

## **Naga Women As Peace Maker In War And Conflict Situation (Yesterday And Today)**

**Dr. Ninghorla Zimik T.**

**Asso. Prof. Political Science**

**M.A., M.Phil, Ph.D**

**Pettigre w College, Ukhrul**

**Manipur**

### **Abstract**

Naga Women since their long chequered history are the peace promoters and played key roles in bringing amicable solutions. Nagas in the olden days were head hunters and wars of various kind were fought. Though women were not allowed to join in decision making and various social restrictions were imposed on them, they were empowered to exercise a special power of stopping severe battles and conclude peace and treaty. In this respect, even the king cannot interfere or restrict any of her actions as a peacemaker. She is called (Phukhareila) in Tangkhul. When she lifted her zeithing (metal staff) to stop the fighting, the warring party would honoured her order and stop fighting instantly. “Prerogative of such a high honour has never been given to men” (Y.K. Shimray) “She was the peace maker, the bearer of the torch of Peace and the Red Cross bearer of Naga inter-village war ” ( R.R Shimray ) In tandem with the role of Phukhareila of yesteryears, the modern Naga women under the leadership of Naga Mother’s Association, Nagaland Naga women Union Manipur and various units of NWUM are ceaselessly volunteering for peace and justice acting as human shields, negotiating with the security forces and militants for safety of the unarmed people, mediating inter-factional violence and emerging as the front line against human rights violations. This paper is my humble attempt to highlight the role of Naga women as peace promoter and to empower women worldwide like yesteryears of Naga Phukhareila.

**Objective:-**

1. To empower women like yesteryears Tangkhul Phukhareila in tandem with the modern world.
2. To highlight the activities and bravery of women/mothers in bringing peace and quelling highly charged volatile situations.
3. To seriously give a thought to end armed conflicts in North East India.

**Key words:** - Peace, Battles, Conflict, Phukhareila and Reconciliation.

**Introduction:-**

The Nagas are settled in the state of Nagaland, four hill districts of Manipur i.e. Senapati, Ukhrul, Tamenglong and Chandel, in Arunachal Pradesh, Tirap and Changlang districts and in some parts of Assam in India and the Nagas under Myanmar occupation is placed in two states, Sagiang province and Kachin states. The Nagas have rich culture and tradition and in this traditional ridden society the role of women is not at the minimal positions in spite of non-involvement decision making body. From time immemorial till date, the Naga women are the peace promoters at home, war fronts and in any conflict situations. Love of peace and justice is a unique gift of God to women and this trait is manifested in their fearless endeavour to face any eventualities for the promotion of peace and avert bloodshed. This inherent attributes of love for peace and nonviolent inspires Naga women to act as a channel of peace and relentlessly strives for its realizations. The Naga women since their long chequered history have played a key role in diffusing a highly charged situations and succeeded in bringing amicable solutions. In the past women were empowered to stop a high casualty battle as a last resort of ending the fightings. Indeed, peace is the need of the hour from international, national, regional and state perspective. Peace is a feeling of internal well being and goodwill towards others. It is the spirit of tolerance, brotherhood, friendliness and co-operation based on the foundation of love. The values of learning to live together in peace should be inculcated by all possible means as it will pave the way for maintaining peace at home, in school, community, the state, region and the country at large.

Naga society traditionally follows patriarchal system wherein the father is the head of the family. Women throughout the world have always been an oppressed and deprived sections irrespective of geographical locations. Women do not enjoy equal rights and opportunities as men. Since their tender age, girls are taught to be quiet, gentle and submissive and to perform the entire household chores. Women are born free but as she sets her foot in the world, she is bound by chains and freedom becomes a fantasy for her. Many social restrictions are imposed upon her and as she grows up, she naturally starts adapting to the social norms and traditions of the society for which she has no choice but to accept it as her destiny. As she was brought up in a male dominated society and have learnt to bear the brunt of man's chauvinistic attitude, she can adjust to all kinds of situation within the family and society. In the family, mother always gives her supreme service and sacrifice her whole being for the family. She is also the one who takes all the blame and burden of the family on her shoulder and pacifies any problems and conflict through her wisdom and fervent prayers. In fact, she wears a different facet to hide her woes and suffering without making herself known to others. Many women suffer in the hands of abusive husbands, sons, in-laws etc. And in such situations, she suffers alone silently and tries to settle and pacify everything within the family. However, such kind of unpleasant and horrendous family life was a rare case in the traditional Naga society.

