violence has torn apart Naga society, with Nagas killing Nagas, as the Naga national movement splintered and became factionalised. At the time of the ceasefire agreement, while NSCN (IM) was the dominant armed group, other Naga factions continued to enjoy support and control territory (See Figure 1). That the ceasefire has held these 18 years has a lot to do with the peace work of the Naga social organisations in creating a society-wide consensus in support of the peace process; monitoring ceasefire violations, providing early warning and building reconciliation among the warring factions. In understanding the dynamic role of Naga civil society in the peace process, it is appropriate to acknowledge the influence of civil society activists from mainland India who persuaded the NSCN collective leadership of the value of civil society's potential in peace-making (Manchanda and Bose, 2015). Central to the civil society discourse was the logic that in asymmetric conflicts the support of civil society groups, especially women's groups, provides strategic depth to an armed group confronting a powerful state.

### Promoting unity and accountability

During the long ceasefire, NMA and other social organisations insulated the peace process from 'spoiler' machinations. NMA joined other Naga social organisations and the churches in a 22-member Action Committee to independently monitor the ceasefire. Although inclusion in the formal ceasefire monitoring mechanism foundered,<sup>11</sup> the

Committee secured revision of the Ceasefire Ground Rules in 2001 to include civilian security.

NMA and NWU's most important role was in keeping open the channels of communication between rival factions and widening the ambit of the ceasefire to encompass excluded factions. In 1999, four representatives of NMA and NWU enabled indirect talks between the top leadership of the warring factions. They trekked across the Myanmar border to the camp headquarters of the rival group and emerged as trusted interlocutors between the top leaders. Again, following the signing of the interim Indo-Naga Framework Agreement (2015), a delegation of the Naga Mothers took the lead and crossed over to Myanmar to bring into the ambit of the peace process, excluded factions.

At every significant civil society consultation, the collective leadership of NSCN included women's groups such as NMA and NWU. When fierce turf wars saw factional violence spike in 2006–2008, NMA and NWU joined other Naga social organisations and the church to launch the FNR, a non-partisan civil society initiative to facilitate communication among the factions. It birthed a Joint Working Group that dramatically reduced inter factional violence. Above all, NMA has sought to bridge the social disconnect of the collective leadership, for instance, pressuring the top Naga leader, Th. Muivah to act against armed cadres involved in assaulting women, and to root out the culture of impunity. Confronting the NSCN (IM) leadership was a new generation of educated professionals, 'mothers' who had come a long way from the grassroots level, and were connected nationally and internationally, via the Internet with Amnesty and the international Indigenous Women's Forum.

## **Shifts in social stratification: Reimagining equality and inclusion**

The peculiar characteristic of the Naga conflict and indeed several other armed struggles in the Northeast is that endemic cycles of war coexist with the Indian state's peace-making processes via the creation of self-governing 'ethnic' homelands or special federal arrangements. Consequently, 50 years of Naga statehood has entrenched modern structures of governance, elected law makers and political parties. They coexist with traditional tribal structures of authority and the more recent and competing avatars such as the Naga Hoho and NMA. Also, the protracted ceasefire has produced the over-ground presence of competing armed groups and their rival 'governments in waiting'. In addition to these complex and intersecting circles of power, there is the oppressive dominance of the security forces and the corrupting impact of their non-accountable security related expenditure (Longkumer and Jamir, 2012).

State and market penetration has produced a further widening circle of stakeholders in the existing Indian state system—political leaders, the salaried, contractors, development partners and so on. The ceasefire has accelerated the conditions for the growth of a new middle class. This post-colonial middle class has emerged from a different relationship with the Indian state than the 'middle class' colonial elite that spearheaded the Naga national movement and was anchored in traditional tribal structures (Misra, 1983, 2000).

In this context, a new order of elite stratification is unsettling tribal hierarchies. Importantly, many of the new initiatives for resolving the old problems that have grid-locked Naga society such as FNR and CAA which are being steered by men and women who inhabit the 'middle class' space of Naga society in terms of their urban location, education and professional occupations. They are exposed to democratising ideologies and networks, national and international.

