Locating the Role of Naga Women in the Naga Political Process since the Nineties

Narotila Imchen

narotila@gmail.com

Dimapur Government College, Dimapur, Nagaland

ABSTRACT

The 1990s were a significant period in Naga politics. The period witnessed the intensification of inter-factional violence between warring Naga insurgent groups. The signing of the ceasefire agreement between the Indian government and Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) in 1997, and the subsequent peace talks that followed after decades of violence, opened up democratic space for Naga civil society to actively engage in the political process. Within this new dispensation, Naga women's entry into the public sphere as 'mothers', rooted in private values and attributes such as nurturing, caring, and pacification, assumes significance. Naga women, traditionally confined to the private sphere, carved out a space for themselves in the public sphere by mobilizing for peace through motherhood strategy. Based on primary and secondary sources, the paper seeks to examine the unique role that Naga women play in the public sphere, within the constraints of traditional patriarchal ethos and Naga tribal customary practices that define gendered roles and perceptions for women. The paper concludes that the peace activism of Naga women in the public sphere has, in a way, empowered their political agency to assert for gender justice and greater participation and representation in formal politics.

Keywords: *Political Process, Peace Process, Civil Society, Patriarchy, Naga Women, Naga Mothers Association*

INTRODUCTION

The Naga nationalist movement in India's North East was the earliest of the challenges that independent India's project of nation building faced from the region. The movement has witnessed several phases of violent conflict between the state and the armed insurgent groups, as well as between the insurgent groups, following internal divisions that wrecked the movement. The Naga people's demand for sovereignty and self-rule that began as a collective movement experienced divisions from within the movement in the course of its trajectory. The nineties, in this context, was a significant period. In 1988, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) split into two factions, viz., National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) (hereafter NSCN-IM) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) (hereafter NSCN-K). With this development, inter-factional violence and fratricidal killings intensified, particularly between the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) factions (Manchanda 2005, 9). Besides the factional violence, the counter insurgency activities of the Indian security forces continued. The nineties saw one of the worst impacts of the inter-factional violence and counter-insurgency operations on Naga society.

Another significant development during the nineties was that the Indian political leadership for the first time recognized the Naga issue as a political issue, requiring a peaceful political solution. Subsequently, a ceasefire agreement was signed by the Indian government with the NSCN (IM) in 1997, which was followed by peace talks between the two sides.
 Similarly, a separate ceasefire agreement was signed by the India government with the NSCN (K) in 2001. Although the ceasefire brought a respite from the hostilities between the Indian security forces and the Naga insurgent factions, the continuing inter-factional violence and killings created a paradoxical situation.

Throughout its various phases, the Naga resistance movement has been punctuated by peace efforts from civil society, despite the fact that its space had been constrained, to a large extent, by the protracted armed conflict. The developments during the nineties facilitated the emergence of a vibrant Naga civil society working in pursuit of achieving unity and reconciliation amongst the groups and factions of the Naga underground.

The ceasefire and the peace talks opened up opportunities and some degree of democratic space for Naga civil society groups to be engaged in the peace process, and to mobilize popular support. In the light of the developments that occurred in the nineties, and with considerable reduction in violence following the ceasefire agreement, efforts to bring unity and reconciliation were stepped up by Naga civil society groups, particularly the church and women's groups. Neidonuo Angami, a founding member of Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), pointed out that it was only after the signing of cease-fire between government of India and Naga groups, that the mothers could approach the Naga groups to unify and reconcile among themselves (Nagaland Post June 26, 2016). These groups were responsible for establishing the civil society link with the underground groups, as well as with the Indian government, and for pressurizing the belligerent entities to come to the negotiating table. The fact that the ceasefire has held for more than two decades has been largely because of the peace and reconciliation efforts of the Naga civil society groups, and the broad social consensus and support that they have created towards the peace process.

LOCATING WOMEN'S ROLE
In Nagaland, the socio-political mobilization of women has been spearheaded by the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA). Formed in February 14, 1984 with the aim 'to combat social evils confronting Naga society' (NMA n.d.a), NMA initially worked against the menace of drug addiction and alcoholism. The deteriorating political situation, militaristic developments, and increasing inter-factional violence during the nineties provided grounds for NMA's peace activism in the public sphere, thereby defining a pragmatic shift in the role of Naga women. The social upheaval caused by the conflict thus pushed women into the public sphere through their human rights and peace work (Manchanda and Kakran 2017, 76).

