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Social Transformation among the Nagas in Assam: A Case Study in Sivasagar District

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an endeavor to view the nature and dimension of social transformation among the Nagas who have inhabited in the plains valley of Assam specially district of Sivasagar since time immemorial.

C. R Nag while conceptualizing social transformation among the Mizos of Mizoram has summed up in three vocabularies – ‘introduction’, ‘abolition’ and ‘modification’. Explaining these three concepts in detail Nag explained that the British occupation followed by the introduction of Christianity in the Lushai Hills has brought social change in Mizo society in many ways. As a result of it, some indigenous social practices and customs have been abolished, some were modified and some new phenomena were introduced which collectively led to social changes in Mizo society. This transformation may be called by the expression ‘social transformation.’¹ Similar parameters of change in the traditional Naga society may be applicable for an explanation.

While looking the scenario of social transformation, it was an endeavor to put on few aspects of Naga social life and society particularly after they had come in contact with the society and environment of the plains areas of Assam valley. The whole process of analysis of the quantitative data will be presented with qualitative interpretations.

Contacts with the Plainsmen

The Sivasagar district of Assam is a union ground for various groups of people of both tribal and non-tribal. Thus, the district is fascinating from the point of population composition. Since pre-historic times various ethnic groups and communities specially the Austrics, the Mongoloids and the Aryans migrated to this part of northeast India and contributed to the growth of a land of heterogeneous population structure.

The Nagas are one of such ancient migrants. Their arrival is not recent, but a long historical past. One fundamental fact in this context is worthy to mention. Since the Nagas have settled in the plains areas of Assam over several generations, their association and contact with the non-Naga people may have a tremendous influence on all fronts of their life.

In The Field of Agriculture and Economy

Traditionally, the Nagas practiced some specific cultivation called Jhum cultivation where the entire population of the village had to work collectively. This practice is still popular among the Nagas in the hill areas.

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The village life of the Nagas in Assam is also marked by many forms of new adjustment relating to wet rice cultivation. They possessed cultivable and homestead lands of their own.

They practiced various seasonal crops – Kharif, Rabi crops in their own land. The Nagas of the Sivasagar district under study though basically pursue agriculture as a prime source of livelihood they are not confined alone is single economic activity; rather they are engaged in wider occupational activities. Expansion of education, merit, and competition, urban impact, industrial and market forces etc. A substantial number of Naga people of younger age have become business-minded and developed tea cultivation. There is a gradual increase of the numbers of government officials, company service holders, contract and supply workers, pretty businessmen and a host of young educated Naga who pursues a variety of world-based activities and earns money.

In The Field of Education

The overall scenario of education of the Naga villages under study is somewhat satisfactory. Quoting census references and data, the Village Headmen and the Church Leaders stated that the literacy rate of Hahchara village is about 90%, while it is 97% in Monaiting, 89% in Namsai, 80% in Baregaon and 80% Deopani village. But the old generations of the womenfolk are still lagging behind in education.

There are some significant changes among the young educated generation of the Nagas. The Assamese language is commonly used by them in their daily life. It can be noted that a good number of Naga boys and girls used to publish their writings like – articles, poems etc. in school or college magazines or in the occasional publications by some associations and other organizations.

Religion and Culture

It is an established fact that the traditional Naga culture was rooted in the fundamental beliefs and assumption of their religion. It is also equally relevant to state that there is the prevalence of a variety of customs, myths, and legendary institutions. Over generations, the religious life and culture of the Nagas living in the plains region of Assam and after coming in contact with diverse groups and communities have been undergoing a significant modification and alteration. Some sections of the Nagas have adopted Hinduism at the beginning of their habitation at Hahchara and Siloni Nocte villages. But lateron, the Wangso and some part of Kanyak have converted to Christianity. But lager parts of the Kanyak Nagas are still practicing Hinduism they constitute a total of 43.11%

Socio-Cultural Life

The social and cultural aspects of the life of individual or community jointly may be termed as socio-cultural is an expression of total life patterns, values and norms, ethics, culture, morality and many other acquired traits throughout his existence in society. Further, there are some basic elements necessary for the continuance of individuals’ existence such as the economy, sources of livelihood, food and shelter and, safety and security. The social structure that may attain its permanent character, but as time passes, the basic characters are also subject to either modification or transformation. This is possible when the culture of a society is changing.

