Naga Mothers Association (NMA) in Peace Process: A Gender Perspective on Peace and Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper will look at the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) to understand the role they have played in the larger question of bringing peace in the state. The context and situations of their emergence and their location will be looked at. NMA have battled serious social and law-and-order problems in the Northeast and especially in Nagaland when the state was ravaged by violence and conflict since 1990’s. The NMA’s identity of not just as women but as ‘Mothers’ needs to be critically articulated and interrogated. The control of customary practices and laws and peace process role of the Naga women will be looked at.

INTRODUCTION

For the longest time, North East India is known for the turmoil and conflict with political unrest and insecurities. The conflict between the people of the region with the Indian state for autonomy, the ethnic conflict between different ethnic tribes and groups and the internal conflict is the backdrop of the situation and lived reality of the people. In this situation, the response of women’s group in the region has been very crucial.

This paper will look at the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) to understand the role they have played in the larger question of bringing peace in the state. The context and situations of their emergence and their location in the Women’s Movement in India needs to be looked at. NMA have battled serious social and law-and-order problems in the Northeast and especially in Nagaland when the state was ravaged by violence and conflict since 1990’s. The social, economic, religious and political history need theorizing to understand the role they have played in different sphere of life in the state and also in the larger political struggle and peace process. The NMA’s identity of not just as women but as ‘Mothers’ needs to be critically articulated and interrogated. The control of customary practices and laws and peace process role of the Naga women will be looked at.

BRIEF HISTORY OF VIOLENCE IN THE REGION AND THE ROLE OF THE WOMEN’S GROUP

It was only in 1971, the term Northeast India came into use. According to Sanjay Baruah, ‘Northeast India reflects an external and not a local point of view’ (2013:38). There is no local term to describe the ‘Northeast’ and every community and tribes in the Northeast have distinct identities, culture, practices and beliefs though they share some commonalities. Till 1972 Arunachal Pradesh was called ‘North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)’. North East India has its origin in the changes made to the political and administration map of areas in 1960’s and early 1970 and this in turn led to the creation of state and formation of North East Council in 1971 (Baruah, 2013:38).

The term Northeast seems evoke a certain type of nostalgia of being ‘far away’ for the mainstream but unlike places that evoke historical or cultural memory, the term Northeast India cannot become the emotional focus of a collective memory (Baruah, 2013). Dominant stereotypes about the Northeast region persist which often reinforce the stereotyped images of the region as ‘troubled land’, ‘beautiful’ but filled with conflict and violence everywhere- in this sense the troubled ‘other’.

Till 2003 Northeast India refers to the seven states, of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura but it now includes Sikkim once an independent state but now a part of India since 1973 (Baruah, 2013:35). It thus comprises of the eight different state in the region with their similarities and distinctiveness and the question arises as to how does one engage with the Northeast with the many complexities that make up the region? The region is far away from the mainland India in terms of physical, distance, accessibility and especially the cultural affinity and ethnic identities. The region is also at distance from the heart and mind of many Indians for whom the people of the Northeast region looks completely different racially from the rest of the country.

The conflict and violence in the region is different from one state to another depending on background of the state composition. The Naga conflict in Nagaland and Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India and Naga inhabited areas in Burma continued because of their refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Indian state and therefore the struggle for autonomy continued. In Mizoram, it was the neglect and apathy of the Indian
government to the famine of 1959 that led to the Mizo National Front (MNF) movement for independence. In Assam and Manipur there are different ethnic communities with a strong ethnic rivalry, and in Tripura the conflict is over land tenancy rights where the local population was reduced to a minority. In these violent conflict situations, women experience conflict and violence differently from men and find themselves in the most vulnerable situations. They also find themselves ‘at the receiving ends of violence on three fronts: from the state, the militiants and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes’ (Gill, 2005: 215).

