



MARGINS AND POLITICS: EXPLORING INDIA'S NORTHEAST

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The Role of Women in Naga Peace Process

Lopilo Humtsoe

The Naga peace process is one of the critical dimensions of the peace accord between the Indian government and the Naga rebel groups in Northeastern India. 'Since India's independence, the Naga conflict has been one of the most protracted insurgencies, with its roots tracing back to colonial history, ethnic identities, and self-determination demands' (Iralu, 2019). This demand for a unique Naga identity, unified homeland, separate constitution, and right to a distinctive flag has been responsible for decades of violence, turmoil, and human rights violations. 'This conflict has also led to the disruption of daily life, with acts of violence, forced displacements, and the suffering of civil society, including physical abuses, particularly towards vulnerable groups like women and children' (Thomas, 2021). While the peace talks continue, they are beset by several obstacles and complications that have barred their path toward an agreement on the problem at hand and kept the Naga people in constant agony.

Naga women have acted as peace builders in numerous initiatives when conflict and violence have reached their worst and have brought stability and healing to their communities. Working in a highly patriarchal environment with very few females participating,

women are now increasingly assuming roles as local organizers, mobilizers, and mediators. They have voiced their condemnation of violence through organizations such as the Naga Mothers' Association, through peace marches, and by mediating talks between the Indian government and other rebel groups. Women have also performed other essential middle-man duties, "mediating in trust development processes between the parties and encouraging the diffusing of local tensions by promoting cease-fire agreements and non-violent conflict resolution". They have also called for the attention of human rights in the peace negotiations to ensure that civilian people's opinions, particularly those of women and children, are represented and their rights defended.

Meanwhile, Naga women have played a vanguard role in bringing community-based conflict resolution through customary and traditional knowledge to bridge gaps in peace-building. For far too long, these unofficial networks have played crucial roles as the channels of reconciliation: they reach across divides that are unbridgeable in more conventional political systems. Nonetheless, the work women do to get such results is virtually wholly unrecognized by their resilience and energy at formal negotiation tables. Women have been historically shut out of high-level peace negotiations by cultural norms and political systems, thus preventing them from influencing policy decisions. But their works are not yet enough to establish lasting peace more efficiently, that is why it is necessary to recognize and appreciate them. This piece is an important commentary that highlights the need for gender-inclusive conflict resolution strategies and to allow women to actively shape the peace process, and in turn, make more effective peacebuilding initiatives.

'Women's contributions to the peace process in Nagaland have been multifaceted, with their activism focusing on ending violence, advocating for peaceful dialogue, and raising awareness on human rights issues' (Ao, 2018). Women have played a crucial role in grassroots peace movements despite historically facing limited representation in formal political institutions due to deeply rooted societal norms. Their contributions have been vital in driving change and promoting peace within communities. 'Organizations like the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) have mobilized women to actively engage in conflict resolution efforts, often stepping into roles of mediation and negotiation between warring factions and the state' (Yhome, 2020).

In discussions, the contributions of Naga women often go unrecognized despite their importance. 'The existing patriarchal structures limit their participation in formal peace negotiations, thereby hindering the potential for a more inclusive and effective peace process' (Dewi, 2020). 'Scholars argue that peacebuilding efforts can only achieve lasting success when they incorporate gender perspectives, ensuring that both men and women contribute equally to conflict resolution mechanisms' (Kikon, 2019). To foster lasting peace in the region and recognize the contributions of Naga women it is essential to understand their involvement in the process of building peace.

This research explores the vital but often overlooked contribution of Naga women to the peace process. It delves into the challenges they face, their efforts in conflict resolution and the importance of including women in formal talks to adopt a more holistic approach towards peace building.

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF THE NAGA CONFLICT

The Naga fight for independence started during the time before gaining freedom driven by a deep yearning for a unified Naga identity that would encompass all areas populated by the Naga people. 'Approximately 4,000 Nagas fought in the French Labour Corps during World War I, which exposed them to a wider range of political ideologies and sparked the establishment of the Naga movement. This is when the movement started to gain speed. These Naga veterans founded the Naga Club in Kohima, the current capital of Nagaland, in 1918 after they returned. The cornerstone of the Naga battle for political autonomy and identity was laid by the Christian-educated village leaders from the Angami, Ao, Konyak, Lotha, Rengma, and Sema tribes, who formed the Naga Club' (Goswami, 2007). As Roy (2018) points out, "the spread of Christianity and the establishment of modern political, administrative, and educational institutions created an educated elite among the Nagas, who began articulating their aspirations for self-determination".