The Nagas living in plains areas of Assam have undergone a fascinating change in all major spheres in their life. It is perhaps the socio-cultural aspect of their life patterns which shows a noticeable transformation over the last few decades.

The field data acquired through a number of questions opened to the respondents and from personal field observation. The empirical findings and the relevant issues are discussed on the page to follow.

Exposure to Languages

Language is an effective means of communication and interaction between individuals. Keeping in view such assumption we asked our respondents about their exposure to language and the findings are presented in the table-1 below.

Table -1.1 Respondent’s Exposure to Languages

Languages	Exposure		
	Can speak	Can read	Can write
Own Language	341 100%	120 35.19%	90 26.39%
Assamese	341 100%	297 87.09%	297 87.09%
Hindi	196 57.47%	21 6.15%	21 6.15%
English	91 26.68%	89 26.09	78 22.87%

The finding presented in the table is an indication whether the Nagas are confined group or extended group in the sense of exposure to languages. In addition to their own dialect, language, they can speak The Assamese language (100%). Besides, 57.47% can speak Hindi, 26.68% can speak English and 0.58% can speak the Bengali language.

The Nagas in Assam show differential aptitudes in reading and writing in their own dialect. Only 35.19% can read while a lesser number of them (26.39%) has the ability to write their own language. On the other hand majority of them have acquired command over The Assamese language i.e. 87.09% can read and write Assamese language in the Naga society in Sivasagar district.

Hindi has also gained popularity among a good number of respondents (57.41%). English is another language that gained popularity and prominence among a good number of the Nagas.

Assimilation with Local Culture

It is in fact not an easy task to trace the Naga traditional culture, but some features, nature and elements and also about its continuity and trends can be understood.

However, an in-depth inquiry concerning to above assumptions and the related field information are presented below in two data tables.

Table-1.2 Adoption to Local Culture

Villages	Nature of Adoption			Total
	Completely	Partially	No Adoption	
V:1	26 26%	69 69%	05 5%	100 100%
V:2	18 22.5%	59 73.75%	03 3.75%	80 100%
V:3	03 16.66%	13 73.22%	02 11.11%	18 100%
V:4	03 10.71%	25 89.28%		28 100%
V:5	05 8.62%	48 82.75%	05 8.62%	58 100%
V:6	21 63.63%	9 27.27%	03 9.09%	33 100%
C:1	02 20%	08 80%	-	10 100%
C:2	04 66.66%	02 33.33%	-	06 100%
C:3	07 87.5%	01 12.5%	-	08 100%
Grand Total	89 26.09%	234 68.62%	18 5.27%	341 100%

The above data shows a majority of the respondents (68.62%) put the record that the Nagas have accepted all forms of habit, mannerism, behavior in addition to their prime activities like agriculture from the local neighboring population.

On the other hand, for 26.69% respondents, the Nagas of Assam have accepted all forms of agricultural peasants, including the seasonal ritual activities and agricultural tools, techniques, method, and processes of cultivation and used by the Assamese peasants, including the seasonal ritual activities and ceremonies relating to cultivation. Instead, they for most of the daily life time keep themselves busy in maintain household activities and to earn money. In this context, it is important to mention some significant cultural practices those have been popularly accepted and cultivated by the Nagas from the neighboring Assamese families. The married Kanyak Naga women now-a-days use Assamese *Mekhela*, (lower garments) and *Chadar* (upper garments) in their daily habits of dress patterns. Similarly, the Nocte Nagas who were the disciples of *Bareghar Satra* (a Hindu Vaisnavite religious institution) regularly offer prayers of the *Namghar* (a Vaisnavite place of worship) in accordance with Vaisnavite rules.