For the NMA, the prevalent social evils were a consequence of the long-drawn insurgency in the state. As such, it took up a decisive role in the political sphere by mobilizing women for peace-related activities, while also combating social issues. NMA's entry into the political realm, and combining social and political issues together demonstrated the deep linkage between the two issues in the state (Chenoy 2005, 375). In the course of their mobilization to establish a society free from social evils, Naga women through the NMA carved out a space for themselves in the public sphere by blending together political issues with the social. The effectiveness and longevity of NMA's peace activities in Nagaland has been due to its ability to blend the political with the social, as also its utilization of the apolitical image of Naga women (Banerjee 2000, 141).

'MOTHERHOOD' STRATEGY IN THE BACKDROP OF GENDERED SOCIO-POLITICAL EXCLUSION
Across several societies and cultures, the 'public-private' divide spells out sanctioned roles for men and women. Women are confined to the 'private sphere', considered their traditional domain, where they perform basic feminine roles such as protecting and sustaining family and community, nurturing, caregiving, etc. In the traditional Naga society where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, Naga women have remained largely confined to the private sphere. They are not considered a part of the public sphere, a space considered socially and culturally sanctioned for their male counterparts, and where masculine roles are performed (Manchanda 2001, 15). Naga women have been traditionally excluded from the realm of formal decision-making process; they do not have representation in the democratic tribal village councils and community decision making bodies. Their political agency has remained either suppressed or unrecognized. Naga women have arguably used this exclusion as a resource for taking up the role of mediation, negotiation, pacification and peace-making during situations of violence and conflict, whether inter-factional, inter-communal or between militants and security forces (Manchanda 2004, 35). In particular, during situations of conflict and bloodshed when men would not listen to one another, it was women who mediated and pleaded the men to stop the violence (Vamuzo 2012, 14). This traditional role of Naga women plays out in the socially sanctioned space available for women within the Naga tradition.

Naga women have been able to appropriate their traditionally assigned role to negotiate their terms in the political sphere. By defining peace-making as women's traditional role, Naga women have carved out a space for themselves in the formal political process (Banerjee 2000, 142). As a matter of fact, the intervention of Naga women in the conflict situation in Nagaland can be seen as an extension of their traditional and socially assigned role within the patriarchal society of the Nagas. Paula Banerjee (2022) writes that during violent conflicts when the public sphere breaks down, the gendered roles of public and private spheres get reorganized, and women emerge as important civic actors through various women bodies and institutions.

Another strategy that NMA adopts is 'motherhood'. Although the membership of NMA is open to every adult Naga woman, it incorporates a 'motherhood' approach in its activities. Given the limited space available for civil society intervention during conflict situations, the NMA, according to Neidonuo Angami, a former President of NMA, sought to occupy space through its motherhood strategy (Banerjee 2002). The motherhood strategy of NMA draws strength from the moral authority of the 'mother' who is seen as a pacifier, caregiver, and nurturer, and also from the social sanction of being a 'protector' that motherhood offers (Banerjee and Dey 2012, 16). Through the NMA, Naga women have successfully translated their traditional role as arbitrators of peace and as mothers to social and political agents in the conflict situation. In particular, it adopted motherhood strategy to enter into peace politics because motherhood is regarded as a 'tolerated' space of protest by women in conflict situations (Banerjee and Dey 2012, 16).

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION EFFORTS
During its 5th General Assembly held in Zunheboto district headquarters in 1994, the NMA made a resolution to form 'NMA Peace Team' under the theme 'Shed No More Blood', a theme posited on the universal value of human life. Considered as one of the most notable campaigns of NMA, the 'Shed No More Blood' signified NMA's move of assuming a role in the public sphere. With the objective of creating awareness and conscience to 'shed no more blood' and to pursue unity and reconciliation (NMA n.d.b), the NMA met leaders of the various Naga underground groups and appealed to them to "get together, talk and resolve" (Kumar and Murthy 2002, 116). They even mediated in factional rivalries and violence and appealed for immediate cessation of violence. With the objective of highlighting and creating awareness about the need to shun violence and hostilities, the NMA organized a peace rally on November 22, 1995 at Kohima, under the theme 'Human Integrity and Consequences of killing' (NMA n.d.b).

The participation of NMA in the NSCN (IM)'s consultations with Naga civil society to strengthen the peace process was seen as a breakthrough and recognition of the significant contribution of Naga women to the peace process. NMA used the platform to appeal for stopping all kinds of violence and bloodshed among Nagas, and to reconcile and reunite.