Earlier, the conflict had vaulted Naga women into the public sphere to engage in micro-politics of grassroots peace work. The ceasefire expanded the middle space for non-partisan engagement. Moreover, it is in the civil society sphere that women are present in large numbers not in formal politics. An expanding generation of educated, professional Naga women has emerged who straddle the worlds of tradition and modernity with ease; they feel 'at home' in Ukhrul as well as in Delhi or Amsterdam. They are confronting local patriarchies embedded in customary laws.

Customary law does not entitle women to property rights. However, as Nagaland's senior most woman civil servant, Additional Chief Secretary, Banou Jamit ruminated – the crunch will come once this generation of professional women create wealth and are blocked by the men of the clan from disposing of it'.<sup>12</sup> Already, Monalisa Changkija, owner and editor of *Nagaland Page* is feeling the pressure from her uncle and nephews to pass on the newspaper business to her maternal nephews, the clan heirs, and not her daughters who belong to another clan. Hushili, a senior civil servant, claimed that 'as long as men have a monopoly over control of land, the traditional source of status and power in Nagaland, male resentment over women rising in the professions was subdued'. Sensitivities on the issue of land rights are extreme, as evident in the male hostility to Naga women marrying outside the community and alienating clan land. This anxiety drives the opposition of the Lotha (Wokha) Tribal Authority to Lotha women marrying migrants from mainland India and setting up matri-local residence and taking on Lotha names.

## Women in public life

In Northeast Indian societies, the public space is the monopoly of men. Customary practices and traditions that define the Naga way of life across diverse tribes commonly extol the participatory democracy of the village republics, but exclude Naga women, who are streamed into the tribal women's organisation safeguarding culture and social welfare (Das, 2011). Among tribes that follow hereditary principles such as the Sema, accounts tell of a woman *Gaonbora* (village head) in the 1970s, wearing the traditional red shawl, staff in hand, performing her duties. NMA advisor, Rosemary Dzvichu's mother, was a nominated member of the Angami Public Organisation, but with voting rights. These were exceptions, though change has been quietly happening. The current NMA President was member and vice chair of the Kohima Municipal Council.

More recently, under pressure on quotas for women, the Naga Hoho proposed 'nominating' two women to the assembly. 'Once that becomes the practice, the resistance to women's equal participation will weaken', said Chuba Ozukum, Secretary Naga Hoho.<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Dzuvichu, who is steering the campaign for women's quotas, dismissed it as

perpetuating the selection of proxy women without voting rights.<sup>14</sup> The UNC in Manipur too is experimenting with the nomination option. The nominee of the Maring tribe, a woman was elected Secretary, Welfare UNC. Since the 1990s, NWU has been lobbying for women's political rights. A major breakthrough was when the Moyon Naga Council gave the women's tribal body, the right to vote in the elections. A Moyon woman became Speaker of the Council in 1997. But these advances have been difficult to sustain. Efforts to amend the UNC Constitution are fiercely resisted.

In Nagaland, women are missing not only in the traditional tribal structures of authority, but also in the modern structures of state politics. The Nagaland state assembly has a record of 11 legislative assemblies with no woman representative from any of its 60 constituencies. In Nagaland, only 25 women have stood for any election in 50 years. As for the national Parliament, the single exception to the male monopoly was Rano Shazia who represented Nagaland in 1977. Women do door-to-door campaigning, routinely distribute cash inducements to voters and act as poll agents, but are not considered worthy contestants. Khegholi Aaomi, a Congress party worker and the wife of a former Minister, was brusquely rebuffed by the state party bosses when she wanted to contest. At the insistence of the central leadership, she was given a ticket to contest from Dimapur in the 2008 assembly elections, but withdrew as there was no party support. In 2013 elections, the party offered her a ticket. This time she refused. 'Congress was losing. I didn't want to be made a scapegoat'.<sup>15</sup> 'The money question is what holds women back', explained Monalisa Changkija, owner editor of *Nagaland Page* daily.<sup>16</sup> Women have no property rights and cannot like the men use their property as collateral. Monalisa links the demand for gender quotas with property rights, the Joint Action Committee on Women's Reservation strategically delinks the two.