The three Assamese *Bihu* festivals are popularly celebrated by the Noctes. They celebrate these occasions with a great mix of traditions – Noctes and the Assamese. In their own dialect, they term *Bohag Bihu* as *Paku*, *Magh Bihu* as *Magh Paku* and the *Kati Bihu* as *Mel Paku*. On such occasion, they used to sacrifice animals in the name of their ancestors and offer home-made liquor “Khan” (traditionally prepared rice bear). The offering of rice-bear and sacrifice of animals is considered essential along with prayers and worship. They pray and offer those items to *Aaithan Dangoria*, *Jal-Konwari* and in the name of *Lakhimi* separately (all these are names of Hindu god and goddesses).

Changes in Traditional Beliefs, Rituals, and Practices

There is a considerable impact on the traditional belief patterns, ritualistic behavior, and nature of practices of the Nagas living in the midst of non-Naga population in Assam. The table-3 provides some empirical findings to such queries.

**Table-1.3
Changes in Traditional Beliefs, Rituals, and Practices**

Villages/ Chowk	Changes Traditional Beliefs, Rituals and Practices				
	Total	There is change		No Change	
		No.	%	No.	%
V:1	100	67	67	33	33
V:2	80	68	85	12	15
V:3	18	12	66.66	06	33.33
V:4	28	26	92.85	02	7.14
V:5	58	57	98.28	01	1.72
V:6	33	29	87.87	04	12.12
C:1	10	07	70	03	30
C:2	6	04	66.66	02	33.33
C:3	8	07	87.5	01	12.5
Grand Total	341	277	81.23	64	18.76

As per the indication of the data, the majority of the respondents (81.23%) were of the view that the Naga tribes have experienced changes in certain spheres of their religious life. Comparatively, it is only the lesser number of respondents (18.76%) who put forwarded opposite opinion.

Traditionally, every Naga tribe believes that there is an unseen divine power behind the creation of the universe and destiny of mankind and therefore, they had a varying conception of belief in gods and spirits. Further, they believe in both benevolent and malevolent characters of the divine power those are exercised on human beings. Taboo occupies a central figure in the religious life of the Nagas. It is a set of belief which controls the entire religious affairs and social life of the people.

Change in Socio-Cultural & Religious Practices

No society remains static. The pre-British Naga society had existed for centuries without any forms of scientific development and they lived on primitive agriculture with self-sufficient economy and independence.

With increased contact, interaction and assimilation with the people of permanent village structure in the plains they have achieved some changes in their way of life. The table-4 below gives it in detail.

**Table-1.4
Change in Socio-cultural & Religious Life of the Respondents**

Items	Opinion				Total
	Rapid Change	Considerable Change	Little Change	No Change	
Tools & Techniques	00	201 58.95%	97 28.44%	43 12.61%	341 100%
Food Habits	00	196 57.48%	31 9.09%	114 33.43%	341 100%
Dress & Ornaments	00	216 63.34%	85 24.93%	50 14.66%	341 100%
Religious Practices	00	176 51.61%	37 10.85%	128 37.54%	341 100%
Mode of Travel	00	117 34.31%	79 23.17%	145 42.52%	341 100%
Expenditure Patterns	00	212 62.17%	33 9.68%	96 28.15%	341 100%

Majority of the respondents (58.95%) were of the opinion that there are changes in the methods of production particularly in the field of agriculture. They have undergone the culture of wet rice cultivation with cattle ploughs, tractors, manures which they did not experience in the primitive mode of their cultivation. Thus, a total of 58.95% respondents stated that the Naga cultivators have adopted themselves with the use of all tools, techniques, and methods of agriculture needed for wet rice cultivation. These practices have been followed by them from the period when they settled in form of village life in the plains of Assam. The new mode of agricultural practices according to their opinion has brought about changing other spears of life. 57.48% respondents stated that there is a considerable change in the food habits of the Nagas. Thus, the traditional practice of hunting for food stuff from the forest and the destruction forest resources have significantly stopped.

The investigation goes to a certain extent of in-depth inquiry in this respect. On the basis of the information supplied by each of the respective village Head, it was found that maximum number of families are in the lower income group and hence, the average monthly expenditure was estimated at Rs. 5000/-, while there are few families from among them Naga who leave the ability to spend about Rs. 80,000/- per month. However, they are in a limited number of families with larger land property, small tea gardens, two medical practioners, businessmen etc. The survey also reveals that maximum possession of the land property by a family is amounting to 92 bighas (about 23 acres). It was also found that out of 341 families, there are 2 families who possessed more than 50 Bighas, 5 families with more than 20 bighas. We found a maximum number of families with the possession of the land property within the range of 2 to 10 bighas and 19 families with 1 katha of land.

