

ETHICS IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: A Study of the Changing Dynamics of Naga Philosophy of Life and Religious Practices

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Abstract

The indigenous Naga tribes had a rich knowledge system passed orally through generations. This Indigenous Knowledge System had been the foundation of ethical living and survival mechanisms for the Nagas during adverse times. Over time, changes in religious beliefs and practices and the advent of modernisation shook the principles of this ethical world. This paper examines the portrayal of the Naga philosophy of life, closely knit by participatory living and affinity towards nature in select fiction and non-fiction, to argue that this indigenous knowledge system was the foundation for the sustenance of the community. The study also examines the community's indigenous religious beliefs and practices vis-à-vis the impact of conversion to Christianity on these people. Given the transitions in various indigenous societies due to the impact of modernisation, the paper delves into the importance of the indigenous knowledge system as the major contributor to harmonious living.

Keywords: Alcoholism, Colonisation, Easterine Kire, *Genna*, *Morung*, Oral Tradition, Putu Menden.

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1. Introduction

The Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) comprises the body of knowledge that is developed and practised within indigenous societies without the intervention of the modern scientific knowledge system. For any indigenous society, this body of knowledge passed down orally through generations forms the basis of their ways of life. Such societies do not regard material comfort as the purpose of gaining knowledge; rather it is the enhancement of the community's mental and physical well-being which is the actual goal of knowledge dissemination. In this context, the example of Lord Buddha who sought 'nirvana', not for his individual being, but rather for "all the suffering humanity" can be taken (Kapoor 26), exemplifying the connection between knowledge diffusion and collective prosperity. In terms of Indian thoughts and practices, the indigenous knowledge system has always been connected to ethics and moral code of conduct and therefore, it has been observed that "(k)nowledge thus has never been divorced from justice. In fact, it has always been imbricated with ethics, with the dominant ethical value of dharma. All disciplines of knowledge, vidya, have this social-ethical imperative" (Kapoor 26).

India's northeast region is populated with several indigenous groups rich in their cultural heritage and tradition. These people had their own history of struggles in pre-colonial and colonial times as well as after India's independence. The state of Nagaland had undergone severe struggles during the colonial regime and even more in the post-independence period. The strong foundation of their traditional knowledge system kept the Naga community strong and going even during those adverse times. This paper will study the portrayal of the Naga indigenous knowledge system in select fiction of Easterine Kire, Naga folktales and critical works by historians, sociologists, and ethnographers to explore how such knowledge has been the gatekeeper for preserving ethics in that society. This knowledge system acted as the very base of the individual's and the community's survival mechanism. Over time, however, with the

conversion to Christianity, modernisation, and increased migration to urban localities, marked changes could be seen in their ways of life and belief systems. The very foundation of the indigenous knowledge system had been shaken in order to adapt to the growing demands of the modern world.

Given this backdrop of the changing dynamics in the Naga society, this study focuses on the impact of the indigenous Naga knowledge system on the formation of an ethical society in the past. Towards this direction, the study explores the culture of the 'morung' (community dormitory) and the village council to investigate how such an interface between the individual and the community impacted the Naga shared knowledge system. The study further examines the Naga philosophy of life based largely on human affinity with nature to investigate the correlation of such beliefs with the indigenous knowledge system among the Naga tribes. An indigenous society which was so deeply embedded in oral tradition is likely to base their knowledge system on every religious practice. Taking this aspect of indigenous culture into consideration, the research examines the impact of the Naga knowledge repository on various religious practices, such as the rites of passage, rituals and customs, festivals and celebrations. Based on these features of the Naga way of life, the primary objective of the paper is to examine the extent of the ethical foundation in the Naga indigenous knowledge system. Given the transitions that have taken place in the Naga society at present, the objective of the study becomes imperative to examine the importance of an ethical indigenous knowledge system as the major contributor to harmonious living. The hypothesis of the study is that the presence of an ethical interface of knowledge between the individual and the community in the indigenous space is the most potential tool for sustenance.

