

Students and Developmental Process in Nagaland

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In spite of Samir Kumar Das's conclusion that 'the Assam movement was a student movement with neither the students nor the middle class, their mentors, exercising any hegemony' (Das, S.K.: 2002:146), we find it more plausible to accept Apurba Barua's stand to adopt Gramsci's prescription of 'hegemony' as near appropriate explanation to the student movement in North-East India (Barua, A.K., 2002:16-17). One comes across a unique experience of the students playing disproportionately larger roles in the lives of the tribal communities such as the Nagas. Naga students have been in the vanguard of the Naga solidarity movement of various types. As a part of the social whole, though a sectional one, they have been most dynamic, energetic and future-oriented lot. Similarly, if by development one means social reconstruction, Naga students have played a tremendous role in it. Apart from the professional politicians, the students have been raising the issue of violence, autonomy, nationality, ethnic integration, human rights, and even sovereignty for the Nagas. Furthermore, the Christian church through the village primary schools and chapels inculcates the spirit of social service, leadership and elocution among the Naga students.

When these students find their elders demoralised, intimidated, maimed, violated and imprisoned during the long years of insurgency, they voice against intimidating atmosphere and promptly take up in their hands the unfinished cause of the

community. The tribal tradition of romance and adventure further prepares them to stake their stand on public issues and face the consequences fearlessly. In the absence of a reliable and respectable forum to take a partisan stand on behalf of the Nagas, the students have usurped the space available to the spokesmen of the community. As the fearless representative of the suffering under dog, they speak for the cause of the community in the best of the Naga tradition. So much so that they claim as if they are the sole champion of the Naga 'world and the Naga cause'. We propose to trace out the Naga tradition of youth socialisation in this paper. Secondly, we shall report on the process as to how introduction of Christianity further prepared the Naga youth to take up the role of the leadership automatically. Thirdly, we intend to trace out briefly the emergence of the Naga Students Federation/ Union (NSF/U) as an important pressure group for the betterment of the Nagas. And lastly, we shall comment on the role of NSF/U in the over all development of resources for a prosperous Nagalim/Nagalnd.

The Naga Tradition of Training the Youth

We know that the term Naga is not indigenous to the land. Verrior Elwin claims that the term was derived from an Ahom term, 'nok', the hill people (Elwin, V: 1960). The Nagas claim that the community is spread over an extensive area from upper Myanmar to North-East Indian states of Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and hill tracts of Manipur. The traditional Nagas, however, had some common features at level of a very broad generalisation.. For example, almost all the communities had slash and burn type of rotational cultivation. They were all hunters and gatherers in the past in terms of their economic activities. They resided in the villages with a type of democracy in which clan, khel and village elders played roles in community affairs. Though some of the communities were nearly democratic in their orientations, there also tradition of strong chiefs such the Sema and Konyak communities. In most of the Naga villages there existed an institution of 'youth dormitory' (morang), invariably a separate one for the boys and another, for the girls. The

dormitories were under the charge of an experienced adult, who could oversee the affairs on behalf of the community.

The Nagas had a tradition of age-set labour squads, in which boys and girls could be expected to work on the agricultural fields, house construction sites, and other common works such as village paths, bridges, and water bodies. They could be requested by the households to work for them for a feast and drink. The morangs were also the training grounds for the tribal folklore, games and plays, art and crafts and tribal rituals. They were also trained for the warfare and maintenance of the common properties. Many communities had separate dormitories for the girls under the charge of an elderly lady of the community. In this way, the children—boys and the girls alike—were naturally socialised in the best tradition of the community.