### **Head hunting Period:-**

The Nagas were basically head hunting tribes. They would never stop nor surrender themselves to the enemy until they take their enemy's revenge head. All the human heads taken were prized equally whether of a man or woman. The Nagas had their own belief about the value of human heads. They believed that the heads of those belonging to other villages other than their own would add to the fertility of the soil. The most important factor for waging war was that a man could not climb the ladder of social recognition till he brings enemies' heads and particularly the heads of women with long hair to enrich the fertility of the soil. Another compelling caused of war was for obtaining justice like boundary disputes, breach of agreements, treaty or divorce.

On the religious point of view, a man was prompted to kill as they had a strong belief that when he dies, those captured and killed persons would carry his luggage till they reach

the land of the dead. The warriors wanted to be happy and famous when alive and even after death.

Another important factor for head hunting was that the warriors who secured the highest number of heads over his rivals had a better chance to win the favour and love of the fairest girls of the village for marriage. It is said that anyone who cannot capture any head at all had great difficulty in getting a suitable wife. In the Naga society, there were two most important steps for gaining social recognition i.e. the number of heads one could capture and the feast of merit one can throw. It is therefore clear that head hunting was prevalent in the Naga society in the past and had religious sanctions, economic utility, political consideration and most importantly social values and justice.

Each Naga village being like a mini state had the absolute right to declare war at any time against any village, but with the introduction of certain inter village laws of war, any kind of war could not be started at ones will and wishes. They classified the type of wars and accordingly made laws in accordance with the nature of war. The Naga war laws allowed a woman to be killed and have her head chopped off, but did not permit to be raped or molested before she was killed. The war laws also strictly forbids any man from torturing to death and strike any enemy who have already entered the safe zone.

The Naga society being a patriarchal society as mentioned earlier had a sharp division of labour between man and woman which is the product of their warring culture. Head hunting was exclusively the adventure of the male members of the society. It was a taboo for woman to touch even the weapons associated with head hunting or any war. The warriors should not lie with his wife on the preceding night of his venture out of any war or battle. When the menfolks were on the battle fronts, women should remain chaste, should not borrow fire from the neighbours nor spin or weave. Women were also not permitted to join or attend any head bringing celebrations but were allowed to watch from a distance. Though women were not allowed to join in decision making and various social restrictions were imposed on them, they were empowered to exercise a special power of stopping severe bloody battles and conclude peace and treaty. This right cannot be challenged and abrogated however powerful a person might be. In this respect, even a king cannot restrict any of her actions as a peace maker. She is called "PHUKHAREILA" in Tangkhul. Phukhareila is a woman who is married to a man of another village and community. The literal meaning of

Phukhareila is a great lady, peace maker and neutral lady. Phukhareila is an honourable title given to those women who were married to another village or outside the community. She was respected and her rights acknowledged as she is related to both the villages as her native birth place and as her new husband's village.

Under the Tangkhul customary laws, Phukhareila is permitted to move about freely between her native village and her husband's village even during critical time of conflicts and inter village wars. For her security, a special act is enacted known as "Phukhareila pang kashara" which means no man under any pretext or circumstances can lay hand on her or harm her. If there was any conflict or war between her father's village and husband's village, she would first initiate to solve and pacify the conflicts through her wisdom. In many cases, through her diplomatic negotiations between the two warring villages, many critical cases, were solved amicably and stopped from further warfare and bloodshed. There were also instances of becoming deep rooted enemies due to unwise dealings of Phukhareila. There is a saying that "shanaowui eina phila-wungnao akui tai, Shanao eina sapher khamaher, zamshei khamaying ngathay" which means because of a woman princes lost their heads, because of a woman the best wine is exchanged.