2. Ethical Interface of Shared Knowledge System

The indigenous Naga way of life was predominantly governed by community participation, in which ethics played a very important role. The Naga philosophy of life and religious

practices are essentially interrelated to community life. For the Nagas, it was an expanding, concentric system of circles – the self, the family, and the community. M. Horam, citing the case of Tangkhul Nagas, explains the importance of the larger community in the life of the Nagas:

The individual is protected, cared for, and loved by the clan and the village. He can never starve or reduce himself to begging. In his clan he has an insurance scheme which covers and guarantees not only the welfare of his family after his death but also avenges his death if he meets it by foul means at the hands of his enemies. In a society such as this, there is restricted freedom of action for the individual. He is a link in the chain of his society, and a weak or broken link will affect the whole chain (*Social and Cultural Life* 39).

The Naga village community, thus, may be identified as a network of mutually interdependent relationships with the family and the society at large, which formed the base of their knowledge system. The very basis of creating an ethical society started from the Naga individual's immersion in the dormitory system early in life and involvement in the village council at a later stage.

2.1. Knowledge Sharing in Morungs

Dormitory life in the traditional Naga village structure played a very important role in the formation of the Naga identity and philosophy of life. This dormitory was called by various names among the different tribes. It was "...called 'Champo' among the Lotha Nagas, 'Arichu' or 'Ariju' among the Aos, 'Dekha Chang' among the Sema Nagas, 'Longshim' among the Tangkhul Nagas, 'Kichuki' among the Angami Nagas and so on" (Horam, *Naga Polity* 65). It was customary for all young boys and unmarried men after a particular age to sleep in their respective dormitories. M. Horam records that "(i)n common with other Naga tribes the Tangkhul Nagas too have the institution of a bachelors' or young men's dormitory, referred to by most writers as 'morung'" (*Social and Cultural Life* 67).

Speaking about the Konyak Nagas, Furer-Haimendorf has observed that it was "(n)ot only men but women as well spoke of belonging to such-and-such a morung, and there was no other term for the divisions of a village which in anthropological usage are described as wards" (*Konyak Nagas* 45). The 'morung' served as an educational institution for every Naga boy and girl. It was the perfect place where the traditional Naga culture, tradition, and customs were transmitted from one generation to the other. Young Naga boys and girls learnt their age-old traditions by listening to folk tales and legends of their tribes and participating in folk songs and dances. They were also taught to carve figures on stones and wood, and make designs on clothes. Most of the Naga villages practised the culture of their girls living in the 'morungs' just like the boys. The girls usually stayed in the dormitories after attaining puberty till they got married and moved to their husband's home. While life in the 'morung' was designed to teach the Naga boys warfare and other traditions of the tribes, the young girls learnt spinning, weaving, embroidery, stitching, sieving, cooking, rice-brewing etc., which would help them in their future. Life in the dormitories also taught Naga girls various aspects of community-approved gender roles, lessons about good behaviour, manners, character, morality, and ethical code of conduct. Thus, the Nagas regarded dormitory living as essential for the continuity of their community's philosophy and religious practices based on traditional culture and principles.

An Ao elder in Sujata Miri's book *Ao Naga World-view: A Dialogue* sums up the importance of the training that is imparted in the dormitories –

... *arju* is the place to learn the art of warfare and adherence to village rules. There is no distinction between the rich and the poor.... Disobedience to the elders was met with punishment. Punishment included, massaging the elders, fetching water for *arju* in the middle of the night and so on. Initiation into the life of *arju* was a difficult process for the pupils. But after they successfully crossed the first stage the boys moved on to the

higher stage where they mainly learned about qualities of leadership in the community (48).

Even though life was hard in the dormitories, it was crucial for the Nagas as the education that they received was important for their overall development and the preservation of the community's knowledge system. In the *Morungs*, the boys got training in "...the art of fighting, discipline, obedience, courage, patriotism, wood-cutting and carving, carpentry, basket making, dao, spears, and other utensils. They also learnt traditional songs, love songs, customs and all kinds of social activities" (Jamir 29). Commenting on the importance of the dormitory for the continuity of Naga philosophy of life and religious practices, Major Anand says,

The *morung* plays a vital role in preparing the younger generation for posts in the council. The *morung* is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys and a meeting place of the village elders. It is as well the centre for the social, religious and political activities. In short, it is the fulcrum of the village democracies (91-92).