Against the backdrop of discord over women's quotas, in the 2013 assembly election, two women contested, Yangerala Ao (independent) from Mokokchung, the state's most literate district, and Rakhila Lakiumong (Bharatiya Janata Party) from Tuensang, the most backward. The ruling Naga Peoples Front put up no woman candidate, a reminder that ethno-nationalist political parties tend to be hostile to the entry of women in formal politics (Manchanda and Prentice, 2012). 'Had Yangerala been able to break the glass ceiling and become the first woman elected MLA, it would have been the ideal resolution of the bitter struggle over quotas', observed Banou Jamit.<sup>17</sup> She did not win. The women, 45% of the electorate, did not support her (Shrinivasan, 2013). Naga women have so internalised patriarchal exclusion they will not vote for a woman. 'That is why reservations are necessary', Abokali Jimomi of *Youth-Net* emphasised.<sup>18</sup>

The State of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and two districts of Assam are exempt from the purview of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution providing for elected local self-governing institutions as they have traditional local village councils and Village Development Boards (VDBs). Sizeable funds, central and state, flow through the VDBs and particularly through urban and metropolitan councils. The experience in the cash-modest VDBs has been that new women members raise uncomfortable questions about auditing of funds. Ironically, in the midst of the heat and noise over quotas, Nagaland has been quietly implementing a 25% quota for women in the VDB (Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978).

## Consciousness and confidence of women as political subjects

Political settlements resolving identity-based struggles have as their core the guaranteeing of customary laws and practices. In the Northeast, a majority of ethnic peace accords, including the 1960 Agreement creating Nagaland state, constitutionally guaranteed (Art 371A) customary laws and practices governing land and social relations. In Nagaland, women are challenging socio-political exclusion and calling into question the adequacy of the traditional all-male tribal system of arbitration and reconciliation that they feel trivialises crimes against women. And from the backdoor has come in the contentious question of property rights for Naga women. It is within this context that Naga women want to initiate a debate on Art 371A,<sup>19</sup> arguing that when at a particular moment in history, Naga decision makers determined the inclusion of 'all' customary laws including those that perpetuated the suppression of women, women's perspectives were excluded. Those perspectives need now to be incorporated, said Dzuvichu, advisor NMA.

The social upheaval of conflict has pushed women through their human rights and peace work into the public sphere. The long ceasefire has further expanded the middle space for civil society, including women's activism. The possibility of women translating that activism and recognition in the informal sphere of politics into authority in the formal sphere of representative politics (modern and traditional) will be the measure of the empowering potential of peace politics in Naga society today. Already apparent is the quality of new found assertiveness of Naga women as political subjects within an overall context of reimagining equality and inclusion in Naga society, 'post conflict'. It is evidenced 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 Advisors. Significantly, Angami has been ambivalent if not negative on the demand for women's quotas and their inclusion in decision-making structures.

### *Asserting rights I: Quotas for women*

The Naga women's challenge to unequal gendered relations has got catalysed around women's claims to quotas in urban and metropolitan councils, which technically are outside the purview of customary laws which govern Naga village life and exclude women in decision making. The debate has got framed as positing the 'traditional' world of the Nagas in opposition to the hegemonic influences of 'modern' India; the recourse of the 'cosmopolitan' Naga women to the Indian courts is pitted against customary practices of reconciliation.

India's third tier of government, the local self-governing institutions, was not extended to these constitutionally demarcated tribal areas. In 2001, the Nagaland government enacted the Nagaland Municipal Act, extending the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (1992) to Nagaland's metropolitan and urban councils. Five years later, 33% reservation for women was incorporated in the Nagaland Municipal (First Amendment) Act, 2006. Since then no elections have been held despite the expiry of the terms of 19 existing councils. Elections in Mokokchung were disrupted in 2008

due to fierce opposition by Naga tribal associations. In 2009, the council of ministers citing a threat to law and order indefinitely postponed elections across Nagaland. Naga women's organisation took their case to Guwahati High Court. Despite an order in favour of quotas, the Nagaland government continued to procrastinate. In September 2012, the Nagaland state assembly unanimously adopted a resolution declaring the 2006 Amendment in violation of Naga customary laws guaranteed under Art 371 A,<sup>20</sup> thus invalidating the quota provision. This was at the direction of the Naga Hoho and the Eastern Naga Peoples Organisation (ENPO). The critical salience of the women's challenge is evinced in the fact that Art 371A has been invoked only twice, once when Nagaland claimed special rights to control its oil resources, overriding the Union Government's claims (Suan, 2013) and second, on reservations for women. Meanwhile, the Joint Action Committee on women's reservations appealed to the Supreme Court to defend their right to reservations.