There were also instances where Phukhareila along with the village councilors could not settle inter village rivalry. In such cases, the two villages would fix a day and place where they would decide the case by direct combat at a selected battle field. On the appointed day, the two hostile villages would come in full combatant armouries with the children and women as spectators. The neighboring villages would also come to witness the fight. When the fight was on, the spectators would pelt stones on the enemies but it was not of much avail as all the warriors protected their heads with headgers. The fight went on with the full war cry and war ho-hoings. If none of the parties won or defeated, there would be a short interval to quench their thirst with rice beer. Again, they would resume their fighting and if the battle became fierce causing heavy casualties and went on for hours the neutral great lady, "Phukhareila" holding her "Zeithing" (metal staff) would step in and ran amidst the battle field shouting "shaphaira, shaphaira" which means enough, and once she lifted upher "Zeithing" and pronounced to stop fighting, the warring parties should stop fighting instantly without a word of restrain. As the warriors had the full knowledge of her authority to stop the war, no one dares to go against her word and strike a hand on her. Her word is the

end of the fight and the case was settled or compromised, This was the end of everything. She acted as the ambassador of peace. Harming Phukhareila means violation of the whole inter village laws which may cause a war by all the villagers together against the violator of the law of war. Thus, “when two villages failed to settle a dispute or conclude war, the last word is from a woman. A prerogative of such a high honour has never been given to men “”. She was the peace maker , the bearer of the torch of peace and the Red Cross bearer of Naga inter village war (). In the Chakeshang Community Demi (mediator) acted as a peace maker during inter village war or in any conflict situations. It is taboo to slain or kill a Demi. She was the only one to break the ice for peace talk between the two warning villages (Lucy Zehol- Women inn Naga Society-P.70)

Among the Mao, Paomei and Maram Nagas, women joined the war by standing behind the two warring groups. Women will supply stones to the warriors of their respective party and when the fighting became too severe, the women of both the parties would move forward and stop the fighting. Once the women of both the parties made a declaration of peace, the warriors should comply the orders and stop the fighting instantly. The Naga women were empowered to intervene and stop the most severe battle. It is indeed a unique tradition found among the Naga tribes which accepted the role of women as the last resort of stopping any violence and inter village wars in the olden days.

Other than Phukhareila, there were many eminent Naga women who took part in peace building even in the olden days. For example, Harkhonla of Marem, (Tanfkhul) through her wisdom and courage, averted an invasion of her village from a strong neighboring village attack which surprised everyone. She led her village warriors as her Commander in chief and won the battle without any bloodshed through her tactical war strategy. During her life time, she remained as the main source of wisdom and power behind Marem village politics.

### **Modern period:-**

In the modern period, Rani Gaidinliu is another notable Naga Women who boldly fought against the British Raj for forcible intrusion into the Naga villages by imposing oppressive rule of the British Raj. After the death of Jadonang, Gaidinlui a kabui Naga girl of 17years from Nungkao village continued to spread the Jadonang cult and anti-British

movement. She told her people “ We are free people, the white men should not rule over us, we will not pay house tax to the Government, we will not obey their unjust law like forced labour and compulsory portage subscription.” (Lal Dena, Mordern History of Manipur p. 136) She fervently urged the people to fight against the British Government following the principles and methods of Mahatma Gandhi. Jawaharlal Nehru gave her the title of ‘Rani’ for daring to challenge a mighty empire by a young village girl of 20 years. She is called Joan of Arc of the Nagas. In this way Rani Gaidinlui and her armies boldly fought against the British Raj for restoring the peaceful independent traditional Naga village state.

Of late, late Apei Hinga, the last queen of Maram village who died in August 27th, 2010 worked tirelessly during her lifetime for the maintenance of peace and progress in the village. She also brought many social reformations which were hindering the peaceful co-existence. Queen Apei Hinga, known for her love of justice and her role as a loving mother queen, the Naga women union Manipur conferred the best mother award in 2006. As a kind hearted queen and a loving mother, even when a criminal runs into her house, protection and shelter was given. She was known and recognized as the link to the primitive way of live and the present generation by upholding the indigenous culture and traditional identity. (Sangai Express, August 2010).

