

**Department of Anthropology
University of Delhi**

**The Complexity of Naga Political Imbroglia:
Insights from Anthropology**



Chair

V.K.Srivastava

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Speakers

Subhadra Channa

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R.Vashum

School of Social Sciences, IGNOU

Kanato Chophy

Centre for Indigenous Culture Studies, Central University of Jharkhand

S.M.Patnaik

President, Indian Anthropological Association

Time : 9:30AM

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Venue : Biswas Hall, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

Concept note

Every nation-state faces the polemics of race, ethnicity and multiculturalism crucial to national identity and sovereignty. This problem persists widely across international frontiers and boundaries like in Latin America, Middle East, South Asia and South East Asia. However, in most countries the issue of self-determination among smaller ethnic groups, tribal and indigenous people has elicited international attention and confounded academics and policy makers. There are numerous tribal movements today situated across countries and continents. Thus for instance, the Zapatista in Mexico, the Mapuche in Chile, the Twa in east Africa, the Maya and Miskito of Central America, the Embera and Huorani in South America, the East Timorese, the Hmong in Southeast Asia, the Bodo, Karbi and Mizo in North East India have been victims of brutal civil war or guerilla warfare, and importantly are stakeholders in the self-determination movement that had gripped nation-states in the post-colonial period.

Against this backdrop, the Naga tribe of North East India has been at the forefront of a resilient and tenacious self-determination movement, deemed as one of the longest separatist movements in South Asia. The Naga national movement has been complex if not paradoxical involving various agents and stakeholders covering a long period of time beginning with British colonialism; in the post-independent period, the subject matter is further complicated due to violent armed struggle, charges of secessionism, harsh repression by the state, and the involvement of international players.

The Naga identity movement is contested at various levels; and this process has churned out numerous studies and researches, but the problem still persists due to the complexity of Naga identity and history. After more than 60 rounds of table talks between the Naga political groups, which began with signing of peace agreement in 1997, the peace accord currently being negotiated is of utmost significance since the earlier historic signing of Shillong Accord with NNC leaders in 1975 had ignited a new phase in Naga National movement spearheaded by the NSCN.

The Peace Accord mediated between the NSCN (IM) and Indian government on 3rd August 2015 is expected to have far-reaching implications, since the stakeholders also involve the neighbouring states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and more importantly the Naga tribes located in Myanmar. At this juncture, the anthropological study of Naga nationalism and its ramifications remain central to the study of ethnicity and identity in North East India; the ethnographic tradition in anthropology which tries to understand the multiple realities, multiple voices, contested histories and conflicting stories have a significant role to play in not only enriching the Naga discourse but also opening new frontiers in North East studies.

Complexity of Naga Political Imbroglia: Insights from Anthropology

Compiled by:-

Chetali Tandon and Eche Wangnyu

The importance of organizing the seminar was highlighted by Dr. Avitoli G Zhimo, who also introduced the concept to the audience. She thanked Prof. V.K.Srivastava (Head of Department) and Prof. P.C Joshi for providing opportunity and help to organize such a seminar. She added that it feels great to see the faculty concern about problems of India's northeast. She introduced the Speakers to the audience and mentioned that, all the speakers are associated with the Nagas in one way or the other. Prof. V.K Srivastava has done fieldwork among the Angami-Nagas way back in the 1980s. Prof. Subhadra Channa has also worked on the Nagas and has published a book "Nagaland" as well. Prof. Soumendra M. Patnaik was an advisor to the Government of Nagaland for tourism. Dr. Kanato Chophy, an Assistant Professor in Central University of Jharkhand and Dr. R. Vashum, assistant Professor (IGNOU), were also key speakers. Both are alumni of the Department. Dr. Chophy has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork among the Nagas (Sumi and Angami). Dr. Vashum has worked on the Naga nationalism for his Ph.D degree and published books on similar theme.

After the Introduction of the seminar and the key speakers, an M.Sc student Ruchika Tripathi from the department of Anthropology who recently conducted the fieldwork among the Nagas presented few visual slides about the Nagas; a brief ethnographic description from the beginning of 12th and 13th century to the advent of Christianity in 19th century to the present day context . She highlighted various important Naga civil society organizations, Naga tribes and their territory, natural resources, idea of Nagalim etc.

Chitra Kadam, the compere of the programme, narrated her fieldwork experience among the Konyak Naga in Longwa Village which is situated on the Indo-Myanmar border. She discussed peculiar features of the Konyak Nagas of having a hereditary chief called *Angh* and having good craftsmanship.

Prof. Subhadra Channa , from Department of Anthropology was the first speaker of the seminar. She started her lecture by saying that she is not an authority on the Nagas , but has done

fair amount of work on the question of identity in context of Nagas. She discussed oppositional identity of Nagas in relation to Indian nation with an anthropological perspective. Nagas, she said have always been an undefined and problematic category in themselves and for others. For instance, North east itself can become an identity in itself still there are lots of confusion even in naming a tribe. She discussed while tracing history, one can find complexity in dealing with the administrative requirements of classification and the fluid nature of reality where the boundaries keep shifting. For instance, the Naga map of 1992 could be contested in the present day. She added that democracy is always built on communicative action, which she explained with reference of Habermas idea of deliberated democracy and use of technology vis-a-vis reality pertaining to the fluidity of cultural identities. In her discussion she laid stress on “the technologies of control” which can be both internal and external.

