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Shonreiphy Longvah

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SHONREIPHY LONGVAH, *Sikkim Central University*
shonreilongvah@gmail.com

Religion, a strong belief in the existence of an omnipotent supernatural being that controls human destiny, has long been part of the Naga way of life. Even before Nagas converted to Christianity, they believed in the existence of a Creator, and to whom different Naga tribes accorded different names. Most Naga tribes also had a clear belief system pertaining the afterlife. Part of this article argues that it is therefore a misnomer to define traditional Naga religion as 'animistic', as has been commonly done. However, ancient Naga religion did not generate a sense of Naga nationalism in the way, I will argue, Christian conversions did. By the late 19th and early 20th century, many Nagas had been converted to Christianity. At the same time, Nagas' self-awareness as a political community that shared a common identity and destiny was also born. This article contends that Christian conversion was predominantly responsible for the rise of Naga nationalism.

Naga is a term of foreign origination that classes together a heterogeneous group of people. Each Naga tribe follows its own socio-cultural, political, agricultural and other practices. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Owen (1844: 7), 'the similarity of features, habits, language, and practices, undoubtedly bespeaks them to be of one common origin', and this common origin, fostered by massive Christian conversions, led to a desire for a common political future. Mao (cited in *The Morung Express* 31-6-2013) pointed out that in the remote past Nagas did not apply the term 'Naga' to refer to themselves. Rather, in ancient days, Nagas described themselves in reference to their habitat, i.e., their village. The history of those communities who came to identify themselves, or were thus identified by others, with the term 'Naga' also remains obscure. This obscurity fascinated

western anthropologists who started tracing the origins of the Naga people based on their physical appearance, political and cultural practices, traditions, languages and religion. But while they came up with various hypotheses, including faraway origins in China and Mongolia, till today no anthropologist or historian has been able to trace the exact place of origin of these 'enigmatic' warrior tribes. Such enigmatic origins are not unique to Naga tribes alone. Several other tribal communities in Northeast India display a similar mysteriousness in their origins. Many argue that the absence of written records and a 'clear and consistent oral history' as factors for this enigma. For instance, Burling (2007: 4) pointed out that various tribes in Northeast India 'talk as if their ancestors once lived somewhere else, but migrated at some point in order to reach the previously uninhabited territory where they made their final home'.

Having briefly introduced the 'Naga', this article proceeds by discussing the impacts of Christianity on Naga national politics. It argues that massive Christian conversions, while not the sole reason, was a major catalyst of the rise of Naga nationalism. By the 1940s, an overwhelming majority of the Naga population was Christianized (although a meager percentage still followed the ancient religion, or the *Hao* religion as Tangkhul Nagas call it). By the mid-1950s, Nagas were embroiled in a national movement for their freedom, and in this, Christian religion acted as the 'backbone' (Lorin & Spees, 1990: 355-363). I indeed argue that religious conversions to Christianity resonated with changes in the political and socio-cultural sentiments of Nagas. From 1836, several efforts were made by Christian missionaries to spread the Gospel of Christ in what is now referred to as Nagalim¹.

In 1838, Miles Bronson visited the Naga Hills inhabited by the Konyak Nagas, but 'his mission was an unsuccessful one' (Mawon 2015: 157). Roughly three decades later, the missionary E.W. Clark visited the Naga Hills and, in 1876, settled with his wife Mary Clark in the area inhabited by the Ao Nagas (Henningsen 2007: 77). In other words, the 'Christian Missionaries began their work first in the Ao Naga area' (Sema 2013: 59). From that moment onward, Christianity gradually spread across Nagalim, although slow at first and not without setbacks. It was recorded that Nagas found it hard to abandon the traditions of their ancestors, and they were therefore deemed 'conservative' with little interest for change (Allen 1905: 40, 45). It must, indeed, have been with great difficulty that Nagas gradually abandoned their traditional religion and practices.

Allen (1905: 39) remarked that 'nothing less than a strong desire for social advancement would induce a Naga to adopt a religion which would impose on him so

¹ The term 'Nagalim' and 'Nagaland' means the same literally, i.e., both refer to the land of the Naga people. In this manuscript, the former will be used because the latter often applies to the State of Nagaland created within the Union of India in December 1963. Nagalim means all the land of the Nagas both in India and Myanmar. With an exception of the Nagaland state, in India, Nagas are a minority in the states of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In Myanmar, the Nagas are found in the Kachin state and Sagaing sub-division.

many troublesome restrictions.’ Christianity seemingly offered this social advancement, and, over time, Christianity took a firm hold across the Naga country. If Christianity was first introduced in the northern hills of Nagalim, it also spread to its extreme south, inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga tribe. Here, the gospel of Christ was introduced by the American missionary couple, William Pettigrew and his wife Alice Pettigrew from 1896 onward. If, in the history of Nagas’ conversion to Christianity, the Ao Nagas were the first to convert in present-day Nagaland, the Tangkhuls were the first to do so in the state of Manipur. Amongst other things, the advent of Christianity integrated the hitherto ‘unorganized Naga tribes’ (Shimray 2005:45), as I will discuss in more detail below. The introduction of Christianity also came with western education, medicine, and way of life. Education opened the eyes of the Nagas to the modern world and made them realize that the term Naga though foreign in origin, was a term that could connect them under a single political rubric.