Against these backgrounds, the Northeast region has witnessed more than seven decades of violent conflict in the region. In conflict narratives, women are essentially seen as passive and powerless victim, where they are raped, murdered, orphaned, homeless, widowed etc. But in recent times, the narratives have shown women coming out, mobilize resistance, confront the security forces, administrations and the courts. Women have formed Mothers fronts and coalition for peace and have emerged as agents of social transformation and conflict resolution. Thus the public sphere which was not accessible earlier for women seem to open up for women during the times of conflict. But the question still remains as to what extend women have access to these public spaces. Despite the fact that women come out in street protesting against different forms of exploitations and violence, but very often their activism is not fully acknowledged. Against this background, Manchanda writes that the early essays at documenting women’s peace activism in the Nupi Lan women’s revolt in Manipur, opened up a field of study which is still waiting for an author. In history, the Nupi Lan women’s war of 1904 and that of the Meitei women of Manipur in 1939 remained only in footnotes (2007: 30). If we look at Assam, it has a long history of women’s activism with names such as Chandra Prava Saikiani, Hemaprava Das and others coming together to form Women’s organization in the 2nd and 3rd decades of the 20th Century. The first women’s organisation called Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti was formed in 1915, followed by the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926 (Banerjee, 2007: 144).

Today, it is the women’s struggle in the 1990’s against human rights violations and excesses by the security forces through Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) by the NMA, Meira Paibis along with different women’s group in the region. Both the NMA and Meira Paibi have worked against alcohol and drug addiction, gender violence and human right violation in Nagaland and Manipur (The Times of India, January 10, 2013).

There are many women’s group initiatives in the region to reduce violence and build peace initiatives but it often gets invisibilised, unrecognized and undervalued. In 1995 during the violence between two Kuki- Thadou and Paite, in Churachanpur district bordering Myanmar in Manipur, 5000 women came out on the street appealing for peace. They brokered peace and pressured the community elders to forged peace among the different warring communities. Again in Assam, it was the Bodo Women’s Justice Forum appealed to the Santhal women to create a neutral space for a dialogue (Manchanda, 2007: 30-31). It is in this context of women’s active participation of peace making Banerjee (2007) argued that women are denied formal political power to negotiate their own spaces within and between opposing sets of aggressive camps which represents the patriarchal power. But, the social situation empowers women to use that power as authority in public sphere. In Nagaland, women’s group proactively negotiate peace between the NSCN’s and the India State was supported by the state as well as Naga Hoho, the apex tribal organisation. Either ways when the women’s voices are heard and accepted, or denied and rejected, the common experiences of the gendered politics where women are discriminated against by the larger patriarchal structure of the society cannot be denied.

NAGA MOTHER’S ASSOCIATION (NMA) IN NAGALAND

Looking at the history of women’s movement, it important to note how women’s group emerged in the region emerged. The Women’s movement in Nagaland emerged as Naga Mothers Association (NMA) in a response to political unrest and militarization in the state. With the conflict and violence touching every life in the state, the women group felt the need to come together to address serious problems faced by the state as a result of the political unrest. Thus the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) was formed on 14 February 1984 as a state-level voluntary organization mandated to fighting social evils and problems. The preamble reads, ‘Naga mothers of Nagaland shall express the need of conscientising citizens towards more responsible living and human developments through the voluntary organizations of the Naga Mothers Associations’ (Banerjee, 2007:160). NMA considers social problem as an integral part of the struggle of the Naga peoples to take responsibility for their political, economic and social rights. The NMA also works to fight drug abuse and alcoholism. According to NMA president, Neidonou, ‘One of the main causes for the conflict is related to the chronic underdevelopment of the people’ and because of which they spread their wings to social problems along with the issue of peace (Banerjee, 2007: 162).

According to Sano Vamuzo, the first president of NMA and the founding member ‘Naga women are one when it comes to the issue of peacemaking amongst Nagas. We have no party; we are above political factions and parties. Our message to our brothers is the same’ (Vamuzo, 2012:16). Membership to NMA is open to all adult women irrespective of their marital status. Every tribe has their own tribal women’s organisation who are affiliated to NMA. In the case of Sumi, it is called the Sumi Totimi Hoho (STH) and for Ao, it is called Watsu Mondgung. The NMA aims at ‘upholding womanhood, human rights and human values’ and works towards the development of society though education to eradicate ‘social evils’, economic exploitation and work for just peace and progress (Banerjee, 2007:161). Patra and...
Manna writes that, as a civil society organization, NMA has two faces: the social and the political and the social face of NMA no doubt helped the organization to ‘mobilise the common people, which in turn, legitimates NMA to speak politically’ (2008: 23). It may be pointed out here that the history of Naga conflict has seen many peace initiatives by civil societies like the Naga Hoho, The Baptist Church, Naga Peoples Movements for Human Rights (NPMHR), Naga Students Federations (NSF), All Naga Students Organisations of Manipur, Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and the Naga Women’s Union of Manipur (NWUM) (Manchanda, 2005: 10).

