

**ORIGIN OF THE NAGAS – A STUDY****Dr. R. Xavier**

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Loyola College, Chennai-34.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Nagas inhabit in four states in India and in the Western parts of Myanmar. The Nagas live between Brahmaputra and Chindwin River. According to J.P. Mills, the Nagas live in the area, "bounded by the Hudkawng valley in the north-east, the plains of Brahmaputra valley to the north-west, of Cachar to the south-west and of the Chindwin to the east. In the south, the Manipur valley roughly marks the point of contact between the Naga tribes and the very much more closely interrelated group of Kuki tribes Thadou, Lushei, Chin, etc,"

In India they are found in Nagaland, four Districts in Manipur, one District in Assam and two Districts in Arunachal Pradesh. In addition to this, many Nagas inhabit in Western parts of Myanmar (Burma). In Myanmar, Nagas are concentrated in the Somrah Tract bordering India, which comes under Kachin state and Saging Sub-division.

There are 45 major tribes with the population about 3 millions in 2001. There are 13 tribes in Nagaland, 17 tribes in Manipur, 2 tribes in Assam, 3 tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and 10 tribes in Myanmar. According to Naga National Right and Movements NNC, there are 77 tribes, which includes the sub-tribe and major tribes.

The Nagas have no written historical record about their origin and the route of migration to their present inhabitation; some writers believed that Nagas immigrated from three directions - North East, North West and South East. However it is a general believe that the majority of the Nagas immigrated from South East through the corridor of Indo-Myanmar border to the Naga Hills.

According to the report on the province of Assam in 1854 by Mills A.J. Moffatt, the British first came to contact with the Nagas in 1832 when the Captain Jenkins and Pamberton along with 700 soldiers and 800 coolies marched across the Naga Hills in their attempt to find a route from Manipur to Assam. When the British came to the Naga Hills, the Nagas continued to raid the British troops in different villages. The fight between the Nagas and British continued till 1880 when the fort of Khonoma was finally fell into the hand of British troops.

**The origin of the word 'Naga'**

It is still not clear how the name 'Naga' was derived from what. There have been several attempts to trace out the etymological origin of this popular ethnonym. If the kiratas of the later Vedas, epics and puranas were the indo-mongoloid tribes of eastern India, the nagas were definitely among them. But the nagas were definitely not among them so it is hard to accept the theory of 'naga' originated from the Sanskrit word 'nag' meaning snake or serpent. There is no popular form of serpent worship among the nagas though there is fear and dislike for the pythons. Some tried to connect with Sanskrit nga 'noga' meaning mountains as the nagas lived in highlands. McCrindle Gerini and others have identified the Nangalogue with the present nagas (Nangalogue = nanga log means in Sanskrit naked people). By the 18th and 19th century the Naga had become quite a popular name. Many European writers accepted that the word was derived from Assamese and Sanskrit Nanga.

Though no final word has been said in these derivation, it is certain that this name was given by the outsiders to mean this group of people who are divided into more than two dozen tribes.

**Who are the Nagas?**

The Nagas belong to the Mongoloid stock. The Philologists have grouped Naga languages as belonging to the Tibeto-Burma family. There are some Naga villages, which have different dialects, which cannot be understood by other villagers but each tribe has common language. For instance, there are three Poumai Naga villages, which cannot be understood by other villagers. The Tangkhul Nagas - every village has a different dialect, which is not understandable by other villagers.

The Nagas are very courageous, industrious, cordial, colorful, amicable and truthful. They have a sense of humor, very candid and hospitable to any strangers too. Different authorities on Nagas commented on Nagas. To quote Dr. Verrier Elwin, "They are a fine people, of whom their country is proud, strong and self reliant, with the free and independent outlook characteristics of highlanders every where, good to look at, with an unerring instinct for color and design, friendly and cheerful with a keen sense of humour, gifted with splendid dances and a love of song."

J.H. Hutton, an authority on Nagas commented, "One of the first characteristics that strikes a visitor to the Angami's country is his hospitality, a hospitality which is always ready to entertain a visitor and which forms a curious contrast to the very canning frugality of his domestic economy...Another very striking trait of the Angami is his geniality. Both men and women are exceedingly good humoured and always ready for a joke."