An important role of NMA has been that of keeping the channels of communication open between rival factions so as to bring about reconciliation, and to widen the ambit of the ceasefire to bring in excluded factions to the peace table. During March 1999, an NMA delegation undertook a journey on foot across the border to Myanmar to meet the NSCN (K) faction leader, the late SS Khaplang, where the delegation conveyed the message of peace and reconciliation to the leader. Following the signing of the Indo-Naga Framework Agreement in August 3, 2015 between the Indian Government and NSCN (IM), a delegation of the NMA travelled to Myanmar to meet the NSCN (K) leaders who had, in the month of March that year, abrogated the 14-year long ceasefire with the Indian government (Nagaland Post September 4, 2015). The NMA peace delegation appealed to the NSCN (K) leaders to renew the ceasefire and to join the ambit of the peace process again, underscoring the fact that peace would remain elusive unless all factions of the Naga insurgent groups are on board the peace process.

NON-CONFRONTATIONAL CHANNEL: BRIDGING DIVIDE BETWEEN NEIGHBORS

The Naga political issue has, over the years, created suspicion and apprehension among neighboring communities in the region. In particular, the demand for integration of all Naga inhabited areas in the region articulated in the 'Greater Nagalim' demand of the NSCN (IM), has caused consistent unrest in the neighboring states of Nagaland. In June 2001, the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) signed the Bangkok Declaration which extended the ceasefire without territorial limits to cover all Naga inhabited areas outside Nagaland. This was interpreted as a covert recognition of the NSCN (IM)'s demand of 'Greater Nagalim' (Sahni January 23, 2024). This demand evoked serious concerns among the neighboring non-Naga communities, who have been apprehensive of losing a sizeable area of their territories if the demand of the NSCN (IM) was to be conceited to by the Indian government. The aftermath of the Bangkok Declaration saw serious ethnic problems and violence erupting in the neighboring affected states of Nagaland, with Manipur witnessing the worst explosion. It may be noted that the 'Greater Nagalim', an integrated Naga homeland as demanded by the NSCN (IM), would include four districts of the present-day Manipur state. These four districts are primarily inhabited by the Nagas and constitute about 70% of the total area of Manipur (NPMHR 2002, 96-97). Maintaining the territorial integrity of Manipur has become a major theme in the politics of Manipur today, and thus, Sanjib Baruah writes, "The goal of creating a single political unit out of all Naga inhabited areas puts the Naga project of nationhood in collision course with a parallel Manipuri project." (Baruah 2005, 100-101).

Following large scale violence and deaths in the neighboring states, particularly in Manipur, over the extension of ceasefire coverage beyond the state of Nagaland, the NMA took up the role of reaching out to the neighbouring communities and holding conversations with them to allay their fears. Underscoring the indispensability of understanding and dialogue among different communities to iron out differences, the NMA initiated non-confrontational channels of communication. It initiated people-to-people dialogue by undertaking peace tours and goodwill visits in the region. In July 2001, the NMA undertook a peace tour of Assam, where it met the Chief Minister of Assam and other prominent Assamese citizens, seeking support and cooperation to the Naga peace process (NMA n.d.c). In December 2002, a joint delegation of NMA and Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) visited Mizoram and Meghalaya, where they highlighted the Naga peace process to the political and civil society leaders of both the states, and sought support to it (NMA n.d.c). The NMA, on its own, as well as in coordination with other civil groups, initiated journeys of reaching out to other communities for building trust, support, and mutual accommodation among neighboring communities, and to seek support to the Naga peace process. These efforts bear testimony to the role of NMA in bridging divides between neighboring communities.

NAGA WOMEN'S ROLE: THE EVOLVING NARRATIVE

NMA has provided a platform for Naga women to be integral participants in the Naga civil society initiatives for peace and reconciliation. Their peace activism has empowered them to venture into spaces that were previously unavailable to them, and to make gains in the larger social world, including formal representational politics. Over the years, the areas of activities of NMA have broadened from being peace makers and peace builders, to being politically conscious and assertive, as is evident from the growing participation of Naga women in political, social and cultural discourse of Naga society in recent years. Given the historical exclusion of Naga women from formal decision-making bodies, be it the Village Councils or the State Legislative Assembly, their experiences in organizations like the NMA have made them to grow politically conscious and assertive, even questioning and addressing their absence from formal decision-making bodies (Banerjee 2000, 142). The growing political awareness and assertion of Naga women can be linked up with the sense of sisterhood centered around peace activism that NMA has been able to build over the years among Naga women across different tribal groups. As a matter of fact, the mobilization and operation of NMA is largely decentralized; it does not have any rigid structure of rules and procedures, and operates through its affiliated tribal women's organizations (Das 2007, 47-48). By maintaining clear lines of communication among its affiliated units, NMA has positioned itself as a women's constituency, while also making its mandate representative (Manchanda 2005, 21).