Introduction of Modern Education and Training to the Naga Youth

In 1872 the American Baptist Missionaries entered the 'Naga field' for converting the indigenous people in their fold. Education, health and social development were adopted as means to their objectives. Main Naga dialects began to be transcribed in the Roman script. The first primers were written and illustrated with the biblical themes. The missionaries began to teach ecclesiastic and secular pedagogy in terms of three R's together to the first ever batch of students. In course of time, these first students turned to the Christianity. They enthusiastically adopted the new faith, sang the hymns and began to preach the newly acquired religion with a great zeal to their animist brothers and sisters. For most of them, the resident American missionaries naturally became the model of ideal style of life. They tried to dress in the Western style, pick up the Roman alphabets, adopt missionaries' etiquettes and mannerism. So much so that at least some of them began avoiding manual labour such as working in the jhum fields.

The first modern school was started at Impur sometimes in 1890's by the American Baptist Mission and very soon the government of Assam came forward to provide financial support. By 1926 there were two Middle English Schools running

at Impur and Mokokchung among the Ao Nagas (Downs, F.S., 1971). In the opinion of this mission historian, there were no single area of Christian work in the region that did more to help the people adjust to the new situation in which they found themselves in the 19th and 20th centuries than education (Downs, F. S., 1992). Further more, the church (through its educated elite) helped strengthen, indeed almost create, a sense of tribal identity for the first time at a level higher than that of village or relatively small cluster of villages. This new identity was to become the basis of modern political movements.

There were separate schools for the boys and girls and at least some of the schools had boarding houses attached to them. The missionaries were eager and enthusiastic to introduce non-pagan elements in the every day life of the Nagas. It was not only novel dress, food, furniture and architect, but also new work habits and a sense of superiority complex. While the missionaries were rightly proud in their claimed achievement of 'civilising' and 'modernising' the new converts (Smith, W., 1926), the scholar-administrators such as J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills were worried to watch such trends as evidence of 'detrribalisation' of the Nagas (Mills, J.P., 1926). The first educated Nagas secured the non- conventional jobs of the village preachers, pastors and school teachers. Then some of them got employed as the blue coat functionaries in the state administration of British Assam, to which the Naga Hills was a district. Thus, a beginning was perhaps unintentionally made, in which those, who were educated, assumed not only new vocations, but also set the role for the future generations. They were the trend- setters in more than one ways. In course of time, they automatically assumed the role of community leaders, as they were the most erudite members and effective spokesmen of the community.

Birth of Naga Student Movement

The first formal assembly of the Ao Students Conference was held at Longkum village in 1929. It was led by W Noktenlenba and, whom his eight associates helped. The Conference emphasised on Christian teaching, its role in nation-building,

health and medical education. It as well took note of much ahead of time the role and status of women in society. It is claimed that R. Khating, himself a student, moved from one village school to another during his summer vacation with a view to organising the Tankhul students. Thus, the first Tankhul Students Conference was organised at Ukhrul Mission School on June 15, 1932. Similarly, a Lotha Students Conference was held for the first time at village Oketso in 1935 under the leadership of E S Ngullie. Within a few years the Joint Naga Students Union Jorhat and Shillong Students Union came into being in 1939.

The Ao Students Conference (ASC) passed a resolution way back on December 30, 1940 at its 8th session at the village Merinokpo: "Resolved that there should be an All Naga Students Federation to promote better understanding/ cooperation between different tribal students and literate persons". This resolution was re-affirmed at Sungratsu session (1943) of the ASC and its 11th session at Mongmetong village on 30th December, 1946. Its Resolution 15 reads: "It was resolved that T Aliba Imti (the then President of the ASC) be entrusted to initiate the issue of organising the proposed All Naga Student Federation without delay and the first session will be held with delegates from every Naga Student Conference the place that might suit the convenience. (Imti, T.A., 1974: The Genesis of All Naga Student Federation). With the efforts of ASC president Angami, Ao, Lotha and Sema student leaders met at Kohima on May 7, 1947 and resolved to call for the Naga Students Federation. Accordingly, the Naga Student Federation was inaugurated on 29th and 30th of October, 1947 under the chairmanship of Z Ahu. Among the notable participants apart from T A Imti and Ahu T Haralu, MS. N Haralu, MS. Chubala, Kithan, Shashi Meren Aier, Jakhalu, C Ngullie, Chiten Jamir and Pangjungtemsu may be counted. The second session was held at Mokokchung on October 13-15, 1948 with Shashi Meren Aier as the President. However, very soon it turned ineffective.