Yansathung Kyong, chairperson of Lotha village tribal authority in Wokha explained why the tribal authorities were opposed: '[A]ll these changes – women in decision making bodies – will destroy our identity, our communities. It's against our customary law and practices'.<sup>21</sup> The Lotha women's organisation is an active member of the Joint Women Committee. The emotionalism associated with the discourse on the women's quota as well as the perceived gravitas of the social challenge implied by the women's demand for inclusion is evident, in all its complexity, in the continuing crisis over municipal elections in Mokokchung district, largely populated by the Ao tribes. The Ao women's organization Watsu Mongdang has been in the forefront of confronting the opposition of the Ao tribe elders and their organisation Ao Senden in contesting municipal elections in 2008 and 2009. At issue was no simple traditional versus modern or generational opposition. For instance, the head of the Ao Senden is Dean of Social Sciences, Mokokchung University, and belongs to the professional 'middle class' (as do office bearers of Naga Hoho). His wife, an office bearer of Watsu Mongdang, is well-educated. These heads of Naga tribal authorities are open to women's equal participation, but defensively add, they need to carry the older generation with them.

Rosemary Dzuichu, who has been steering the campaign, attributes more material motives to the Ao Senden and Naga Hoho's opposition:

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.<sup>22</sup>

The crisis in Mokokchung came to a head ostensibly over the Watsu Mongdang taking the 'law' in its own hand and punitively shaming an Ao tribesman who had raped a girl from the Chang tribe. The women feared that if left to the customary arbitration procedures, the rapist would be absolved by giving a pig as compensation. The Ao Senden upbraided the women for interfering and excommunicated them for a year. Social relations were grudgingly re-established at the intercession of the church. The incident

exposed a widening social rift over women's demand for inclusion in decision-making and settled power networks, and their challenge of customary laws that trivialise violence against women.

### *Asserting rights II: Tribal courts*

The women's questioning of the tribal courts has prompted a fierce backlash. Already, the onslaught of modernity and market has undermined clan ownership of common resources and unsettled the basis of the authority of tribal hierarchies of power. Increasingly, the continuing salience of the tribe as a social organisation of society has come to rest on its dispute-resolution mechanism. Not surprisingly, tribal elders are resisting any erosion of their adjudicatory role in managing social relations, especially gender relations. However, the new complexities confronting Naga society, especially in expanding urban centres such as Dimapur are calling into question the adequacy of customary justice mechanisms. A social culture of impunity for crimes against women has been further reinforced by protracted militarisation and impunity under AFSPA.

National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB) statistics for 2013 suggest that Nagaland has the lowest rate of crimes against women in India. However, underreporting is likely and there are accounts of Naga women confronting multiple insecurities owing to the presence of the army, armed cadres and migrants (Kikon, 2014). Arguably, social cohesion of village society had acted as a deterrent to sexual violence. Wife beating and incest though prevalent was rarely spoken about.<sup>23</sup> Few cases come to light as women were reluctant to approach tribal courts. 'Why approach the tribal elders' arbitration courts 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', explained Monalisa.<sup>24</sup> The people who comprise the customary courts are all men. There are no jails, only punitive fines, excommunication and expulsion. Often matters are hushed up. Akum Longchari, founder of *Morung Express* was more explicit. 'There is a culture of impunity in customary law. Those in positions of power, get away with it. What is convenient is termed customary!'<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In the early ceasefire years (1997–2003) NMA's political strategist Neidonuo had held back from commenting on the political agenda, saying 'the decision has to be theirs [leaders], our job is to take advantage of the 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 mobilisation of motherhood, aimed at retaining the trust of all sides. 'The solution should come from our leaders. Not from an ordinary mother like me. If I give a decision they may not accept it' (Manchanda, 2004: 71).