This has perhaps made NMA into a grassroot movement, creating a sense of sisterhood among Naga women across different tribal groups. It is through the peace activism of NMA that Naga women have acquired legitimacy to enter the space for political decision making (Banerjee and Dey 2012, 26).

The growing political consciousness and assertion of Naga women has been facilitated further by education and professional employment that they have secured over the years (Manchanda and Kakran 2017). It is under the leadership of a new generation of educated, professional women that Naga women are now challenging the exploitative customary practices of their society and demanding for gender justice and women participation in electoral politics (Manchanda and Kakran 2017, 74). This can be seen in Naga women's advocacy for gender justice and women empowerment as prerequisites for sustainable peace. According to NMA

advisor Rosemary Dzuvichu, absolute peace can be achieved when there is social justice and when women are empowered (Nagaland Post June 26, 2016). Educated Naga women have today acquired the necessary expertise and credibility to articulate the rights and interests of Naga women and to fight for the same against the established system and structures. This can be seen in the long legal fight of Naga women for reservation in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in Nagaland, spearheaded by NMA. It finally saw the light of the day when the Nagaland Legislative Assembly (NLA) passed the Nagaland Municipal Act in November 2023, allowing for reservation of one-third of seats for women in the ULBs (Nagaland Post November 10, 2023). Accordingly, the ULB elections with women reservation were held for the first time in June 2024, where a total of 102 seats were won by women candidates. Another telling testament has been the historic election of two women to the 14th NLA in 2023, which marked Naga women's entry into NLA for the first time since the first NLA elections were held in 1964.

The above developments point to the emergence of Naga women as political agencies, albeit the continuing cultural barriers to the cause of women's equality and justice (in particular, the discriminatory Naga oral customary laws protected under the provisions of Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution that prevent women from participating in public matters), and the lingering dilemma of finding a final solution to the vexed Naga issue. The 2024 ULB elections and the election of two women MLA to the 14th NLA are significant indicators of how Naga women have been ushered into the public sphere after years of being socially and culturally excluded. The developments, as Amrita Saikia (2024) writes, may have a positive implication on the Naga peace process, and towards building positive peace in the conflict torn state.

The above factors have perhaps shaped an evolving narrative of Naga women's agency from being peacemakers to finding place in formal politics, and their role in the overarching socio-political landscape of the Naga society today. Manchanda and Kakran opines that the possibility of Naga women translating their peace activism in the informal sphere of politics into formal authority in the public sphere will be the measure of the empowering potential of peace politics in Naga society (Manchanda and Kakran 2017, 76). Naga women today have come out of socio-cultural and historical invisibility to the center of public sphere, where they have successfully broadened their peace activities and movement to address issues of gender justice and equality in Naga society.

CONCLUSION
Historically, Naga women have remained relegated to the shadows of social and political discourse due to the strong patriarchal social structure. The political agency of women has either remained suppressed or unrecognized. For quite long, this has remained the dominant narrative of the role and position of Naga women. The social effects of the long-drawn insurgency in the state and the developments in Naga politics in the nineties perhaps have acted as catalysts for Naga women to occupy space as crucial actors in the socio-political life of the Nagas. Today, there is a growing recognition of the dynamic and essential role of Naga women in the mainstream Naga political process.

Naga women, through the platform of NMA, have become role models as far as women's activism in political and social activities of conflict-ridden societies is concerned. Naga women have been assertive in the broader framework of Naga civil society mobilization for socio-political transformation, and for carving out a place for themselves in the peace table. The NMA has opened possibilities for Naga women to step out of the stereotype of being the 'subordinated other', and to push themselves into the public sphere. They have successfully appropriated 'motherhood' strategy and the socially sanctioned role of peace making available to them in the private sphere to extend it to the mainstream Naga political process. Their peace activism is perhaps what has launched them to gradually assert for their rights and find a way through to the modern representative institutions of governance in the recent times. It has also contributed to the growth in the negotiating power of the Naga women. There is an evolving narrative of Naga women as political agencies at present, which has otherwise remained suppressed throughout history.