Some concerned Naga activists revived it in 1965, but again misunderstanding among the student leaders came on the way and within two years the Federation turned non-functional. At the initiative of M/s Piketo Sema and Benjamin Bani, two

students of Gauhati University, a Convening Body was formed at Shillong on August 28, 1971 consisting of 16 members with intention to call a more representative meet at Kohima with a view to activating the Federation. Thus, a meeting of the All Naga Students Leaders deliberated for two days on October 7&8, 1971 and the First General Conference of the revived NSF was held on October 18-20, 1971 at Kohima. The General Conference decided on the flag, insignia, motto and emblem of the NSF. It was modelled on traditional democratic set-up of the Nagas. In all 16 Naga tribes were represented in the new set-up with two representatives each drawn from Angami, Ao, Lotha, Khiamungan, Sema, Konyak, MNDNSA, Zeliangrong, Rengma, Mon, Yimchunger, Tankhul, Phom, Maring, Chakhesang, and Sangtam. Besides them, there were representatives of Naga Student Unions from Delhi, Dibrugarh, Guwahati and Shillong. The NSF works through its functionaries, such as chairman, secretary, treasurer, cultural secretary, speaker, and a number of sub-committees.

Actions and Activities of NSF/U

Its motto reads like: "We, the Naga Students, in order to cultivate and preserve our culture, customs and traditional heritage; to ameliorate moral and social activities; to foster our talents and educate ourselves for all round progress; to safeguard the common interest and to have unity, integrity, mutual understanding and co-operation among ourselves, dedicate ourselves to the Federation". Since then, the NSF has a regular presence in life of the Naga students in Nagaland, Delhi, Dibrugarh, Guwahati, Shillong and else where. There have been 29 Presidents since 1947 till date and its past presidents turned out to be significant individuals in their latter lives. Similarly, its sessions were invariably held in Naga areas such as Kohima (four times), Mokokchung (thrice), Mao, Peren, Dimapur, Pfutsero, Ukhrul (twice), Surhuto, Jalukie, Jotsoma, Tseminyu and Wokha. It continues to be guided by its Constitution, which reads: "That the Naga Student Federation shall continue to cultivate and preserve our culture, customs, and our traditional heritage; (shall) safeguard our common interest, integrity, fraternity and (seek) co-operation among

the Nagas all over the Naga inhabited areas". Its Golden Jubilee Souvenir entitled, *REPROACHMENT* mentions some of the activities undertaken by it in past years. They may be enumerated as: fast unto death in November, 1990 for fixing superannuation age at 55 years in the government service, goodwill mission to Merapani (Wokha district) 1985, protest against extension of Disturbed area belt and introduction of IPS cadre in the state of Nagaland, 1986, annual boycotting of the Indian independence day on 15th August, etc. (Anonymous: 1997).

Considering the significant number of Naga students pursuing studies in various educational institutions at Shillong, the Naga Students Federation opened its branch, The Naga Students Union, Shillong (NSU, S) in 1960. The objectives of the NSUS were kept in conformity with that of parent body and the cosmopolitan nature of the locale. They were identified with the following: (i) to promote unity and harmony among the Naga students, (ii) to preserve, cultivate and encourage Naga culture, custom and traditional heritage; (iii) to promote moral and social activities to the highest possible extent; (iv) to help and promote the welfare of students residing within its jurisdiction; (v) to promote a spirit of brotherhood among all the students irrespective of caste, religion and language; (vi) to promote peace and tranquillity among all the students without social distinction; (vii) to look (after the members) and pacify any untoward activities that may occur to the members of the Union; and (viii) to take necessary actions when the solidarity, harmony and unity (of the NSU, S) is threatened. The NSUS claims that it has a membership of about 8,000 students. It is one of the most active branches of the parent body, which organises annual meets for sports and cultural activities. Similarly, considering the significant size of the Naga students in Delhi, the NSU/F has a Delhi chapter. With a view to serving the larger interests of the Scheduled Tribe students, the Naga students have also joined their all India forum, All India Tribal Students Association, Delhi.