Easterine Kire's book, *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, is replete with instances of community bonding formed in the dormitories. The oral tradition passed on from generation to generation in these dormitories is most significant for the Naga. "Talk at the thehou, the community house, often centered round what was called man's talk Reminiscing about hunts and battles in the past made the thehou a place where any youth with a man's heart inside him would linger and listen to add his stories as well" (Kire, *Sky is My Father* 7). For every Naga man and woman, dormitory life had an abundance of memories, and the bonding formed with other members during that time was forever. The life in the dormitory was also truly a preparation for the future. The significance of dormitory life among the Nagas can be understood primarily at two levels – to keep alive the oral tradition of the clans and to nurture the spirit of community bonding. It has thus been rightly stated that the "...Morung institution (bachelor's dormitory for boys and girls) of the Naga occupy a pivotal position in their

socio-cultural and economic life as it preserves the deep seated moral social value of the Naga society" (Saha and Mishra 216). Among other strict rules and regulations in the dormitory, men and women were encouraged to learn the ethical norms and practices of their community. The dormitory life also stressed complete discipline and following the orders of the superiors and, thus, prepared the Nagas for all odds in life. Unquestioning belief and complete obeying of orders hardened the young boys and girls in their initial stages. Panger Imchen's explanation of the dormitory sums up its real essence:

This arichu was not a mere dormitory to sleep in.... There was no other learning institution in Ao society before the coming of modern schools and colleges. This basic training was essential for every young man and girl and it taught them hard labour, sacrifice, honesty, fearlessness, faithfulness and punctuality for no Ao could imagine living outside the Arichu system (98, 101).

The *morung*, in that sense, cannot be regarded as a simple hostel-style dormitory fashioned for unmarried boys and girls to live in. It was indeed the very foundation and pillar of Naga indigenous knowledge system and the base of the formation of an ethical society and the preservation of the Naga philosophy of life and religious practices.

In today's time, the traditional 'morung' system of the Naga tribes has fallen apart due to the advent of modern schooling and migration from villages to developed cities. Naga children and youth of today are receiving contemporary scientific education, which is paving the path for the community's development. However, when one looks at the emerging problems of contemporary Naga society, which are primarily identified as, "mental lethargy, complacency, tribalistic pride and conservative attitude, professed national workers without national spirit and principles, religion without practice of morality, politic without ethical conscience, unjust favoritism for the rich and abled, heartless attitude for the helpless poor and innocents" (Gangmei 2011), the absence of the strong foundation of the 'morung' education is felt. In an article titled "Present

Situation of Nagaland" (2014) published in *The Morung Express* and subsequently in *Matters India*, the author points out –

The self-reliant economy of the Nagas is fast disappearing with the Central government pumping crores of rupees into the State every year mainly to content insurgency movement. This has pampered many Nagas to live an easy life. We become spendthrifts, living beyond one's income. Our generation, hence, is not willing to work hard both physically (manual labour) and mentally (to compete with others in competitive exams).

The author also highlights the decline in religious faith and the resultant immorality and unethical practices in society. This perspective highlights the absence of ethics in the contemporary way of living. Of course, the positive aspect of modern education cannot be negated, and it also, cannot be denied that the 'morung' system of education in today's time is improbable. But in order to develop and sustain ethics in the contemporary Naga society, it is suggested that the modern-day syllabi juxtapose relevant indigenous teachings, whereby learners are made aware of the moral code of conduct that their ancestors had laid out as well as their rich culture and tradition.

2.2. Village Council: Ethical System of Governance

Another important feature of the Naga knowledge system was the organised administration at the village level. Even though termed by the colonisers as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised', these people showed exceptional capability in ethical governance of the villages. The Ao Putu Menden, or the village council, was an extremely organised administrative body in the Ao villages. The members of the Putu Menden looked into the civic affairs of the village and performed their administrative tasks based on their shared knowledge system of the past. The council was also responsible for announcing important dates of religious rituals and festivals to the entire village. Furer-Haimendorf has recorded similar practices among the Konyak Nagas:

The village council also decided matters of rituals and ceremony and fixed the dates for communal agricultural rites.

In ritual affairs, more than in any others, the village acted as a unit. The seasonal feasts and days of abstention from work (*genna*) were observed simultaneously by all wards of a village, and there were several ritual experts who acted on behalf of the entire village (*Konyak Nagas* 42).