This, indeed, was the time in which Nagas’ political consciousness was on the rise, and with British withdrawal becoming imminent Nagas came to reject the idea that their land, which was under a special dispensation during the British rule,² should pass into Indian hands (Baruah 2003: 321). This rejection was due to the germination of Naga nationalism, which, in turn, was largely shaped by the introduction and advent of Christianity. That said, Christianity was not the single factor that triggered the onset of Naga nationalism. Other factors such as introduction of western education and the involvement of the Nagas in the two World Wars also worked to cultivate the ideas of belonging to one distinct national group (Longvah 2015: 68). In addition, the growth of Naga nationalism was also based on the desire to preserve and protect their identity and culture, and to free themselves from any foreign occupation, which looked down upon them as ‘backward’ and ‘primitive’. Thomas (2016: 2) discusses at length how the disparate Naga tribes, therefore, came together and demanded an independent nation to ‘reconstitute their identity, demarcate their national space and defend it from further incursions’. This consciousness of a common identity paved the way for aspirations of self-determination, which means that Nagas themselves would determine their own political, administrative, cultural and socio-economic affairs. Based on the historical given of Nagas being distinct from the Indian nation, the Naga commonly termed their

² Under the British administration, Nagas experienced a special treatment such as the enactment of the ‘Inner Line Regulation of 1873’ that prohibited British subjects from going beyond a certain line towards the Naga areas without a pass or license issued by the Deputy Commissioner (Horam 1975:13, cited in Shimray 2005:38-39). This regulation, modified as per the needs of the time, is still active in the state of Nagaland. In 1880, moreover, legislation was enacted that classified the Naga tribes as ‘excluded’ and their areas as ‘excluded areas’, with the aim of protecting the Naga areas from possible economic exploitation by the peoples of the plains, thus indicating that the Naga Hills were always separate from the rest of Assam. Throughout British rule, Nagas lived by and large on their own and continued their social and political activities as the British hardly interfered with the traditions, customs and village administration of the Nagas (Shimray 2005: 39-41).

movement as a national movement. They considered India as a foreign country, a colonial master who, akin to the British earlier, had trespassed into their land. This led to a warlike situation between the Nagas and the Indian Government.

In this article, I will first highlight some colonial writings on Naga traditional religion and critique their accounts based on data accumulated through participatory observation, interviews, and the reading of secondary sources. Next, I will focus on Christian conversions of the Nagas and discuss how such conversions advanced the rise of Naga nationalism. This will be followed by examining the relationship between the Naga Movement and Christianity as well as the recent complications to the Movement caused by factionalism within the broader Naga family. Relatedly, the role of the Church and Christianity in mitigating the complications and volatilities of factionalism will be discussed. I conclude by arguing that Christianity propelled manifold changes in the Naga society, of which, the most important change was the rise of Naga political consciousness.

A critique on the colonial classification of Nagas as ‘animists’

The Naga people and their culture intrigued western anthropologists since the 19th century. When British troops first encountered some Naga tribes in 1832, they were resisted violently by, what they saw as, ‘ferocious hill-people’. Nagas resisted them because they encroached into their homeland without permission. Prior to the arrival of the Britishers into some parts of the Naga country, western education and way of life were completely alien to Nagas who transmitted their ancestral knowledge and wisdom through oral tradition. The Nagas, a conglomeration of many tribes (some listing it to more than 60 tribes), had no script of their own. Therefore, they had no written record of the way of life they led in ancient days. Their ancestral practices, knowledge, warfare, agriculture, matrimony, hunting, burial, art, ideas, and other cultural practices was imbibed, preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next through oral traditions, mostly in the forms of folktales and folksongs.

In the colonial era, the relationship between the British and the Nagas was mostly limited to those Nagas inhabiting the Naga Hills District, which was created in 1866 with an area of 9,446 square kilometers. By the late 19th century, 30 per cent of the Naga areas - of an approximate total of 100,000 to 120,000 square kilometers - were conquered and ruled by the British (Shimray 2005: 31; Iralu 2005: 190). The British left the Indian sub-continent in 1947, well before they succeeded in subduing the entire Naga country. Many of the British officials in the 19th century combined their duties as colonial administrators with the perusal of ethnological inquiries. These two duties were nevertheless related, as it was thought that ethnographic information on Naga tribes would help the colonial government administrate and control them more effectively. The British colonial policy towards the Naga in the 19th century was principally based on punitive expeditions to stop the Naga raids against British subjects in the plains of Assam.