The members of the NSU/F work as the vanguard of the cause, considered desirable to the Naga solidarity. They work as the keeper of the Naga consciousness. They always take up

issues, which they view as injurious to the Naga cause. A group of Nagas are still fighting for 'their independence against the Indian state'. There are armed clashes between the Indian security forces and such Nagas, who operate from their underground camps. The students frequently take up the issue of the victims of such clashes by providing relief, or agitating for the claimed violation of the human rights. They frequently organise cultural meets, sports events and ecclesiastic congregations. They form their choir groups and go on evangelical expeditions to the out reach communities to spread the message of the Christ. Many of them work as the affiliate of the recognised political parties: national and regional. During the State and the National elections they play partisan roles in favour of the political party, to which they identify themselves. They work as an effective pressure group in the body politic of Nagaland. Many of them are associated with a number of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO).

The students organise themselves for a future role in tune with the changing times. Apart from political, welfare, recreational and ecclesiastic concerns, the students prepare themselves for various competitive tests conducted by the state and statutory bodies. They demand for a fair share of the government jobs and agitate for an appreciable quota for the Nagas. One of the main issues in contemporary Nagaland is that of the reconciliation between the 'underground' and the 'over ground' elements of the Naga world. Peace is the key to all the current Naga problems and students are determined that their voice is accorded due significance in this regard.

The Federation is the highest students organisation of the Nagas with universal membership of all the students. Initially, two student representatives from each of the Federating communities were taken in the Federation to constitute its central organisational structure. There are various Tribal Students Federations, Unions, Conferences apart from the village and town Students Unions of the federating Naga communities under the Naga Student Federation. Though the local unions have the power to exercise and execute their functions within their jurisdiction, in the matters of conflicting situations the views of the Union /Federation prevails. The Federation voices the legitimate aspirations of the Nagas and claims to

seek their fulfilment through peaceful means (Veyie, Yesonu, 1995: 86).

In words of Anthony Patton, "(t)o-day this (traditional) world is fast changing under the influence of the outside world, especially through education. When some one receives education and takes up jobs and begins getting salary, money enters into a world where there was none, and class enters into a classless society...Poverty enters into a world where there was none. (It is) not that the people are no more able to justify their traditional needs. There was a day when produce of the field was sufficient to satisfy the hunger and that was all we needed. But the present needs and multifarious demands, aggravated by the limited return from the fields, have brought him an awareness of new found poverty. Education of the children is among the costliest things, which we feel the need of. Many feel the need of good clothes and modern gadgets, radios and record players, guitars and books and any things else, which money can buy. In yester years, there was no use of (such) assets... Every thing was bartered. Now a man without a (paying) job is unable to meet his new needs and demands. In the light of growth of population, the land does not expand, but dwindles" (Patton, A., 1995: 65).

Discussion

The NSF/U functions as an effective spokesman of the Nagas at large. As the Nagas are scattered in Myanmar and four Indian states and divided among a number of ethnic and political persuasions, the NSF/U naturally occupies the open space of leadership. They try to synthesise between the desire to preserve the traditional values and they look as modern as possible. This is possible because of the fact that they are exposed to the external experience and at the same time, they are under pressure of their own social environment. They are certainly an emerging elite among the Nagas, who take their assumed assignment seriously. At the same time, like other students in the world, they are at an age and in a position of dependence, which makes them unable to stand on their own feet. Thus, they are in search for an adult role in their society for self-identity and integrating themselves to it. It is

primarily because of this reason that the students have taken upon their shoulders not only 'in-campus' issues, but also the 'out-campus' ones including social, political and cultural issues (Malngiang, P., 1994: 4). As they point out lapses, irregularities and errors of the establishment, they command sympathy, affection and support from the under dog. Because of the fact that the students resort to various ways to fight for the cause and oppose the oppressive steps of the establishment, they have turned out to be an effective and powerful pressure group.