'As a result of the Naga Club's concerns against British colonial control and the need for a distinct political identity, the Naga National Council (NNC) was finally established. With the signing of the Nine-Point Agreement in 1947 between the NNC and Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam at the time, the NNC significantly contributed to the advancement of the Naga political movement. By this agreement, the NNC was recognized as the Nagas' representative body and was given legislative and executive authority (Goswami, 2007). Nonetheless, the situation intensified when a group within the NNC, spearheaded by Angami Naga leader A.Z. Phizo proclaimed

Naga independence on August 14, 1947, disregarding the arrangement and paving the way for future discord.

'Violent insurgency persisted in the area despite India's attempts to settle the dispute peacefully, including the 1963 establishment of the state of Nagaland following multiple Naga People's Conventions. A truce and a peaceful settlement were the goals of initiatives like the Shillong Accord, which was signed in 1975, and the Nagaland Peace

Mission, which was founded in 1964. However, the NNC's internal conflicts and the rise of more extreme factions hampered these efforts. Disenchanted with the Shillong Accord, leaders such as Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu, and S.S. Khaplang went on to join the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980, which caused the militant operations to further divide and intensify' (Goswami, 2007). The level of violence in the region spiked after the NSCN split into two groups in 1988 due to conflicts rooted in tribal politics and differing ideologies.

In 1997 a ceasefire deal was struck following peace talks between the Indian authorities and the NSCN (specifically the Isak Muivah faction). The Indian government and the NSCN (IM) formalized the Framework Agreement in 2015 which was widely regarded as a significant breakthrough in resolving the Naga insurgency. 'Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the historical significance of the agreement, marking it as the beginning of a hopeful future for both India and the Naga people' (Dutta, 2015). Despite this optimism, the road to lasting peace has remained challenging. As Kikon (2015) notes, 'multiple insurgent groups continue to operate in Naga areas, and factional violence is frequent. The progress towards peace has been hindered by divisions within the

parties involving differing political beliefs, disunity among rebel groups and insufficient support from the grassroots level. The path to a resolution is further obstructed by factors such as instability and a lack of trust between the negotiating parties.

The Naga struggle remains one of the longest, and most intractable conflicts that India has known despite several accords over talks through these years. While the long delays in the settlement process demonstrate that there is much work to be done, greater inclusivity, trust building and an emphasis on local solutions for political and sociocultural challenges are warranted.

TRADITIONAL ROLES OF NAGA WOMEN IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Women in Nagaland have played a role in various aspects of their communities including leadership, social and cultural practices, economic activities, education and healthcare. Their impact reflects their resilience and resourcefulness and is deeply woven into the fabric of Naga society. 'Economically, Naga women are essential to the agricultural sector. They engage in all stages of crop cultivation, from planting and harvesting to processing staple crops such as rice, millet, and vegetables. This involvement is crucial not only for ensuring food security but also for maintaining traditional agricultural practices that are integral to their cultural identity (Hoshi, 2022). 'In addition to agriculture, Naga women are skilled in weaving, a traditional craft that produces intricate textiles used for clothing and ceremonial attire. These textiles, which often feature traditional patterns, are not only a source of income but also serve as a key element in preserving cultural heritage' (Hoshi, 2022).

'Socially and culturally, Naga women are custodians of traditional knowledge, including folklore, rituals, and ceremonies. Their participation in organizing and leading community festivals and rituals is essential for the preservation of cultural practices and the reinforcement of social cohesion (Kohli, 2021). 'Women also play a significant role in managing household responsibilities and child-rearing, which are crucial for the stability of family units and the continuity of cultural values' (Kohli, 2021). By passing down cultural norms and values through the generations these duties play a role in maintaining the unity of Naga communities.

'In terms of leadership and governance, Naga women have historically held influential positions within their communities. They have been involved in managing social affairs, resolving disputes, and contributing to community decision-making processes. This involvement underscores their significant role in maintaining social order and ensuring community well-being' (Kumar, 2024). The participation of women in leadership roles showcases their capacity to lead and coordinate communities, despite societal norms regarding gender.

'Education has been another area where Naga women have made notable contributions. Traditionally, they have been responsible for teaching younger generations about cultural practices and skills. In contemporary times, many Naga women have pursued formal education and have become advocates for social change including gender equality and the addressing of social issues (Sarma, 2023). They show their commitment to promoting forward-thinking values and improving societal conditions through their efforts in education.