Later on, such expeditions were carried out to protect the conquered Naga villages from attacks of then still independent Naga villages. Through punitive expeditions, some Naga villages adjoining Assam were controlled 'on and off' by the British from Assam. Allen (1905: 2) referred to this as the 'period of control from without, by a system of expeditions or promenades'. The end of the 19th century saw a firm establishment of British headquarters within the Naga territories of Samaguting (present day Chumukedima) in 1866 and Kohima in 1878. Operating from these headquarters, British punitive influences became more effective, and brought many Naga villages within the fold of colonial administration. Initially, minimal or 'absolute non-interference' vis-à-vis Nagas' traditional system of authority, their customary laws and practices was upheld, that is, as long as it did not challenge British authority. This period was known as the 'the period of control from within, the period of absolute non-interference' (Allen 1905: 2). However, the 'non-interference' policy could not contain the independent spirited Nagas from raiding other villages (both Naga and non-Naga), and of practicing 'head-hunting' warfare amongst themselves. This, the colonial government, found not desirable and therefore it decided to directly interfere, pacify the area, and introduce minimal forms of administration. Head-hunting was thus abolished although its practice reportedly continued until the 1960s in unadministered areas of Nagalim (Das 2013: 97). This direct interference was known as the 'period of control from within, merging into gradual absorption into British territory' (Allen 1905: 2).

After the British effectuated control over the Nagas, much became written about Nagas by colonial officers posted there. Many of these views ought to be critiqued, but here I confine myself to critically interrogating colonial views on Naga religion.

Chidester (2009: 52) posits that the 'fear of the unknown, belief in spirits, or submission to the authority of a higher power' constitute the basic features of religion. Darwin (cited in Chidester 2009: 62, 68), in an attempt to explain the origin of religion, argued that 'belief in God or a Supreme Being' was not the universal characteristics of religion, rather, 'belief in unseen or spiritual agencies' seemed to be universal. Thus, broadly speaking, all religion in some way or another believes in the existence of 'unseen' entities or spirits. They simply differ roughly in their expressions of that belief. Since the 19th century, traditional Naga religion was commonly identified as 'animism'. This perhaps was due to the presence of strong animistic beliefs and practices, their everyday lives being influenced by spirits, and by their attempts to appease these spirits to ward off calamities. Sitton (1998: 69-70) argued that this indeed formed the basic tenets of animism which was generally defined as the 'belief that non-living objects have souls (life) and that natural phenomena possess supernatural or magical power.' The proclivity of the Nagas to offer sacrifices in order to keep the evil spirits satisfied might have prompted Michell (1883: 206) to remark that Naga religion was a 'species of devil-worship' and of them not believing in a 'supreme being'. Various colonialists, however, argued to the contrary and forwarded the view that Naga traditional religion believed in

the existence of both a supreme being and various other spirits, and therefore defined their religious practices as 'animistic' (Allen 1905: 88; Elwin 1961: 10).

Prior to the advent of Christianity, Nagas nevertheless had a clear conscience of their religion. Owen (1844: 8-9) disagreed with the generally held notion by those in Assam that Nagas had no religion. He narrated:

the existence of a singular practice amongst them negatives the idea of their being without religious feelings, for to what can we ascribe the following observance if it be not intended as devotional. At every cross-path they meet on a march, each, whether man, woman, or child, breaks off a branch or leaf of a tree which is thrown on a heap whilst passing – and these continue accumulating until an eclipse takes place, when the whole are removed by fire. The motive for so strange a practice I could never ascertain, with any nearer approach to correctness than my interpreter's knowledge could afford me, viz. that their Supreme One might see their observance, and reward them accordingly.

Read thus, Nagas have been wrongly essentialized as 'animists'. Today, this notion is indeed subjected to debate. Empirical study and not a *priori* assumptions on traditional Naga religious beliefs indicate that Nagas cannot be considered as full-fledged 'animists'. Most Naga tribes had a clear idea of the Supreme Creator³ and of the afterlife or a second world. They worshipped the Supreme Creator ('the Lord of all spirits', 'the benevolent God') as the last resort when appeasing various spirits on earth failed (Shikhu 2007: 13). But while Nagas believed in the existence of the Supreme Creator, they hardly worshipped Him and the supposed reason behind this was:

because He was believed to have lived in the sky, too far away that He did not interfere in human affairs and struggles. The Nagas did not worship or offer sacrifices to the Supreme Being on a daily basis because He was considered to be a benevolent God and not requiring propitiation. It was only when all their sacrifices to the malevolent spirits of lakes, rocks, trees, hills, and caves failed and resulted in constant harassment, sickness and natural calamities, that they resorted to the worship of the Supreme God who was believed to be the Lord of all spirits. (Shikhu 2007: 13)

Such ancestral practices indicate that Nagas also believed in the existence of spirits residing in inanimate objects. However, upholding the latter by omitting the former seems to have been the predominant reason why Nagas were considered as 'animists'. Mention may be made here that such a co-existence of belief systems is not the

³ The Supreme Creator has been accorded with different names by different Naga tribes. For instance, the Semas called it *Alhou*; Angamis, *Terhuomia* or *Ukepenuopfu*; Konyaks, *Kahwang*; Aos, *Tsungrem*; Moas, *Ora*, and Tangkhuls called it *Varivara*, a derivative from the term *Uri Ura* indicating things that had been in existence since ancient times (Shikhu 2007:12-13). Nagas in Myanmar refer to the Supreme Creator as *Thishaw*, *Maitai*, *Atengpu*, *Khenung Thongpu*, etc. (<http://www.nagasinmyanmar-burma.com/p/religious-condition.html>)

characteristics of Nagas alone. In fact, many major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam also contain animistic beliefs and practices and yet these religions were never considered as a form of 'animism'.