There is another aspect of the student activism. When they see the political leaders making mockery of their electoral promises once they get elected to the various elective bodies, the students, who are normally attracted to the idealism, decide to act by organising themselves in an effective body. And such a body may be the student organisation. Furthermore, in the state of Nagaland, there has been so much political fragmentation, political factionalism and attrition, and violence that political parties seem to have lost credibility in the eyes of common people. The NSU/F, needless to add that, gives vent to the popular disgust against the recognised political parties. The problem is that there is a gap between the stated programmes, policies and activities and the actual performances of the political functionaries. As a committed and creative body of the young idealists, the NSU/F naturally occupies the space available, which other wise would have been gone to the active and committed politicians. Thus, the NSU/F has almost established its hegemony over the Nagas and in the process it has turned out to be one of the two along with the Church most effective spokesmen of the community.

The NSF and its members believe that the root cause of Naga under-development lies in unresolved Naga political problem. Once that is settled, the rest will follow a natural course. The NSF/U has specially been effective to take up the cause of the Nagas in general and Naga students in particular. Wherever there is a talk of injustice to the Nagas, the NSU/F has taken up a public stand. Their posture against the armed forces are specially prompt. Any form of claimed injustice and oppression does not escape their vigilance. They

are in the vanguard of the various welfare activities. For example, all the students pursuing the higher studies from the state of Nagaland get post-matric scholarship from the State government at their instance. Similarly, till other day unemployed youth had organised themselves into various types of contractors and the State government was obliged to award contract for construction work to them. Of late, they are active on the peace front and have emerged as an important force in favor of peaceful settlement of the Naga political problem. They occasionally make a common cause with the Naga Mothers Association, Church forum, and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for social issues such as drug de-addiction, alcoholism, and so on. Like most of the student associations elsewhere, the leadership of the NSF has been in the hands of the most erudite spokesmen of the community. This becomes clear, when one reads the list of its past functionaries. Many of the stalwarts of the Naga political and social life during the last five decades were actively associated with the NSF. And thus, the NSF has naturally appropriated the space available and established its hegemony on Naga affairs.

Naga society like any society in transition is devilled by a number of problems: some demanding urgent attention, others deserving long term planning. The community, polity, various segments, and even political formations—all are in conflict with some thing or other. The Nagas invariably refer to their grand past traditions of valour, struggle, independence, and unique heritage. It is not to pontificate, but it goes without saying that the community is more of past oriented and less of forward looking. Yes, no sensible person will justifiably ignore the political reality, but even when the political problem is settled as per desire of the Nagas at large, the community has to plan for its own development. The experience else where has shown that constructive steps are not easy to choose. And even when the choice is made, its implementation is all the more painful and time consuming. The community with its immense tradition of creativity and endeavour should invest at least some of its efforts in pursuit of developmental efforts.

Notes

1. "More than other sections of society, the students as the receptive members of the intelligentsia and as persons engaged in studies, are greatly exposed to this hegemony (their ideological predominance over the subordinate classes). This hegemonic position is not synonymous with the governing fraction, which staffs the top levels of the state apparatus, or the groups, which elaborate and reproduce dominant ideology. Nor should it be located in those groups, which visibly exercise political and ideological leadership in society, but rather in effects of dominant forms of political and ideological practice, the particular relations they reproduce. It is, therefore, necessary to look in greater details at the way in which, in a particular society, a particular class exerts hegemony to motivate students to act in a particular way. It would, therefore, be necessary in the study of student movements not merely to locate the class, which apparently rules, but to locate the class or the combination of classes which exercises hegemony in that particular society at that particular phase of history" (Barua, A.K., 2002: 16-17)

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