Based on the Naga philosophy of life and culture, the council also played a very important role in administering law and justice among the villagers. In Sujata Miri's book, *Ao Naga World-view: A Dialogue*, which is in the form of conversations among the community elders, it has been noted that the village council was not involved in the administration of justice for all disputes. The other means of justice in such cases are explained by one of the elders:

We have two other ways of settling scores such as *lepchi* and *Alichitepba*. *Lepchi* is considered as a personal matter. It can be between husband and wife and it can be decided by some kind of signs. Village councils are not involved in this matter. All other cases in the village are brought to the village councils and they give the final decision. In case, both the parties are unhappy with the council's decision then they decide to do *Alichitepba* (eat the soil). *Alichitepba* would be the equivalent of a judgement of the Supreme Court today. The village council would give six days' time to the parties after they eat soil. If anything bad happened to either of the parties, that party or person was considered to be the wrongdoer (46).

Other than these two kinds of justice in which the village council was not directly involved, in case of various disputes, both the parties had to present their cases in front of the council members who would listen to them and then come to a viable solution. Sometimes the council would also decide on the imposition of heavy fines, adequate punishment or even banishment from the village if an individual was found guilty. Temsula Ao records that in the olden days, imposition of fines by paying heavy cash penalty and/or cows and pigs were the most common punishment for almost all kinds of criminal cases as well as assault and murder (40). However, for particular offences, such as, incest, the offenders would have to undergo

'khangaleng' (ex-communication) from the villages after payment of fines by both parties (Ao 42). The Nagas had very less tolerance for adultery. Whether it was a married man or a woman who would have brought another partner and was found cohabiting, irrespective of the gender, equal punishment in the form of a fine called 'Kilamet' would be imposed, and the offender had to pay twelve pigs or bulls. Whatever might be the form of punishment, ethics played a primary role in all such decisions.

However, with the changing times, several modifications in the administration of the village councils could be noticed. Because of the well-organised structure of the council and their capability of smooth-functioning of the Ao Naga villages, the British administration recognised the Ao Naga Customary Laws. In the post-independent times, the Constitution of India provided for the safeguarding of the cultural and religious practices which were included under Article 371 A (i), which enabled the easy governance at the village level. In today's time, the village council system of administration is implausible, and the nature of the judgement for various offences as in the past cannot be deemed scientific. What, however, can be the modern Naga people's takeaway from the past is the ethical system of administering justice. The village council had no impartiality in judgement between the rich and the poor. It is also heartening to see that there was no gender disparity in judgement. These positive and ethical aspects of the Naga village administration can be pointers for the smooth functioning of the system even in today's time.

3. Naga Philosophy of Life

The indigenous Naga philosophy of life revolved around nature. Similar to other indigenous people, the Nagas revered Mother Earth. Easterine Kire beautifully portrays the close relationship and harmony that they had with *Ukepenuopfu*, the birth-spirit and creator of all. The forest people had their own rules of hospitality and thanksgiving based on this harmonious relationship. Vilie, the protagonist in Kire's *When the River Sleeps*,

remembers his mother's instructions on human essential bonding with nature:

If he took firewood or gathered herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners. What was it his mother used to say when they had gathered herbs so many years ago? *Terhuomia peziemu*. Thanks be to the spirits.... If he found an animal in his traps and brought it home, she would repeat that. *Terhuomia peziemu*. It was her way of pronouncing a prayer of thanksgiving to the provider, to Ukepenuopfu (80).

The forest-dwellers like Vilie, trained in using 'rock bee honey', various herbs like *Ciena* (to ward off evil spirits as well as many ailments), edible herbs and plants like *jotho*, *gara*, and *gapa*, know it too well that nature is not dependent on humans, but humankind is dependent on the generosity of Mother Earth. The Naga people's bonding with nature is reflected in Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* as well. Much like Vilie's special relationship with the forest, Pele (protagonist of *Son of the Thundercloud*) and his villagers too revere the bountiful nature. They regard the river as the "source of life for the village" and "... call her our mother because she gives us food: fish, frogs, herbs and water" (Kire, *Thundercloud* 54, 55). When the river dries, and drought strikes the village, the men and women are heard crying out loud, "Our mother is dead! She can no longer feed her children. Who shall be our mother when our mother is dead?" (Kire, *Thundercloud* 55). This connection to the natural world is represented throughout Kire's fictional works.