NMA since its inception has been working for peace between the government and different civil societies. In 1994, the NMA formed a peace team to address the ‘political turmoil in the state’ with the motto, ‘shed no more blood’ and in the process was able to build a credibility in the Naga peace process (Chenoy, 2002: 143) and ‘nurtured a sustained ceasefire between Naga underground groups and the government, and continues to monitor peace process’ (The Times of India, 10th January 2013). A dialogue was initiated by NMA between the ‘underground’ and state government to stop violence and bloodshed and they spoke against the killings by both the army and the ‘insurgent’ group. At the same time they worked with religious leaders and appealed to different groups for peace in the state. On 25th May, 1995, the pamphlet released by NMA reads, ‘The way in which our society is being run whether by the over ground government or the underground government has become simply intolerable’ (Banerjee, 2005: 65; 2007:161). NMA appealed that the assassinated man may be a husband, a son or a brother. As a result, his whole family is shattered by his violent death no matter what reason is given for taking life.

NMA was at the forefront in strengthening peace process after the cease fire agreement was signed in 1997. Again in support of ceasefire, four members’ peace team of the NMA and the Naga Women’s Union of Manipur (NWUM), meet the NSCN Khaplang faction to appeal for talk with the NSCN-IM factions (Banerjee 2007: 161). With NMA working proactively for peace, to some extent, they were able to influence the Naga politics and they are the ‘only women’s group in South Asia who has participated in ceasefire negotiation’ (Banerjee, 2010:150). Ironically when the government of India signed the framework agreement with NSCN-IM on 3rd August 2015, (The Economic Times, August 3, 2015) the women’s group were no were to be seen and they were completely left out.

The resilience strength of the Naga women was highlighted by Rosemary Dzuvichu in 2007 where she notes that ‘having lived in a conflict zone’ which has a diverse effect on family and relationships, women were taught early on to resolve conflicts both within the confines of the family as well as outside in the society (Vamuzo, 2012:12-13). The experience of NMA hence draws attention to women’s role as ‘peace negotiators and to a gender perspective on peace and conflict resolution (Chenoy, 2002: 133).

MOTHERHOOD AS A TROPE IN PEACE BUILDING

It is important to note that NMA called itself as Naga ‘Mothers’ Association and not ‘Women’s group/association because they believed that every woman whether they are mother or not is a mother because she is being called a mother by one or the other. This need to be articulated critically both conceptually and theoretically. One has to be very clear that every ‘mother’ is a woman but not every woman is a mother and therefore should not confuse the different category and clubbed them together. The glorification of the role of ‘motherhood’ also needs to be interrogated because, the ‘mother’ is being romanticized as being peaceful, loving, nurturer and every woman’s ultimate aim is to be a mother. Both history and feminist scholarship informs us that not every mother is peaceful, loving and nurturer and wants to be a mother. Feminist has also theorized on motherhood and the problematic where some women take the idea of birth, nurture and mothering as a burden. The popular motherist narratives highlight the conservative logic of the biological connection in the binary stereotype of women and peace and men and war. Feminist peace analyst are uncomfortable with the motherist logic which ends up implicitly affirming the structural inequality between men and women at the heart of patriarchy (Manchanda, 2007). According to Brock-Unite ‘Patriarchy is a form of social organization based on the force based ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half, patriarchy has to do with power over people, mostly power to control women and nature’ (in Machanda, 2007: 16).

Interestingly with NMA, it has been argued that by invoking the moral authority of being a mother and used the socially sanctioned space available to them within the Naga tradition, the informal space of politics which is in the cultural practice for peace initiative have been used by women for activism. The question that one wonder is ‘are women actually the peace barriers or is it the patriarchal politics where women are being used by the other inorder to achieve their interest? Ironically when the bodily safety of men is denied because of violence, it is the women who are being used to ensure their safety and also to achieve their agenda as seen in the case of NMA or Merie Paibe. In the site of violence, conflict and war, using women’s body as a site of contestation to fight wars is not an uncommon phenomenon in the discourses and understanding of war and conflict. Thus, the use of the trope of motherhood for women’s political mobilization also has its advantages and limitations. Women negotiate for peace to end violence as a symbolic mother for every warring group but at the same time when she lost her husband or son, the kind of social ostracisation women face as a widow and single parent under the cultural constructions, practices and norms needs a critical thinking. It is the same society which meted out the violent treatment on her based on her identity as ‘woman’ and because she is a woman, she lived out silently as she does no
longer have a voice or identity without the man in the family to protect her and give her voice.