Naga women have a range of traditional roles that play a crucial role in maintaining the well being, unity, preserving cultural heritage and ensuring the economic stability of their communities. Despite facing challenges from societal norms and contemporary issues Naga women continue to show resilience and adaptability. Their diverse contributions emphasise the significance of recognising and supporting initiatives to foster inclusive and effective peacebuilding processes.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE NAGA CONFLICT

Within the multi-decade struggle of Nagas, women have played considerable but often overlooked roles. Throughout history, Naga women participated in violent conflicts along with their male counterparts, as well as in different support roles. They have various roles ranging from vocal opposition during marches to peace negotiators. Perhaps the most well-known women's organisation in the thirty years since its inception is the Naga Women's Association formed in 1984. 'The NMA has been instrumental in promoting peace and justice, often rallying for an end to violence through protests, campaigns, and awareness initiatives' (Sarmah, 2023). This collective has worked relentlessly to hold both the Indian government and insurgent factions accountable for the human rights abuses that have disproportionately affected Naga communities.

'Moreover, Naga women have often acted as intermediaries between conflicting groups. While they may not always be formally recognized as negotiators, their ability to maintain dialogue between insurgent factions and government officials has proven pivotal' (Miller, 2022). During ceasefires or brief peace settlements, women have acted as intermediaries to facilitate communication between

insurgent groups that could be distrustful of each other or of external powers to smooth the bargaining process. Due to their special place in society, they are often able to mediate what might be very polarising circumstances. Nonetheless, the same cannot be said regarding their attention and recognition efforts and women as actors in the promotion of such discourses.

'The involvement of women in the conflict also highlights their resilience and capacity for leadership in times of crisis. While men in insurgent factions and military forces dominate the armed conflict, women's activism has focused on peacebuilding and human rights advocacy. They have organized local ceasefire monitoring groups, coordinated humanitarian efforts for victims of violence, and challenged the societal norms that glorify armed resistance. Through these efforts, women have played an indispensable role in mitigating the conflict and advocating for peaceful resolutions' (Miller, 2022).

On the other hand, their undertaking has great personal risks involved in them. The violent beating, harassment, and murder threats are characteristic of the battle against women who express themselves through activism. Their emotional distress, being uprooted from their homes, and the death of relatives have also intensified their inability to engage in all peace processes. After all these struggles, however, the Naga women were able to significantly change the discourse on peace from a military approach to a non-armed conflict resolution approach.

WOMEN AS PEACEBUILDERS IN NAGALAND

As less recognized, women have played a vital role in the peace process of conflict-ridden areas like Nagaland. In the Naga peace process, women have led peacebuilding efforts that bridge the divid

between rebel organizations, civil society, and government representatives. In more detail than what is expected of them, the roles of peacebuilders make a very considerable input into the search for a peaceful end to the long-running conflict.

'Naga women have taken on leadership roles in grassroots peacebuilding initiatives that focus on mitigating violence, promoting dialogue, and advocating for human rights. A prime example of women's involvement in the peace process is the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), which has become a powerful symbol of non-violent activism. Formed in 1984, the NMA has organized campaigns aimed at curbing violence, promoting peace, and seeking justice for victims of the conflict' (Sarmah, 2023). Their slogan, "Shed No More Blood," says it all, aptly capturing their mission: they're committed to ending more bloodshed and forging permanent peace in the region.

Through its action, the NMA works to ensure that peace-making efforts are bottom-up and are cognizant of the plight of all affected civilians, as well as vulnerable groups, especially women and children. They have been instrumental in reducing the level of violence in the region by standing out for human rights and pressing the Indian government and rebel groups to stick to ceasefires. Additionally, 'the NMA has facilitated dialogues between rival factions and with the government, serving as mediators in sensitive negotiations' (Sarmah, 2023).

Naga women have participated actively in the peace process both as grassroots activists, unofficial negotiators, and mediators. 'Despite being excluded from formal peace negotiations due to entrenched patriarchal norms, women have acted as intermediaries between insurgent groups and government officials' (Miller, 2022). When tension is reached, staying neutral and finding a way to gain

mutual trust among opposing sides has proven indispensable in keeping lines of communication open.

'Naga women's deep connections to their communities enable them to mediate in conflicts that extend beyond the insurgency, such as intertribal tensions and disputes over resources. By addressing these localized conflicts, they contribute to a broader sense of peace and stability, which in turn supports the larger peace process. Their mediation efforts also emphasize reconciliation and forgiveness, focusing on healing communities fractured by decades of conflict' (Miller, 2022).