In connection to the Naga philosophy of life, the indigenous Nagas believed in a 'golden era' when humans lived in close association with nature; it was common to hear of "...human beings marrying snakes, birds and tigers; their association was that close" (Miri 78). Several such tales of marriage between humans and animals or trees can be noticed in the Naga folk narratives. In a Lotha Naga folk tale, a woman is married to a caterpillar who can transform into a man at night. So, in the morning, he turns to his original form and goes about his business and takes the human form at night. When his wife gets to know about this, she burns and kills him. But accidentally,

some hairs from the caterpillar's body get mixed with her food, and on swallowing that, she dies. In a Liangmai Naga folk narrative, a girl is seen married to a python, and they have snake-children too, who are mistakenly killed by the girl's mother. A similar tale exists among the Ao Nagas, in which a young Ao girl lives with her fiancé, a snake. While living together, the girl is able to transform herself into a snake, and later she gives birth to baby snakes. An Angami folk tale also records the marriage between a girl and a snake. After the marriage, "...the snake bit her in the breast and she got breast ornaments and he bit her in the leg and she got cane leggings" (Hutton 268). Attracted by this prospect, another girl approached a snake and proposed marriage. However, her fate was not the same; she was bitten by the snake and died. The story serves the purpose of reminding that even in the animal world, no two beings may be same. Another interesting story, popular among the Ao-Nagas, records the deep love between a girl and a tree spirit, which in the daytime would transform into a handsome young man and return to his original form in the night. When the girl's father gets wind of this matter and starts chopping the tree with the help of the villagers, the tree cannot be felled. Accidentally a sharp splinter enters the eye of the girl, and she dies; only then the tree collapses too, signifying the union of the two lovers ultimately in death. The story 'The Fig-Tree' among the Angami Nagas focuses on the special bonding that humans have with trees. It is the story of how a man was provided shelter, food and protection from ghosts by a fig-tree. In the course of the night, the man also gets to know that the fig-tree was called by another tree which was suffering from fever to come and heal him by performing some *genna*, which made the Angamis believe that "...the fig is the chief priest of the trees" (Hutton 267).

Other than the focus on love and marriage, the oral narratives of the 'golden era' also document special human bonding with nature and the subsequent loss of that relationship. These stories highlight the special bonding that they had with nature and of times when the barrier between

humans and nature, as in today's time, was not known. In the 'golden era' that the Nagas talk about in their oral narratives, it is also seen that animals and birds could speak to each other, and therefore, there are various tales of their relationships and habits which are recorded in the folk tales of different tribes.

These narratives about the animals and birds find a place in the oral tradition of the Nagas and highlight their close observation of the animal world. In some cases, the fights and duels between the animals and birds are a reflection of the wars that took place among different Naga tribes. The tales based on the Naga indigenous knowledge system are a reflection of the close association of the human condition and the animal kingdom in the Naga world-view. However, with the passage of time, modern education took the place of dormitory-based education. The traditional system of knowledge sharing among the Nagas was community-based and mainly focused on developing the qualities in human beings to lead a fruitful life as a part of the larger social group. The skills that young boys and girls learnt in the dormitories were primarily targeted at making them apt members of their community. These skills were also important for the Nagas to lead a meaningful life in the future. Modern education, on the other hand, was less skill-based and, instead of focusing on community requirements, stressed exposing individuals to western philosophies and thoughts. This brought about a decline in the oral tradition of the Naga tribes, and the practice of community-based story-telling activities, songs, dances and celebrations during various festivals also underwent several changes. English language dominated the written discourse of the Nagas, and the rich oral repository, which was undocumented was under the threat of being lost. The authenticity of the oral tradition, which had been the very base of the Naga way of life, was also being questioned. It was as though the entire make-up of a community was being modified to suit the interest of the imperial masters. Under the law of the British administration, the governance of the village councils and their powers became obsolete. Under the cloak of westernisation, many changes could be noticed in the lifestyles of the indigenous

tribes. The church gatherings took the place of open meetings in the *morungs* where village members used to sit and discuss matters on village concerns. The church had also become the site for various social functions, such as marriages and funerals. With the increasing footprints of western education and culture in the Naga Hills, a great disparity could also be noticed among two classes of people, one, the common village folk and others who had migrated to the city. The Nagas, under the influence of westernisation, seemed to have lost their traditional cultural mores. A streak of a negative culture, completely alien from their own, could be seen developing in the Naga community as a result of aping the culture of the 'other'.