Inter-community Marriages

Marriage is a social institution which brings ultimate and closest form of social relationship between persons, families, groups, and communities. It is the institution of marriage that brings together people irrespective of socio-economic and cultural differences such as – caste, ceed, language, ethnicity, and religion. One can understand the rigidity or flexibility, closeness and opened and even traditional or modern communities in society through the institution of marriage.

A question understood for seeking the opinion of the respondents towards inter-community marriage table-5 below:

Table 1.5 Village Wise Preference of Inter-Community Marriage

Villages	Preference for Marriage			Total
	Within the Nagas	Between Nagas and others	Between Nagas and Assamese	
V:1	40 40%	35 35%	25 25%	100 100%
V:2	42 52.5%	28 35%	10 12.5%	80 100%
V:3	09 50%	06 7.5%	03 16.66%	18 100%
V:4	19 67.85%	06 21.42%	03 10.71%	28 100%
V:5	35 60.34%	16 27.58%	07 12.06%	58 100%
V:6	19 57.57%	10 17.25%	04 6.89%	33 100%
C:1	05 50%	03 30%	02 20%	10 100%
C:2	01 16.66%	05 83.33%	-	06 100%
C:3	-	08 100%	-	08 100%
Grand Total	170 49.85%	117 34.31%	54 15.83%	341 100%

It was found that 49.85% respondents prefer marriages within Naga communities, 34.31% prefer with other communities and 15.83% prefer marriage with the Assamese families. Village-wise the responses are again different. Majority of the respondents from four villages i.e. Monaiting, Namsai, Deopani and Siloni opined that they prefer marriages within their own communities, abiding by the rules of endogenous marriage systems whereas, a sizeable number of respondents (34.31%) prefer with other communities and 15.83% prefer marriage with the Assamese families.

The other direction of the table data can be interpreted with no less significance. The two categories of responses i.e. marriage with people ‘outside their own’ and specifically with ‘Assamese people’ if combined together (50.14%) and examined a favorable trend towards inter-community relationship through marriage is visible.

CONCLUSION

This studies an aim to investigate the Nagas living in the plains region of Assam. The approach obviously deals with the understanding of the changing parameters of the traditional traits and characteristics under the preview of social transformation. The study reveals a lot of fascinating facts and characteristics of both traditions as well as transformation stages. As far as the structural aspects and concerned, the Naga social life is rooted in the institutions like – family, kinship, clan, tribe, and village. The family as the basic institutions of the Naga society governs all other aspects of social life like kinship network, village organization, Khel, marital relationship as well as identity formation. The prevalence of social and religious institutions and associated practice, obligations and attainment are found to be effective in managing all forms of social activities.

The study of Naga families in the district of Sivasagar, Assam may be here treated as a specific empirical representation that illustrates ample evidence of social transformation in Naga society. Undoubtedly, the Nagas of plains Assam, over the last few decades, have been experiencing transformation in various aspects of their life. In few areas of social life, such transformation is significant and in some areas, it may be considered with little flexibility. It is specially in the field of agriculture, process and mode of production, occupational pursuit, earning sources as well as consumption behaviour of the people where changes are significantly visible, these areas of life patterns automatically influenced other areas of life such as – rituals and practices related to agriculture, norms, and values related to religion etc.

Historically, the diverse ethnic groups of northeast India have been maintaining a bond of inter-ethnic and inter-community relationship and this has socio-historical strength in the emergence of composite social structure and culture. It is an obvious fact that tribal transformation and assimilation of northeast India has gained momentum particularly after the independence of India. This is reflected in the changing scenario of primitive method of cultivation to modern settled cultivation, occupation from agricultural to non-agricultural, changing institutional values like- family, marriage, kinship and village settled life, rethinking of rituals, beliefs and religious practice, and cultural adaption leading to transformation of attitudes, behaviour and normative patterns.

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