Paramount on the agenda of inclusivity in the peace process is an achievement that Naga women have scored. While they have been actively involved at the grassroots level, formal peace negotiations excluded them, and men dominated decision-making bodies. However, 'women's groups like the NMA, Naga Women's Union (NWU), and other civil society organizations have consistently advocated for the inclusion of women in high-level peace negotiations' (Gupta, 2023). They argue that any peace-building will be impossible if the concerns peculiar to women are not put forward appropriately and their voices are not heard in any deliberations about decision-making.

'These organizations have worked to challenge the patriarchal structures that limit women's political participation, emphasizing the importance of gender equity in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Their advocacy has begun to create small shifts in the perception of women's roles in peace processes, with some government and insurgent leaders acknowledging the importance of involving women in dialogues' (Gupta, 2023).

CHALLENGES FACED BY NAGA WOMEN

Even though the Naga women have been active citizens, they have many barriers that stop them from participating fully in the peace process. The level of violence in the conflict and the consequent displacement of people are some of the most difficult issues faced. 'As is often the case in conflict zones, women bear a disproportionate burden of the suffering. The physical and psychological effects of violence, sexual abuse, displacement, and loss of livelihood have had long-term consequences for many Naga women. These challenges exacerbate their vulnerabilities, limiting their ability to participate in peace efforts' (Gupta, 2023). For example, the impact on communities has been quite destabilizing, but the forced migration resulting from military operations and insurgent activity has also disrupted already set social structures within which women operate.

In most Naga territories, women's participation at the official peace table is still being kept to a minimum because of the soundly entrenched patriarchal order. As grassroots peacebuilding led by women continues to thrive, women are usually excluded from the centre policy formulation which shapes their future. 'This exclusion stems from gender biases and societal norms that assign women secondary roles in governance and decision-making' (Kumar, 2024). Traditionally male-dominated organizations often let views by males dominate official discussions, where women hardly ever get a chance to meaningfully contribute to the resolution of the conflict.

Furthermore, 'the societal expectation that women should maintain their traditional roles in the household—such as caretaking and domestic responsibilities—acts as a barrier to their participation in broader political and social matters. This dual burden, which

requires women to balance community activism with familial duties, limits the time and resources they can dedicate to peace efforts' (Kumar, 2024). Meaningful change in the peace process erodes the agency of women: entrenched gender roles and lack of institutional support.

What's worse is that these efforts of women are not even being acknowledged. Not to forget the fact that Naga women have played instrumental roles in sustaining ceasefires, depriving local violence levels of plummeting, or even advocating for human rights. Again and again, it is the insurgent bodies and India that overlook and obfuscate their role in the entire process. This lack of consideration of women's contributions belittles the very peace-building process itself besides projecting a deep-rooted patriarchal psyche. Women's exclusion from formal discussions is described to be an important failure in considering an important perspective and the overall social implications of the conflict.

CONCLUSION

Naga women have been very important players in promoting peaceful processes amid the continued Indian government-Naga insurgent organizations war. Despite the risks and hardships they have undertaken, engagement in peace campaigns, protests and mediation has made them an indispensable part of the peace process. One extraordinary feature of their role in the conflict is that they play a big role in encouraging communication, protesting human rights violations, and healing divisions between conflicting groups.

The hurdles, however, are yet substantial. It is the women who have faced the violation, displacement, and trauma of war which also turned them more vulnerable. These very patriarchal

formations still limit their formal involvement in peace negotiations, devalue the contribution, and act as an obstacle toward the efficiency of peace. It is crucially important to appreciate the Naga women's success and clear the structural barriers that handicap them towards the foundation of a more integrated and sustainable peace. At the same time, including gender inclusions and opening a space for the women at the negotiating table makes the peace process comprehensive as well for addressing all the concerns of every member of the Naga society.

However, women across Nagaland have been significantly involved in the pursuit of justice and human rights, mediation in conflicts, and building peace. What is most important is that such efforts have brought a difference between the experiences of staying with the community and seeming to reduce the rate of violence, opening more channels of communication, and standing up for the marginalized. Despite numerous barriers for them, which include such personal dangers and patriarchal discrimination, their efforts demonstrate how vital women are in the establishment of a lasting and inclusive process of peace.

Therefore, for this peace process to be truly inclusive and fully effective, Naga women's contributions must be recognised, and their participation in formal negotiations must be actively promoted. Their different viewpoints and positions as peacebuilders provide insightful information that has proven essential for bringing about lasting peace and reconciliation in Nagaland.

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