4. Religious Beliefs and Practices

In relation to the Naga indigenous philosophy of life and the transitions that took place, it becomes imperative to examine the Naga religious beliefs and practices, as these beliefs originally stemmed from the rich repository of traditional knowledge. According to this indigenous knowledge system, every object in nature was a *Tsungrem* (God) and was worshipped. The Nagas had a firm belief in various spirits, and to protect them from malevolent spirits, they took refuge in their Gods and tried to appease them with various offerings. K. S. Singh describes the religion of the Angamis as animistic and states: "The Angami believe in a sort of continuity among man, nature and supernatural forces. There is nothing like a family, clan or village deity. Spirits are believed to be present everywhere, some of them are malevolent and some are benevolent" (70-71). The Aos, too, have similar beliefs and attach immense importance to the worship of their Gods. Temsula Ao records the Ao-Naga belief system on several *Tsungrems* related to the natural world. Other than *Lijaba*, "the creator of the earth and all living things and vegetation upon it" (Ao 53) and *Longtitsungba* or *Aningsungba*, the Lord of the sky "attributed the power over the heavenly bodies like the sun, the moon and other elemental forces like the rains, storms, lightning, thunder and winds" (Ao 53), the Ao-Nagas believe in several other *Tsungrems* connected to the

Mother Earth, such as Kini Tsungrem – Homestead God, Tsuba Tsungrem – Well or Spring God, Tekong Tsungrem – Mountain God, and Along Tsungrem – Stone God. Along Tsungrem forms an integral part of the Naga belief and may be connected to the origin myth of the Aos. Smith notes that "(i)n the Ao territory there are several stones which are said to be the abodes of deities, near which offerings are made. Stones or large boulders that have an unusual appearance are believed to be the dwelling-places of spirits" (88). Similar to the Ao Naga belief in various *Tsungrems*, the Mao Nagas also believe in different kinds of Gods, which can be broadly classified as the 'good Gods' (*Oramei*) and 'evil Gods' (*ora kashu*). The evil Gods are greatly feared by the common people and are believed to "...capture humans and devour them ... prey on human beings and kill them to solemnise their important functions such as marriages, construction of new houses, and the like" (Neli 216). The Idu Mishmis also believe in the spirit world: "Most of the *khinyus* (spirit) have permanent homes; some live in the underworld, some on the earth, some in the air, and others in human dwellings. They get easily offended with human behaviour of omission and commission, and are always on the look-out to do them harm" (Baruah 77). Among the major Naga tribes, religious festivals and ceremonies comprise various rituals and sacrifices based on their religious beliefs. They were generally god-fearing people and "(t)heir religious observations appear to be not so much of love and adoration but one of appeasement" (Sekhose 129). They also held lots of respect for nature and worshipped the sun, moon, and other elements of the natural world.

Among the sacred and secular festivals celebrated among the Ao Nagas, the important ones are *Moatsu Mong* and *Tsungrem Mong*. *Moatsu Mong* was celebrated to invoke God's blessings for a healthy yield of crops. *Tsungrem Mong* was also celebrated to invoke the blessings of God for the protection of fields and crops from natural disasters and other means. Other than these two major festivals, there are various other occasions for religious celebrations among the Naga tribes. *Yim Kulem* was observed to worship the village God whenever a new village was

established. The deity of the village was also worshipped once every three years after the village harvest to invoke peace and prosperity. Another important ritual was the worshipping of the log-drum after a new village was established. The *sungkong*, meaning the log-drum, which was usually kept on the outskirts of the village, was brought inside on the day of this celebration. The rituals performed by the *Tir* or the ceremonial head of the village, included slaughtering a pig and slitting the throat of a cock and sprinkling its blood on the log-drum. Various other religious rituals abounded the life of the Nagas; important among those were the ones performed by title takers, cleansing the village from epidemics, first seed sowing ceremony, village reconstruction, etc.