In the world of ancient Naga religion, 'shamans', or *Khunong* in the Tangkhul language, who were believed to possess the ability of travelling the realm of the dead people, or *Kazeiram*, those who communicated with the dead people, could heal diseases, drive out evil spirits, and interpret dreams and signs, occupied a highly revered social position. The well-established concept of *Khunong* strongly indicates that most Naga tribes believed in life after death, insisting that the soul does not perish at death, but would continue to live in the land of the dead. Therefore, things such as utensils, domestic animals, cloths, food, and weapons, that might be necessary for setting up a new life in the land of the dead, were arranged for the deceased in the burial ceremony (Shikhu 2007: 15). Even after converting to Christianity for more than a century, the Tangkhuls are still found to uphold the notion of *Kazeiram*. For instance, in February 2017, 94 years old Ramyaola Mawon, presuming she would not survive for another year, was making arrangements by gathering those stuffs which she would require on meeting her ancestors in *Kazeiram*. This belief is a common phenomenon among the elderly Tangkhul population.

It may further be mentioned that the practice of shamanism is still in vogue although today they have added the prefix Christian, making them 'Christian-shamans' or 'visionaries' famously known as *Vareshi Khunong* by the Tangkhuls. As a result of the existence of such a strong and organized belief system (which was argued to be absent in animism), a kind of doctrine for the Tangkhuls and many other Naga tribes, it can be hypothesized that Nagas belief system was more 'advanced' or 'complex' than animism and that, therefore, traditional Naga religion cannot be classified as simply 'animistic'. Indeed, the strong doctrine of the afterlife also negates the 19th century colonial accounts which argue that at the most Nagas had a vague concept of the soul or life after death (Allen 1905: 89; Elwin 1961: 10).

By the 19th century, Nagas were exposed not only to Christian religion but also to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islamism although the latter failed to appeal the Nagas (Allen 1905: 40, 89). Only Christianity could influence the Nagas to forsake their traditional religion. However, and irrespectively of what form traditional Naga religion took, what it did not provide Nagas with was a common platform to come together politically, in the way Christianity achieved, as I will now argue.

Naga Nationalism and Christianity

Nationalism is, above all, 'political'; it can be seen as an attempt of a culturally distinct people to attain political self-determination (Hechter 2004: 6-7). Kohn opined that nationalism is first and foremost 'a state of mind', 'an act of consciousness' (cited in

Shimray 2005: 52). It is an 'ideological movement to attain and to maintain the autonomy, unity and identity of the existing or potential nation' (Smith 2001: 335). Across the globe, nationalism is a factor that stimulates a strong feeling of dislike of other people, which sometimes leads to communal violence, ethnic cleansing, even genocide.⁴ Barrington (1997: 174) defines nationalism as 'the pursuit – through argument or other activity – of a set of rights for the self-defined members of the nation, including at a minimum, territorial autonomy or sovereignty' and concludes that every form of nationalism involves the 'setting of membership and territorial boundaries'. For Upreti (2006: 536) 'nationalism is a process whose ultimate objective is to draw a distinction between peoples on the basis of ethno-cultural identities in order to claim sovereign rights over a particular territory'.

Along the lines of these definitions, Naga nationalism can be defined as Nagas' desire for political freedom and independence across a contiguously inhabited area currently bifurcated between India and Myanmar. Nagas' articulation of a 'distinct identity' is fanned by beliefs in common origins, history, religion and political destiny. Based on this, Nagas emphatically assert that they have every right to be independent from both India and Myanmar, whom they see as 'occupying forces'. Besides a common denominator offered by Christianity, Naga nationalism - a movement based on the 'constructed', 'imagined', or 'invented' idea of Naga nation - is also a response and reaction to colonialism (Wouters 2016:101-102). Simply put, Naga nationalism, as 'an act of consciousness', is a movement searching for political recognition of Nagas' right to self-determination' (Shimray 2005: 52-53).