Born on June 12, 1924 at Maram Khunao, Apei Hinga assumed the title of Maram Khullenchief after the death of her husband Karen in 1965. Apei Hinga in her capacity as queen of Maram Khullen took proactive roles in promoting the unique culture and traditions of Maram tribe. She was also at the forefront in leading the younger generations on the right path, patiently working to remove any anti social tendency from the minds of the youths. MLA. R.K. RAINA in his condolence speech appealed “... all to follow the footsteps of the late queen on the path of righteousness and justice so that there is peace and justice in the society”. Many other prominent speaker including UNC, NWUM and ANSAM functionaries also recalled the contribution of the late queen towards betterment of the society. (Sangai express, August, 9, 2010- Manipur)

In the present day also, the role of Naga Phukhareila is continuing in tandem with the changing situation and scenario as the region has become a conflict zone of various issues. With the imposition of AFSPA, all the Naga inhabited areas witnesses another kind of war, with harrowing experiences and intolerable human rights violations. In all these years of

bloodshed and tears, women have courageously played various vital roles in defusing the density of the situation by directly intervening or through negotiation and democratic means which is still continuing actively till date. Women braving through the modern, sophisticated weapons of the armed forces are ceaselessly volunteering for peace and justice acting as human shields, negotiating with the security forces and the militants for the safety of their community, meditating inter-factional violence and emerging as the front line against human rights violations.

In recent years, during the factional clash in Nagaland, many innocent Tangkhul civilian fell prey to the violence. As the situation became tense and remains unabated, the Tangkhul “Yorla” (daughters) who are married to different tribes of Nagas of Nagaland immediately formed an impromptu union known as “Tangkhul Phukhareilas Union” and started negotiating with both the factions. With their concerted efforts, they could help defused the high tension and volatile situation.

The Shirui’s Siege is an example of another strategy. On 19<sup>th</sup> January 2009, at the wee hours, the 17<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles laid siege of the village with Jawans surrounding the entire NSCM (IM) camp of the Khusumung Battalion and the village. Through the loud speakers, the NSCN (IM) cadres were ordered to step forward on the periphery of the village and surrender within 24 hours. The rebel group strongly refused to budge as they claimed it a designated camp. The IM cadres who were holed up in the said camp had reportedly sent the message that they would also retaliate in case their camp is attacked or try to over run it. On 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2009 additional troupes were sent along the stock piled armed and bombs to face any eventuality thus creating a war like situation. The villagers were warned not to venture out to their fields. The Assam Rifles barbed wire the camp and water supply to the camp was snapped. At this juncture, women from Shirui village immediately reacted by keeping vigil near the main thoroughfare towards the NSCN (IM) camp to avert a showdown. Despite the bone chilling winter, the women of Shirui and surrounding villages mostly from Ukhrol town formed a human barrier and interposed between the two groups to avert possible outbreak of any clash with prayers and singing spiritual hymns. Altogether, more than 2000 women took part in the vigil forsaking their homes and children. Everyday more than 100 women maintained the vigil round the clock in turns. It was indeed, “a true demonstration of women’s soft and non violent intervention in situation of great tension and anxiety. They are



force of peace. Women power works. Together they offer cooperative solution to problems” (Free Press - Feb. 7, 2009, Ashok Tipnis). The love of mother and sisters demonstrated in their action moved the hearts of both the state and non-state actors. With the concerted efforts of all peace loving people, the Shirui Siege ended on 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 9, 2009.

In Nagaland when the factional feud between the two factions NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) was at the peak, Naga women played a great role in defusing the highly charged tensions. When one factions of the group was advancing closely to attack the other counterparts (NSCN) some brave Naga women stepped forward and interposed between the two parties lifting up their hands and thus averted a war like situation. It is also to be noted that Naga honours the right of women. Lifting up of hands by women is a sign of peace and none dare to challenge her.

Today, many Naga women frontal organizations are actively involved in social movements. Several women organizations have emerged right from the village to form an apex Naga women’s organization like Naga mother’s Association (NMA) Naga Women’s Union Manipur (NWUM) and various other Naga women’s group have played a key role in mitigating the impact of violence, negotiating with the security forces to remove army camps from their villages in order to evade any cross firing within the village. As per the directives of NWUM, every Manipuri Naga woman who is a member of the women local units must have one charmei (Kerosine filled bamboo torch) each. In case of Tangkhul Naga Shanao Long which is one of the units of NWUM made a mandatory to wear long pants as inner garments even to sleep in that dress keeping their charmei nearby during emergency period. Before the signing of the second ceasefire with the two NSCNS factions, the Naga inhabited areas became the land of merciless killings and blatant human rights violations. The Indian armies could not catch the underground, but tortured and killed the innocent villagers who are crushed in between the Indian armies and the militants. Many fake encounters took place as they are empowered with AFSPA. During these times, the peace volunteering activities of Naga women are very active and the prevailing situations also compel them to come out of their warmly lit family hearths to save their children and men who are inhumanly tortured and abused beyond human endurance. The emergency call is alerted by clanging the electric posts, steel plates and by using a loud speaker. The women lighting charmei came out from their respective houses forsaking all household chores and reach the place where the tension