The indigenous Naga tribes also believed in religious taboos. Every Naga tribe had a firm belief in observing *genna* during different festivals and celebrations and followed the taboos related to particular occasions religiously. Sekhose describes *genna* as "...an imposition of the rule of law by the religious head which restricts fieldwork and total communication with outsiders or non-resident members. Special rituals are also performed and a symbolical portion of food and drink are kept aside for 'terhuomia' as their share" (129). The Ao Naga life is, thus, filled with *genna* days and "(s)everal rituals are observed by the Ao during childbirth, marriage and death ... A ritual, a festival and a taboo is spoken of as *genna* among the Ao and other Naga tribes" (Singh 79). M. Horam traces the word *genna* to Angami origin and says, "The word *genna*, however, is used and understood by most tribes and is of Angami origin in which dialect the word 'kenna' means 'it is forbidden'. The communal *genna* is called 'amang' by the Aos, 'penna' by the Angamis and 'shar' by the Tangkhuls" (*Naga Polity* 122). He further explains that "(w)hile some *gennas* are observed merely as rest days or holidays, others are for sacrifices big or small according to the nature of the *genna*. This is a strict stipulation that an animal or a bird should be sacrificed on these days" (Horam, *Naga Polity* 124). The Nagas, steeped in beliefs in the supernatural and power of the unknown, observe the *genna* days with utmost care

at every phase of their lives – "...births, marriages, deaths, stages of the cycle of cultivation, hunting, gate-pulling and so on" (Sekhose 129). Some of the *genna* days are observed by individuals or families and yet there are many occasions during which the entire village is a part of the taboos and restrictions.

The indigenous Naga religious beliefs and practices showcase their deep connection to nature and other inanimate objects. These beliefs and practices stemmed from their traditional knowledge system and, most importantly, kept the individual bound by community ties. This interface of knowledge and ways of life between the individual and the village community was the crux of the indigenous space. The forceful entry and subsequent administration of the British in the Naga Hills brought about many changes in the ways of life of the Naga people. With the advent of Christianity, drastic changes were visible in the traditional belief system of the Nagas. The Nagas hitherto had not been exposed to any other form of religion, and the missionaries found a fertile ground to establish Christianity in the Naga Hills. The new religion and western education paved the path for modernisation, and the age-old beliefs, traditions and customs were on a decline. The old religious beliefs, ceremonies and sacrifices related to the many gods that the Nagas believed in were also gradually discarded.

5. Conclusion

The study that has been undertaken is significant for any understanding of the contemporary social and cultural identity of the Nagas as it becomes imperative to re-view the indigenous knowledge system and culture of the past, without which an attempt to locate the Naga self only in the present will be a futile task. In this context, the study focuses on the primary concern, which is the loss of the traditional indigenous cultural identity of the Nagas. Of course, it is improbable and unjustified to suggest that the Naga people of today's time remain shackled to the traditional ways of the past. What had worked for the indigenous groups of people at one point in time, be it the

dormitory system of education, administration through the village council, complete reliance on their oral tradition or their beliefs in ritualistic ceremonies will not work for the modern way of life. However, it is to be taken into consideration that with modernisation and western influence, gradually, there came about a negative culture in the way of life of the Nagas.

With access to easy money, various problems in society, such as, the negative impact of alcoholism, can be seen. "In the wake of social change and modernisation, however, drinking has slowly assumed a new meaning, becoming more of a symbol of lifestyle, "modern" and a means of entertainment, from erstwhile as ritual item, food and medicine" (Athiko 449). In this context, Athiko recognises the importance of the 'morung' system of the past, which moulded the Naga youth's character and "helped to mould the person from becoming a social nuisance" (447) as well as the oral tradition, which prevented one to drink "for sake of pleasure and intoxication" (448). Xavier P. Mao has also reflected on "wine, liquor, and drug abuse" (*Eastern Mirror* 2015) as pertinent problems of the Naga contemporary society. In the absence of the ethical indigenous knowledge system, the modern Nagas were seen aping the culture and customs of an alien group with whom they do not share their real identity in any way.