Nag (1999:14) enunciates that in the colonial period, the sole objective of India's national movement was to rally Indians together in opposition to British colonialism and establish itself as a 'nation' based on 'pan-Indian identity' and 'regional linguistic-cultural identity'. The point made by the Nagas was that they were never a part of the 'pan-Indian' project or for that matter the constructed Indian nation. They therefore aspired independence from any foreign domination, particularly from the dominance of the newly Independent Indian State. However, the Indian State was not willing to recognize Nagas' aspiration for freedom. Terming it as the first 'secessionist' problem of the newly Independent Indian State, the Nagas aspiration was responded to with ruthless military techniques. Galtung (2000: 57-58) indicates that the loss of 'freedom' or independence – 'to be the master of a house one can call one's own, not to be lorded over by some other nation' – often forms the basis of 'deep conflicts that threaten deeply rooted needs'. Indeed, the desire for 'freedom' is the basic point upon which the consciousness of Naga nationalism has been constructed. Memories of the past freedom that lingered in the

⁴ Some examples of such instances are the Jewish holocaust, ethno-national related violent conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, East Timor, Rwanda, Somalia, Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine, among many others.

minds of the Nagas prompted them to struggle for their present freedom, which manifested itself in the form of a direct violent conflict with the Indian Government.

Naga nationalist sentiment, however, remains a young concept whose origins date back roughly to the early 20th century. Mawon and Longvah (2014: 338-339) postulated that the spread of Christianity along with the establishments of modern political and administrative systems by the British, modern education, and participation of thousands of Nagas in the two World Wars led to the birth of educated middle class and 'modern thinking citizens' among the Nagas. They rose above their village and tribal loyalties and dreamt of uniting all Nagas. Ultimately, this led to the birth of Naga nationalism.

Prior to the arrival of the British and the subsequent domination of one-third of the entire Naga areas, each Naga identified themselves with their village and each and every Naga village existed more or less independently of each other. Back then, 'security' meant fortifying their village in defense of attacks from other villages. In fact, for effective village security, brave men with the ability to hunt heads and protect the village were considered a valued asset. Thus, the feeling of collectiveness or belonging to a single Naga family was largely absent. At this juncture, during the First World War, around 2000 Nagas were sent to France as part of the Labour Corps. After returning from France, some of them along with few Naga government officials, educated men, and several village headmen established the Naga Club in 1918 (Shimray 2005: 60). The formation of the Club laid the groundwork for Naga nationalism. The Club, which was the first of its kind in Nagalim, drew its members from various Naga tribes, and was both social and political in nature (Vashum 2000: 65). Later, the Club became more fixated with the promotion of a sense of understanding and fraternity among the Nagas, to unite them, and to discuss the important affairs of the Naga society at large (Singh 2004: 37). On 10 January 1929, the Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission asking the British to leave the Nagas alone to decide their own future if and when they would leave the Indian Subcontinent. Thence on, there has been no turning back in Nagas' asserting their aspiration for independence, though the bearer of the torch has over time changed from one political organization to the other.

Across the globe, in various political movements generated by the consciousness of nationalism, religion played a significant role. In Africa, the Middle East, South America, Central Asia, the Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia, religion harnessed many nationalist causes (Percy 2001, cited in Mawon & Longvah 2014: 337). In Nagalim, it was Christianity that undoubtedly triggered the wave of Naga nationalism. Nakhro (cited in *The Morung Express* 22-2-2017) opined that by the 1940s and 50s, Christianity had induced Nagas to belief that 'God has a special geo-political plan' for them and it was likely because of this belief that, Nagas refused to consider themselves as a part of 'Hindu India'.

Thus, the Naga national movement for independence was Christ centric from the very beginning. The *Yehzabo* (Constitution) of the Federal Government of Nagaland

(FGN), the political organ of the Naga National Council (NNC), succinctly acknowledged the sovereignty of the Christian God over all affairs of the Naga people. He was believed and worshipped as the Almighty God who sustained and will sustain the Nagas in times of trials and hardships (Lasuh 2002: 77). In fact, in 1956, there was an order from the NNC that the Christian God 'ought to be included in every practical field of Nagas and, therefore, as many pastors as possible should be appointed to prepare the war affairs' (Elwin 1961: 63). Later, in the 1980s, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) - accused at one point by Naga Churches for leaning towards the ideology of 'anti-religious' Communism - propagated the ideology of 'Christian Socialism' with the aim of 'strengthening the ethnic unity of the Naga tribes'. Towards this cause, they subsequently succeeded in the large scale conversion of Naga tribes in Eastern Nagaland and Myanmar, which had hitherto been largely untouched by evangelical activities (Shimray 2005: 54). Even in the 21st century, the generally accepted adage 'Nagaland for Christ'⁵ remains as a connecting link between the church and the Naga movement.