**WOMEN ACTIVISM AND POLITICS**

In order to recognise women’s experience as resource and a space in formal politics for mainstreaming gender in peace building process, the experience of women in violent conflict situations should take seriously (Machanda, 2007: 10). It is also important to move beyond the icon of ‘mother’ glorification of motherhood as women have negotiated conflict situation by becoming citizens, combatants, head of households and as political leaders at the local and national level. In the Naga struggle, the NMA symbolises the women of peace in the nationalist struggle for an independent Nagaland. The question remains if the women of peace attributed to Naga women have any cultural meanings associated with it? At a time when violence and conflict between the armed forces was at its peak, the NMA launched a campaign ‘Shed no more blood’. In Northeast India, NMA took a leading role in restoring peace in the state and fight to end violence and killing. Among the Naga’s during the headhunting period, the head of the women was considered as the most prized trophy. This was because of the fact that the Naga women were well protected within the boundary of the village during the time of war. As a result, if a person managed to take the head of women, he was considered the greatest of all warrior as it implies that he defeated all his enemy and was able to penetrate right at the centre of the village which was highly guarded and protected. Thus women coming out of their protected ambit to negotiate peace when before they were being protected is a big step forward. Not to deny the fact that among some Naga tribe, culturally during inter village conflict women were used as a mediator between feuding villages (Vamuzo, 2012: 5). Again, there was also a practice marriage alliance which was forged to bring peace between different clan, villages etc. Thus the ideology being drawn from the old cultural practices of women as peace makers is also significant. These narratives also inform us about the diversity in cultural practices among the different Naga tribe and the need to recognize plurality and difference that co exist so as not to homogenise the narratives and experiences.

In making the distinction between formal and informal political space, there seem to be an implication that when there is a need for mediation, the role of women is important. But when it comes to formal politics and representation, women are still the second class citizen and therefore cannot represent and speak for the village, community, state politics and in the making of the larger nation state. This kind of understandings is seen from the way women are still not given the place to sit and speak where the decision for formal politics are made in the village council to the state legislative assembly. Thus the need to break that distinction of formal and informal politics and legitimize the activism of women in the larger political domain and also to question why that distinction and exclusion still remained and this might be a very important and pertinent question in the shaping the discourse of women’s activism in the state and the region.

**CONCLUSION**

This opens up a lot of possibilities to the questions and readings of women’s movement and the movements like NMA in the larger equation Naga political issues and identity. Does the NMA’s experience opens up a possibilities of an alternative way of negotiating the construction of conflictual identities and nationalities? Does the narratives of Naga mothers hold out the possibilities of women constituting a group which could organize movements around issues of peace, reaching across the conflict divide? Along with negotiation for peace, can they also negotiate the social equality breaking culture norms and practices which are based on patriarchal ideology? On the one hand we are talking about politics of peace but at the other end there is customary practices and laws which are dictating the society which treats the as an ‘object’ and subordinate to men. Can women negotiate their spaces here and can the other group of the society recognise the important role and contribution of the other half of the population in customary practices and laws? It has been argued that in Naga society, the sense of tradition is very strong among women. Thus any intervention that women as a group makes are an extension of what they perceived as their identity.

The NMA put a lot of emphasis on tradition and identity and makes a point to ensure that they function within Naga cultural identity. As a result, in any public events, rallies and meeting every woman participate by adorning themselves with traditional wraparound and shawl. Every tribe has wraparound and shawl which is worn during NMA and tribal women’s group activities thus reasserting their tribal identity within the cultural and traditional institution. The women can make their traditional role flexible but at the same time hesitant to change their traditional role as it can be misinterpreted as a loss of faith in their tradition. The women themselves become the testing ground for cultural self determinism. Their personal becomes political and thus it becomes imperatives for them to retain traditional tribal identity (Banerjee, 2007: 166). Tribal identity and religious identity over shadow each other along with their gender identity as women. When we talk about women movements in Northeast part of India, the role of women in peace initiative is seen and highlighted. Is that the only role they play? Is recognizing them as peace bearers their only politics?

To the Nagas, the question of Nationalism are imbibed within their battle for self determination. In the politics of pluralism, does their existence make a niche where their different, racial, cultural and regional identity is recognized and included or were they sidelined and excluded? Does this understanding provoked any imagination or thinking which can be taken forward? Only time will tell.
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