In the process of imitation of western ideas and thoughts, many negative cultural practices crept into the Naga society, which led to a sense of alienation and disillusionment for the Naga youth particularly. Also, to be noticed was the great disparity between the educated and affluent Nagas and the common village folks. Better possibilities for education and employment led to many Naga youths migrating to the cities. The impact of urban living on these youths resulted in their inability to adjust to their traditional ways of life in the villages. This divide created a fissure in society as the two groups were completely distinct from each other and could no more be recognised as members of a homogenous cultural identity. Commenting on the creation of two groups among the Nagas, Horam states – "...in the 1920s and '30s, the missionaries were

able to exercise, through various forms – the most effective forms were persuasion and coercion upon the population of the villages, and certainly the new converts could enjoy more advantages in terms of educational and medical facilities" (*Old Ways* 90). The strategy used by the British missionaries was to impress upon these people that certain benefits were associated with conversion. The division thus caused among the Nagas led to the creation of two clear-cut groups of people based on their social advantages. The Nagas who opted for the new religion and modern education were mainly lured by certain favourable conditions such as,

- (i) The patronage of British protection
- (ii) Ban on head hunting
- (iii) English education and progress
- (iv) Idea of Hope and Happiness which the Christian religion projected
- (v) Absence of formal worship in their traditional religion
- (vi) Universal fear of evil spirits etc. (*Athickal* 156-157)

These promises were regarded as extremely important for the groups of Nagas who embraced the new faith, and thus, they did not hesitate to step into unknown territory. As more and more people accepted the new religion, a clear divide could be noticed in the family as well as in the larger social group of the Nagas. This fragmentation may be regarded as one of the most important effects of the changes that took place as a result of the advent of Christianity and modern education among the Naga community.

No doubt many more changes have taken place in the Naga society of today's time after the period of colonisation and the subsequent establishment of statehood after a violent period of insurgency. In this context, peace activist Gwangphun Gangmei identifies that the Naga society's "challenge today as a people and nation is not of outside forces but of within. The ego-oriented ideological differences, tribalistic differences and vices, the greed for power and wealth possession, hostile attitude among ourselves, apprehensive of each other, induced by different factional underground groups." He further adds that

“(we) must replace the above vices and attitude with humility, understanding, forbearance, acceptance, forgiveness, and fellow feeling, sense of brotherhood, single focus and struggle to attain freedom for all” (*The Morung Express* 2011). This is the focal point of the present study which suggests that the modern Naga system of living imbibes certain ethical philosophies of the indigenous past to combat the challenges of contemporary times. It has been rightly observed that there is a stark difference between the Indian thought system and the Western framework concerning the function of knowledge.

In the Indian system, the goal of *jñāna* (knowledge) is to exercise control over oneself, which is directed towards *moksha* (liberation of the self from various limitations). Whereas, in the Western framework, the goal of knowledge is an exercise of power over the individual, in the Indian framework, knowledge is intended to liberate oneself from the constraints of the mind. (Kapoor 28) This is where exactly occurs the confluence of indigenous knowledge system and ethics, as only such moral system of knowledge can lead to freedom of the individual from all *duhkha* (sufferings). Even though several indigenous practices of the Nagas cannot hold good in today’s context, but the core foundation of the society, which was based on ethical principles of gender equality, justice in administration, community solidarity, symbiotic bond with nature, and the essential belief in goodness, can be imbibed in the modern way of life. S. C. Jamir, in his thought-provoking column, has pointed out that the Naga “youth needs to be ambassadors of culture, literature, industry and perseverance, hard work and commitment. Having a modern mobile set or internet connection does not indicate the state’s overall prosperity.” Thus, as a remedial measure for contemporary problems in the Naga society, Jamir suggests that “(t)he tribal ethos like truthfulness, honesty, simplicity, fellow-feeling and community life should be the bed rock upon which the future of Nagaland be reinvented” (*Eastern Mirror* 2019). It is in this context that it becomes imperative to re-visit and re-look at the Naga contemporary situation in conjunction with the importance of the ethical

society established as per their indigenous knowledge system of the past as more and more people of the Naga community are advocating the importance of going back to their roots, albeit with contemporary relevance, negating of which will result in the loss of a rich and vibrant culture that exists in one of the pockets of our country.

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