REFERENCES
[1] Banerjee, Paula and Ishita Dey. *Women, Conflict, and Governance in Nagaland*. Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, July 2012. http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP51.pdf
[2] Banerjee, Paula. *Second Civil Society Dialogue on Peace: A Report*. Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, October 2002. http://www.mcrg.ac.in/civilsocietydialogue2.htm
[3] Banerjee, Paula. "Between Two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland." In *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*, ed. Rita Manchanda, 131-161. New Delhi: Sage, 2001.
[4] Banerjee, Paula. "The Naga Women's Interventions for Peace." *Canadian Woman Studies Les Cashiers De La Femme* Vol 19, No 4 (2000): 137-142. https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/7944
[5] Banerjee, Paula. *Women Community and State: North East India,* https://mcrg.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Presentation_Paula.pdf
[6] Baruah, Sanjib. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of North East India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.
[7] Chenoy, Anuradha M. "Women and the breakdown of the Public Sphere." In *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, eds. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, 365 -383. New Delhi: Sage, 2005.
[8] Chenoy, Anuradha M. *Militarism and Women in South Asia.* New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002.
[9] Das, Samir Kumar. *Conflict and Peace in India's North East: The Role of Civil Society*. East-West Center Washington, 2007.
[10] Institute for Conflict Management. *A study on the role of the Naga Mothers' Association in the Peace Process in Nagaland*. New Delhi: Institute for Conflict Management, 2004. Unpublished report.
[11] Kumar, Ram Narayan and Laxmi Murthy. *Four Years of the Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim: Promises and Pitfalls*. New Delhi: Other Media Communication, 2002.
[12] Manchanda, Rita and Seema Kakran. "Gendered power transformations in India's Northeast: Peace politics in Nagaland." *Cultural Dynamics* Vol. 29 (1-2) (2017), 63-82. https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374017709232

[13] Manchanda, Rita. *Naga Women Making A Difference: Peace Building in Northeastern India*. Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, 2005. https://inclsvescurity.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/13_naga_women_making_a_difference_peace_building_in_northeastern_india.pdf (Retrieved on January 30, 2024)

[14] Manchanda, Rita. *We Do More Because We Can: Naga Women in the Peace Process*. Kathmandu: South Asia Forum for Human Rights, 2004.

[15] Manchanda, Rita. "Where are the women in South Asian Conflicts?." In *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*, ed. Rita Manchanda, 13-39. New Delhi: Sage, 2001.

[16] Naga Mothers' Association. *Mothers' Journey from Despair to Hope*. n.d.

[17] Naga Mothers' Association. *Shed No More Blood*. n.d.

[18] Naga Mothers' Association. *Some Memorable events of NMA Peace Team*. n.d.

[19] Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights. *The Nagas: Truth and Hope for the Living*. Kohima: White Lotus Press, 2002.

[20] National Campaign Committee Against Militarization and Repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers Act. *Where Peace Keepers Have Declared War*. National Campaign Committee Against Militarization and Repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers Act, April 1997.

[21] Nagaland Post. (2023, November 10). NLA passes Municipal Bill with 33% quota for women. *Nagaland Post.* https://nagalandpost.com/nla-passes-municipal-bill-with-33-quota-for-women/ (Retrieved on January 30, 2024)

[22] Nagaland Post. (2016, June 26). Women talk about peace & challenges. *Nagaland Post*. https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2016/06/26/women-talk-about-peace-challenges/ (Retrieved on January 30, 2024)

[23] Nagaland Post. (2015, September 4). NMA meets NSCN (K) leaders. *Nagaland Post*. https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2015/09/04/nma-meets-nscn-k-leaders/ (Retrieved on February 15, 2024)

[24] Sahni, Ajai. "Naga Peace Overtures.", *Outlook*, January 23, 2024, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/naga-peace-overtures-news-225959 (Retrieved on February 15, 2024)

[25] Saikia, Amrita (2024, August 27). Women and Women's Quota in Urban Local Bodies in Nagaland: A Saga of Struggle and Success. https://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1941 (Retrieved on January 30, 2024)

[26] Vamuzo, Meneno. Narratives of Peace: Naga Women in the Self Determination Struggle. *InTensions*, (6) (2012). https://doi.org/10.25071/1913-5874/37373