The concept of Naga nationalism was also strongly related with the biblical accounts of Israel's deliverance from the hand of its enemies whenever they sought the presence of God in their lives. In fostering this concept, the Bible acted as the guidance book from which the Naga movement drew its strength. By equating their plight with that of the Israelites, the Naga nationalists firmly established the belief that walking and working according to the decree of God would enable them to accomplish their political goals. Indeed, there exist overwhelming stories on how Naga nationalists miraculously survived difficult situations because of God's powerful protection. Such stories boosted the morale of Naga nationalists, and induced them into the belief that in order to attain independence they must trust in God. For them, to be a good nationalist was also to be a good Christian and vice-versa. Thus, there was a strong nexus between the Naga movement and Christianity. In fact, the Naga nation was believed to be bestowed by God and therefore protecting it became the utmost duty of the Naga nationalists (Sakha cited in Eastern Mirror 17-11-2015). Sangtam (cited in The Morung Express 13-12-2016) also argued that among Nagas, nationalism was a 'divine calling' and thus it was vehemently supported and advocated by tribal churches, various church councils and associations. Till the late 1950s, the Naga national movement under the aegis of the NNC, while certainly inspired by Christianity, did not have a singular position on matters of religion, and granted its followers the freedom to practice the religion of their choosing (Thomas 2016: 4-5). The *Yehzabo*, in fact, recognized both Christianity and Naga traditional religion (Lasuh 2002: 90). However, in the subsequent decades, NNC's stance was transformed and Christianity became more publicly infused with the national movement. The defense of the Naga nation was coalesced with the defense of Christianity (Thomas

⁵ The concept 'Nagaland for Christ' propagandized that Nagaland was to be the first completely Christian State in Asia and therefore, it was the duty of Christians to fight the 'Hindu Government' in order to preserve their religion (Elwin 1961: 63).

2016: 4-5). This linkage between Christianity and the consciousness of Naga nationalism became so strong that the Indian leaders considered the Naga political movement as a 'religious movement' inspired and mediated by foreign missionaries and Christianity (Thomas 2016: 3-4). This conviction made the Indian Government sensitive to the presence of Christian missionaries in Nagalim. As a result, in 1954, American missionaries were accused of instigating an independent state movement against India, and were forced to leave Nagalim (Lasuh 2002: 550).

Among other things, the local entry of Christianity opened vistas to modernity through modern education and through which the idea of modern nation-state came to be more firmly established in the minds of the educated Nagas. It helped them realize that historically, culturally, politically, socially and religiously, the Nagas were a different group of people from the rest of the Indian population. Hence, of all the factors mentioned, the role of Christianity in fostering Naga national consciousness was certainly remarkable. Had Christianity not been introduced to the Nagas, the opportunity provided by missionary schools and other educational institutions would have been missed out as well, and this would likely have prevented most Nagas from thinking outside the realms of their villages, of their tribes. Thus, Shimray (2005: 42) connotes that in Naga history, the conversion of the Nagas to Christianity was a revolution, one more significant compared to British colonialism. Sanyu (cited in Shimray 2005: 42) stated that the message of the Gospel was the beginning of all things in Naga modern history. Further, the Government of People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) (cited in Shimray 2005: 42), the political organ of the Isak-Muivah led NSCN, also declared that the propagation of Christianity, along with the imparting of education by opening missionary schools, made the greatest contribution to the political uprising of the Naga society (nationalism). Similarly, Das (2013: 95-98) commented that the 'political construct' of Naga nationalism was largely influenced by Western education and Christianity and that the 'most educated tribes were also the most Christianized group'.

With the advent of Christianity, inter-village warfare was replaced by inter-village relationships, with them placing Christ at the epicenter of that relationship. Along with the promotion of Christianity, the term Naga was also popularized and assimilated the once diverse villages and tribes into a then evolving concept of the Naga nation. This unified Naga political identity could materialize because of mass conversions to Christianity, which, in turn, was inextricably linked with the consciousness of Naga nationalism as the converted masses became the harbinger of the national movement. Along with the gospel of Christ, the doctrine of Naga nationalism was preached by local evangelists in all the nooks and corners of Naga territory, including those places where missionaries had not yet reached. The Church role in disseminating Naga nationalism as an 'unquestionable truth' continues today. For instance, the Tangkhul Naga churches across India dedicate at least one Sunday in a single calendar year as the prayer cum fasting day for the Naga political movement.

Current status of Naga nationalism

Since the late 1990s, a new twist of event seems to have captured Nagalim and especially the Naga national movement. Initially, and for a long time, the Nagas projected the Indian Government as their sole enemy, the one that prevented their freedom. The Central Government, in response, resorted to cruel and ruthless methods to subdue the Nagas aspiration for self-determination. This nourished a strong anti-Indian sentiment among many Nagas. They vocally declared that 'Nagas are not Indian in any sense'. Moreover, the trend was that Naga civilians were victimized after every armed conflict between Naga nationalists and the Indian Army. The latter often made no distinction between Naga civilians and Naga nationalists in exerting their revenge. For them, since most Naga civilians had some level of sympathy for the nationalists, all, including women and children, were considered hostiles. The Army subsequently resorted to all forms of human rights violations such as ransacking property, burning down villages and granaries, deliberate starvation, torture, rape, murder, village grouping and moving people into, what were de facto, concentration camps (Shimray 2005: 68-72; Luithui & Haksar 1984: 26-37). All along, the Nagas suffered for guarding their national identity. There was little to no media to cover their side of the stories, while no outside observers were allowed to observe the grave situation at hand. The Nagas, therefore, had none to confide their miseries and sufferings to. Despite untold suffering, this was also the time when the Nagas were 'solidly' united for their political cause (Luithui & Haksar 1984: 26). However, today, the scenario has changed due to the rise of factionalism within the Naga movement, and which has fragmented the Naga nation.