As the long years of ceasefire get normalised as 'peace', the new generation of Naga women office bearers boldly demands a more direct voice in peace consultations, criticizing the inadequacies of men alone deciding for 'both halves' of society. The historical experience of all male committees determining how Naga society should be run has

shown that women's interests and perspectives will be ignored. It requires a tight balancing act, negotiating the thin line between upholding community identity and enhancing women's rights and choices. As an entry point for expanding women's public voice, NMA suggested joining forces with the political women of the armed groups, but their assessment of the NSCN women was not inspiring. However, the Naga women have shown, they are determined to not lose the moment of agency and are resisting the push back.

Naga women have walked away from the conservative outlook of the early founders of NMA such as Sano Vamuza, presiding over the 'mothers' taking punitive action against drug peddlers who had 'wasted' their sons and daughters, to the sophisticated peace politics of consensus pioneered by Neidonuo Anagami and the emergence of NMA into a strategic stakeholder in the Naga peace process. NMA has become a body led by educated, professional women who are recasting Naga women's agency in a more assertive rights-based politics. These gendered shifts reflect the changing social dynamics of Naga society as it negotiates a realignment of status, authority and power relations in the long ceasefire and cold peace. It is in that context that the women's question has become central in the social unpacking of tradition and customary law in the encounter with modernity and market.

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### Notes

1. India's 'Northeast' – a cluster of seven states – is a complex mosaic of ethnic tribes and communities that make up 4% of the country's population and covers over 7% of its landmass. The region's geographic unity is a legacy of the colonial construct of the 'Northeast' as a segregated 'frontier' region, eliding its huge diversity.
2. The Indo-Naga Framework Agreement was signed between the Government of India and the dominant Naga 'nationalist' armed group NSCN (I-M) on 3 August 2015. Nearly a year later, the contents of the Agreement remain cache, and despite its appellation as 'historic', the Framework Agreement postpones yet again a final political settlement. See Tapan Bose 'Indo-Naga Framework Agreement: Apprehensions and Expectations' *Mainstream Weekly* vol LIV No 1, 26 December, 2015, accessed at <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article6157.html>
3. Leela Fernandes' study of '*India's New Middle Class*' provides explanatory resonances helpful in understanding the constitution of such a social group and its working through the civil society sphere as opposed to sphere of electoral (majority) politics. While civil society space is often conflated with the middle class sphere, however as Fernandes argues, social movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan can through struggle expand and even transform the sphere of civil society, and indeed make heterogeneous the middle class.

4. National Commission for Women 'Tribal Customary Law and Women's Status', online at: <http://ncw.nic.in/pdfReports/Customary%20Law.pdf>
5. Interview with Monalisa Changkija, Dimapur, 26 August 2013.
6. The notion of 'post-conflict' needs to be problematised, especially in view of the historical experience of continuing militarisation and a violent peace.
7. Interview with Rosemary Dzuvichu, Kohima, 29 August 2013.
8. South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) Data from tables of 'Annual Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Nagaland, 1992–2011' listed in South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://www.satp.org/>
9. Kheslie Chisi in communication with Rita Manchanda, Kolkata, 8 November 2014.
10. Interview with NMA President Abeu Meru, Dimapur, 29 August 2013.
11. Text of Government of Nagaland letter communicating message received from the GOI, Ministry of Home Affairs, 11 February 1998. *Naga Chronicle I* (2002) compiled by Rev N.K. Nuh, Regency Publications, Delhi, pp. 477–478.
12. Interview with Banou Jamit, Kohima, 28 August 2013.
13. Interview with Chuba Ozukum, Kohima, 28 August 2013.
14. Interview with Rosemary Dzuvichu, Kohima, 29 August 2013.
15. Interview with Khegholi Aaomi, Dimapur, 27 August 2013.
16. Interview with Monalisa Changkija, Dimapur, 26 August 2013.
17. Interview with Banou Jamit, Kohima, 28 August 2013.
18. Interview with Abokali Jimomi, Kohima, 28 August 2013.
19. Art 371 A of the Indian Constitution guarantees protection to the customary laws and practices governing tribal land and social relations.
20. 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.
21. Interview with Yansathung Kyong, Wokha, 29 August 2013.
22. Interview with Rosemary Dzuvichu, Kohima, 29 August 2013.
23. Focus Group Discussion held with Watsu Mongdang officer bearers and members, Mokokchung, 30 August 2013.
24. Interview with Monalisa Changkija, Dimapur, 26 August 2013.
25. Interview with Akum Longchari, Dimapur, 26 August 2013.

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