Dr. Kanato Chophy shared his Anthropological insight on the Journey of Nagas right from the intrusion into British owned tea estate to the present division of Naga Political Groups. His insights were based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Angami and the Sumi. He said it is important for him to keep aside his identity of Sumi Naga and give an unbiased anthropological perspective on the Naga Political Imbroglio. Throughout his talk he laid emphasis on the significance of considering multiple realities and conflicting stories in understanding any social problem from anthropological perspective. He further explained two important perspectives that are used by anthropologist in studying any social phenomena; first being the constructivist perspective that considers identity as a flux which is ever changing and the second is the primordial perspective where one could understand Nagas as emerging from one ancestor. In his talk, he started tracing the history of the Nagas right from the Colonial times. He discussed how from being a fragmented category, Nagas have gradually evolved with a political and a cultural boundary, and this all started in 1826. He discussed at length about the relationship of Nagas with the British. He incorporated all the administrative , political and social changes that happened in the Naga society in 19th and 20th century in a chronological order in which he discussed the NNC Proposal, Hydari agreement, demand of Nagas for independence, formation of Naga safeguards, indo-Naga battle , Naga insurgency in 5 phases and role of Indian nationalism. He concluded by highlighting the fact that Nagas were always resilient and still are. According to him one needs to find a peaceful solution keeping aside violence and force or impositions.

Dr. R Vashum started his talk by saying that Naga issue is a National issue. He attempted to locate and understand Nagas in the context of shifting Indian politics. For him, the study of history, the study of nationalism, the clarity between 'Nation' and 'State' as two entities is very important in understanding the Naga situation. He laid down the developments, the problems, the achievements in Naga history along with the role of India's nationalism in understanding the current complex situation of Nagas in a better way. Dr. Vashum argued that the term 'Peace Accord' is inaccurate as it is more of 'framework'. He discussed some possible outcome of the recently-signed Peace Accord between the Government of India and NSCN-IM. He speculated that the geographical state boundaries may remain the same but a different model of governance may be introduced. He concluded by saying that Nagas should promote rational thinking for deciding the fate of Nagas togetherness.

Prof. S.M. Patnaik argued that it is important to articulate this particular phenomenon through a disciplinary lens, which should not be classical Anthropology in a delimited sense. He said it is important to leave behind the colonial hangover of dealing with the local people which often brings criticism and defamation to the discipline. He mentioned about how national thinking has been regulated through policies. Policies dealing with the Nagas started off with external affairs which later shifted to Home affairs. He also talked about the essence or the so-called DNA of Anthropology i.e. the capacity to understand the 'other' is of primary significance. As an anthropologist, he laid down three important parameters of understanding a social phenomenon, first being technologies and methodologies of understanding the 'other', second being instrumentalist of understanding oral tradition and third being understanding the differential meanings when folklore shifts domains. Prof. S.M Patnaik spoke about 'new liberal economy' where he talks about the dynamic interaction between culture and market, market and tradition, in which cultural consumption is in the form of tourism, cultural exhibition or showcase. Tourism connects the entire state with market economy fostering new identities. He further cited that the maintenance of boundaries among the Nagas are becoming sharper due to many factors like globalization , mass media , modern education , technologies , migration , self-presentation and self-preservation. There has been a strong sense of connectedness to be seen among the Nagas regarding their ancestral place, like for celebrations, they keep going back to their territory. It is this territoriality that gives Nagas a sense of belongingness to the nature, which the modernity is deprived of. He even talked about how the idea of nationhood is to be understood in

context of local communities. In the context of Nagas, violence becomes a principle to structure the community because violence and conflict here becomes part of everyday life. In the end, he concluded his intriguing talk by saying that challenges of the future lies in finding out new articulation with the local communities which is free from hegemonic control and internal colonialism.

Prof. V.K. Srivastava opened the house for discussion, comments and questions to be asked by the audience to the speakers. Prof. I.S. Marwah commented that the idea of nation state should be from the context of the people. Nation state should not be viewed and understood in terms of the Centre and periphery.

In conclusion, Prof. V.K. Srivastava talked about the importance of discussing such contemporary and sensitive issues in the Department and congratulated Dr. Avitoli Zhimo for organizing this seminar on such short notice. For him, he said this was more like a workshop than a seminar. He expressed his happiness to see a huge number of audiences turning up for the seminar. He summarized the entire seminar proceedings; how nationhood , nationalism , are constructed , and how differences are transcended; representation of multiple voices etc.

From the first presentation to the last, all the speakers have been concerned with what Anthropologists can do. It is important to discuss “what anthropologists can do”. Prof. Srivastava said that it is important to understand how anthropological writings can rise above the journalistic level. He personally feel that anthropologists have exploded a number of myths like - myths of primitiveness, myths of egalitarianism, myth of progress, myth of compassion and myth of homogenization. He added that anthropologists are concerned with barriers and boundaries at symbolic, cultural and also at the level of languages. Clifford Geertz said that Anthropologist are merchants of knowledge, they collect knowledge, publish it in various forms and earn profit, so against this backdrop he spoke of the relationship between outsiders and insiders. He gave examples from his experiences of fieldwork how anthropologists are referred to by terms like “Indians”, “baharwala”, “ aur log”, “pardesi”. As anthropologists try to understand local realities so the issue of insiders and outsiders has to be problematized and this is called demythification where sometimes Insiders are not as good as we think them to be. He said categories of ethnography and auto-ethnography are also frivolous, as fieldwork is supposed to bring the ethnographer close to the people making him feel like one of them, so its up to the anthropologist

to define his level of insiderness and outsidersness involved. Even in one's own community, one can be both an insider and an outsider. Being both is a constant negotiation that one undergoes, and it is this, where the essence of anthropology lies.

After discussing and summarizing all the important anthropological concerns being discussed and raised throughout the seminar, Prof. V.K.Srivastava again congratulated all for the very productive workshop and extended a vote of thanks to University of Delhi for providing funds and to the Department and students for required help to make it successful.