The struggle for independence of Nagalim is an enduring story that still evades a solution. Therefore, in an effort to come up with an honourable and acceptable solution, the Naga peace process had been undertaken since August 1997 when a ceasefire was declared and a political dialogue started between Naga underground leaders and the Indian Government. In 2015, the 'Naga Peace Framework Agreement' was signed between the two conflicting parties. The outcome of this Agreement however, is yet to be known.

Apart from the ongoing Naga peace process, there had been two earlier peace processes. However, the failures of the first two peace processes were followed by the intensification of infightings within the Naga movement. For instance, the failure of the 1964 peace process plunged the Nagas into a phase of violent internal bloodshed alongside the violence afflicted by Indian armed forces. The 'moderate Nagas', who were willing to find solution within the Constitution of India, were targeted by the so-called 'extremist Nagas', who sought for a solution outside the framework of the Indian Constitution. Consequently, there was a clear split between the two, each with its set of followers.

Similarly, in their effort to deliver the Naga people from the cruel inhuman treatment of the Indian Army, some Naga nationalist leaders made a pact with the Central

Government in 1975, which came to be popularly known as the Shillong Accord. However, this only further divided the Naga people. A section of the non-accordists, that is, those who considered the Accord as 'the most ignominious sell-out made in the history of the Naga people' (Shimray 2005: 104), formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in the year 1980 and continued fighting for political independence. In 1988, the NSCN was divided into two factions largely because of an internal leadership crisis. One faction, under the leadership of Isak and Muivah came to be known as NSCN (IM), while the other, under the leadership of Khaplang, as the NSCN (K). Ever since, the two parties have been at loggerheads, while, at the same time continuing their armed struggle against the Central Government, though at different levels. Over time, the NSCN (IM) turned more powerful and gained the support of a sizeable section of the Naga masses. In 2007, the NSCN (IM), however, suffered an internal division when Azetho Chophy formed the NSCN (Unification). Likewise, on June 7, 2011, the NSCN (K) suffered a similar fate when Kitovi Zhimomi (General Secretary of NSCN (K)) and Khole Konyak⁶ (Chief-in-Command of the NSCN (K)) defected and instituted the NSCN (KK). Within a span of a year or two, the NSCN (U) was merged with the NSCN (KK). Further, in March 2015, after Khaplang decided to pull out of the cease-fire agreement with the Centre, a group from within the NSCN (K) and in favour of the continuation of the cease-fire, formed the NSCN (Reformation) under the leadership of Y Wangtin Naga. The present political scenario in Nagaland is that, on one hand, the Naga nationalist groups are fighting against the Central Government for their political independence, while on the other, they are fighting amongst themselves for power and territorial domination in the name of Naga nationalism.

Factionalism, which is the root cause of all internal fighting among Nagas, has led to the situation of 'peacelessness' in Nagalim, despite the ongoing 'Indo-Naga' ceasefire. Today, factionalism seems often based on the issues of tribe-ism, leadership crisis, and the tussle for power, and has proven to be a menace that can destroy the mantle of common plight and destiny preciously forged under the garb of Naga nationalism. It also empowered New Delhi to degrade the credibility claim staked by the Naga nationalists to a state of opprobrium. Right from the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, New Delhi adopted the policy of 'divide and rule' in order to denigrate the Naga nationalism movement and, provided inordinate attention to the 'loyalist' moderate Nagas. This policy succeeded in splitting asunder the once united Nagas interwoven by the spirit of nationalism and Christianity. Most destructively, the rise of factionalism befuddled the Naga national struggle prompting one to ask as to what exactly are the Nagas aspiring for. This query brings us to the roadside dhaba sign in Assam, cited by Wouters (2016: 98), and which read: 'Before you place your order, please decide what you want to eat', and which can

⁶ In March 2016, Khole Konyak joined NSCM (IM).

be translated into 'Before the Naga place their order they first decide what they want to eat.'

Factionalism, thus, had wise ramifications for the Naga political movement. Towards this end, various Naga civil society organizations but specifically the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) and Nagaland Baptist Churches Council (NBCC), are presently playing an important role in urging the various Naga outfits to reconcile and to stop bloodshed among Naga brethren. These organizations function under the motto 'forgive and forget', invoking the ethics of Christianity on the ground that all Naga nationalists are Christian (Longvah 2015: 105).