is raging. Women will even climb on top of the buses where the armies were pulling down men and manhandling. Women will frightened them with their burning charmei. Sometimes many women were injured seriously when the armies triggered their live bullets to disperse them. In the midst of shouts and blank firing women with their charmei snatched many civilians from the armies hands and prevented many civil casualties. At one occasion one women accidentally burnt one jawans thick moustache with her charmei. The jawans got startled and ran amok as he could not extinguish the fir instantly. (Source Mrs Leena Shangsak and Mrs. T. Changpuila Khanghui). Charmei (bamboo torch) stands for peace, non-violence, human dignity, respect and honour for women's right and chastity.

On second june 2010, in protest against the holding of the election to the ADC, some bandh volunteers were on the streets to enforce the 72 hours bandh and some MR personnel thrashed them on the ground that curfew had already been clamped. In retaliation to the conduct of the MR personnel and the use of excess force, the Tangkhul women torch bearers (charmei) of Ukhrul town in thousands surrounded the District Council Office, seized 16 arms from the security guards and seventeen personnel of 5<sup>th</sup> Manipur Rifles were detained by the womenfolk to protest the assault of some youths by the IRB personnel. Tensions started mounting high as the police started resorting to blank fire tear gas shells as a large number of women torch bearers and bandh supporter marched towards the SP Office to appraise of the situation. Many women were injured, some severely and were all hospitalized in the districts hospital, Ukhrul. The number of injured persons were seventeen persons, mostly women. In retaliation, the mob burnt down ADC's office and two vehicles. It is the first incident in the entire North East that women disarmed the security forces and detained them. One of the women volunteers who guarded the detained personnel said that they were feeling uneasy incase any action be given to them. She consoled them that she would take care of their security. She also expressed that had they not been disarmed, any ugly repercussion could not be ruled out. After hectic negotiation, the detained 15 security personnel were released and the womenfolk also returned the seized weapons. In this way Naga women wherever they may be have always taken a lead risking their lives in order to quell the tense volatile situation.

**Conclusion:-**

The NMA through the campaign “shed no more blood” steadfastly tried to quell inter-factional violence and open up channels of communication and reconciliation based on politics of inclusion. After the ceasefire in 1977, NMA and NWUM had taken a lead in reaching out to both the factions. In 2003, the NMA re-pledged themselves to “shed no more blood” and determined not to give up. Naga mothers Association sent forth peace teams to try and create space for dialogue and reconciliation. Various Naga women organizations have organized rallies and demonstration for the withdrawal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Today NMA and NWUM are giving full moral support in the ongoing peace process between the Government of India and the NSCN. The NMA, NWUM along with FNR (Forum for Naga Reconciliation) led by Rev. Dr. Wati Aier are relentlessly working for bringing reconciliation among them. Indeed, Naga women to stop any war or conflict through peaceful means needs to be strengthened and institutionalized at state and national level as our modern society is living under the shadow of threats and terror. If women are empowered to make peace like yesteryears of Naga Phukhadreila’s; we can usher in a new are of peace in our society and nation at large. In this way, Naga women are ceaselessly working to bring peace and solution. Naga mothers in tears are fasting and praying for the early solutions of their long drawn Indo-Naga conflicts which have hampered all rounds of development and personal growth. They want to live in peace and prosper. It is their humble prayers and appeal to all concerned authorities and civilians to extend their mercy wings and give them a settled secured life free from all injustice, fear and threats by solving the Indo-Naga conflict at the earliest possible.

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2. R.V. John (Somdal)
3. T. Mingthing (Khanghui)