Because of the belief that religion unites the Naga people, the FNR, headed by respected church elders and leaders, are endeavoring to reconcile the feuding Naga nationalist factions since the year 2008. However, Naga reconciliation efforts did not begin with the FNR. It was the Council of Naga Baptist Churches (CNBC), later changed to NBCC, that laid the foundation of the Naga unity move as early as 1991, when it articulated a vision to organize a Naga High Level Summit with the intent of providing a joint platform where various Naga factions could meet 'without any strings attached' (Lasuh 2002: 393). To make this possible, the CNBC constituted the Peace Commission and this committee organized a second Naga High Level Summit in 1992. After this, the CNBC urged the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (BPFNA) to help in addressing the anguish of the Naga people. The efforts of the CNBC to collaborate with the BPFNA in order to further the Naga unity move bore some fruit when in 1997 the BPFNA, along with the CNBC, convened the so-called Atlanta Meeting from 28th July to 3rd August, in Georgia, America. The Atlanta Meeting was a call for Naga Reconciliation, one rooted in the biblical claim that lasting peace can only be achieved on the basis of 'confession, forgiveness and restoration' (Lasuh 2002: 443).

Evidently, the Church played a significant role in the Naga reconciliation process. Reconciliation, here, simply means 're-establishment of fractured relationship' among the various Naga factions. It is the process of uniting the different Naga nationalist groups in order to pave the way for a final resolution of the long drawn Naga political movement. However, despite relentless efforts by the Church, to achieve unity among Nagas remains a herculean task as certain nationalist groups remain reluctant to trust the Church because of past bitter experiences.

Certainly, in the initial stage, the Church role in disseminating the sentiment of Naga nationalism was beyond doubt. Subsequently, however, in order to stop the inhumane treatment meted out to Nagas, the Church started the work of securing peace and stability in Nagalim, even at the cost of Naga freedom. In the late 1950s, then prominent church leaders along with other Naga leaders formed the Naga People's Convention (NPC) that subsequently negotiated the creation of Nagaland state inside the Indian Union. The creation of Nagaland state was however vehemently objected to by the Naga nationalists. For its role in the making of Nagaland, the Church was accused of changing its political

stance by Naga nationalists, for leaning towards moderate ideologies, and for agreeing to a 'compromised peace'. Furthermore, in the past, the Church was also severely criticized for its dubious role in signing the Shillong Accord; and in circulating negative thoughts about the NNC as well as about Thuingaleng Muivah, the General Secretary of NSCN (IM), who they alleged had embraced communism after spending time in China (Shimray 2005: 89-91). Because of this role, the Church was accused, in some nationalistic circles, of working against the spirit of Naga nationalism and for being 'instruments' of the Indian State (Shimray 2005: 89). Since the Church was unable to gain confidence of the nationalist groups, therefore, the onus of Naga reconciliation was subsequently handed over to the FNR.

Concluding Remarks

Even in the 21st century, there are still many things yet to be discovered about the Nagas and their ways of life. There is more than that meets the eye when one talks about the Nagas and their political movement. What is clear, however, is that Christianity propelled manifold changes in Naga society - changes in religious, social, cultural, moral outlook, customary laws and political practices and aspirations. These changes have both negative and positive connotations attached with it. For instance, when viewed from a political dimension especially the nationalism that it awaked, the changes that occurred can be considered as a boon. However, when viewed from socio-cultural and other dimension, the changes were often more of a bane.⁷

Christianity integrated the otherwise independently existing Naga tribes and gave political meaning to their realization of a common identity. Influenced by the common denominator Christianity offered them, the Nagas, for the first time, replaced their village identity with a wider Naga national identity. Based on the Christian values of love, mercy and forgiveness, the Nagas shed their 'head-hunting' culture and forged a relationship of brotherhood which contributed significantly to the rise of Naga nationalism. Christianity, undoubtedly, played a significant role in the consciousness of Naga nationalism, although, in the longer run, it also failed to 'negate tribal identities' (Sangtam, cited in The Morung Express 13-12-2016). In fact, ancient Naga tribal, clan and village solidarities still remain very strong and are not a forgone story. Such parochial solidarities have also fueled infighting among Nagas.

⁷ Elwin pointed out that Christianity and Christian missionaries followed a culturally destructive policy, and robbed the Nagas of many of the things which gave vitality to their lives. He further accounted that the missionaries insisted on a convert becoming a teetotaler; and that they restrict themselves to one wife. At some point Naga converts were not even allowed to eat the flesh of *mithun* since this animal was associated with sacrifices at 'heathen' festivals. Moreover, the great 'Feasts of Merit' were stopped; boys (youths) were forbidden to attend the Morung. Naga converts at times even often stopped dancing, while the art of weaving suffered since generally converts adopted European mill-made dress (1961: 78). Thus, Christianity came at a cultural cost, leading to the discontinuation of many ancestral cultural practices among Nagas.

What seems remarkable, in conclusion, is that while Christianity gave rise to the Naga Movement, the same Christian principles and values are today invoked by the FNR to protect the Naga movement from disintegration. In both ways, Christianity and Naga nationalist politics remain closely related. 🙏

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