J.P. Mills commenting on the Lotha Nagas he wrote, "Their sense of humor is well developed and they are always already with a laugh." It is a Naga tradition, they treat their guests with great

hospitality and honor their guests by offering with meats and rice beer. Maj. Gen. Sardeshpande, one of the Indian Authors on Nagas comments the Khiamungans and Konyaks Nagas as,

"Nagas are magnificent. You have to see and live amidst them to believe this simple statement. A very large majority of us know little about them. The little that we now is about their nakedness, headhunting and anti-national, hostile, underground, insurgent activity for the last thirty years of independence India's consciousness of it north-eastern periphery...By nature they are suspicious, sensitive, wary, distrustful, inward-looking, volatile and very very proud. There cannot be a better friend than the Naga once he identifies his friend; there cannot be a worse foe than the Naga once he feels deceived or let down. Deep inside his inscrutable exterior and penetrating eyes there is tremendous warmth, great geniality. Sharp intellect and immense good-will."

Shimray R.R., one of the Nagas Authorities on Nagas wrote about the Nagas as, "Indeed, they are fierce looking and hostile to those with bad intentions, but certainly not all the attributes are right. They are, on the contrary, very good to those who are good to them, and friendly to those who are friendly and exceptionally hospitable to those who come with good intentions."

Many authorities on Nagas wrote that Nagas are amicable, hospitable and humorous. In addition, the Nagas love democracy, equality, justice and freedom of life from every aspect of life. The Nagas seniors do not expect high respect and reverend from their juniors as they believe in equality and freedom in life. Every one believes in equality and there is no system of slave and master in Naga society. The Nagas are a big family where there is no division of caste, creed and religion. The Nagas are generally candid, amicable and hospitable people but they also endowed with their own weak points and negativism. They are orthodox, conservative, and sensitive to their traditions and do not like criticism.

### **Myth of Nagas Origin**

Many ethnologists had studied the tribe of Nagas since ancient time. The British were the pioneers who encountered the Naga people and studied about them. The Nagas have not its own written history about their origin. But the folksong, folk-tale and legends of different tribes of Nagas are the sorts of Naga history that we can trace the origin of the Nagas.

The different authorities on Nagas hypothesized or contributed their opinions about the origin of Nagas. Some authorities traced the origin of Nagas to the head-hunters of Malay and the races of Southern Seas. While the other authorities, traced the origin of Nagas to China. The British who were acquainted with Nagas since in the early 19th century (1832) studied the different tribes of Naga people. The Nagas are different in many aspects from other tribes in North east India.

The uniqueness of this tribe brought the curiosity to the British ethnologists to study and wrote about them. Some of the pioneer ethnologists who studies and wrote about Nagas were Dalton, Sir James Johnstone, J.P.Hutton, J.P.Mills, Woodthrope, H.H.Godwin Austin, Mackenzie, Damant etc. Most of the pioneer ethnographers on Nagas were soldiers. The authorities of Nagas were non-professional Anthropologist. This may be one of the reasons that no one study deeply on Nagas' origin and etymology of the word NAGA and bring out satisfactory explanation with evidences.

There may be slight difference perspective on Nagas by the outsiders and insider writers but the work of the pioneer authorities on Nagas should be acknowledged and appreciated regardless of their incomplete knowledge (notion) on Nagas. The different authorities on Nagas have different perspective about the origin of Nagas

The folktale and legends of Nagas does not trace their origin from Tibet. But all the stories of origin pointed to the southeast. The folktale and folksong did not support the above theory of Nagas' migration from Tibet. When James Johnstone came to contact the Nagas in 1874 at Samagudting, an old Naga (centenarian) told him that they had come from the North East and were the Seventh generation living there. Another pioneer authority on Nagas,

J.H. Hutton wrote, "Where the country near Manipur is a much more difficult problem and one quite beyond the scope of this book. All sorts of origins have been connected with the Head-hunters of Malay and the races of the Southern Seas on the one hand, and traced back to China on the other hand. " He also stated that the terrace rice cultivation system of Angami is resembled with those tribes of Bontoc or Igorots in Philippines. He did not precisely state about the origin home of Nagas.

About the origin of the Nagas, a Naga scholar Dr. Horam also traced the Naga origin to the Southern Seas. He stated that Nagas custom and culture are similar to those tribes in the Southern Seas in many aspects. He writes,

"There can be little doubt that at one time the Nagas must have wandered about before they found this their permanent abode; from their myths and legend one gather that there is dim relationship with the natives of Borneo in that the two have a common traditional way of head hunting; with the Indonesians, as both use the loin loom for weaving cloth. The embroidery on the Naga clothes resembled the kind done on Indonesian clothes."

The recent study of the origin of Nagas was by a Naga scholar name R.R. Shimray. He supported Marshall's view of Indo-China southwards movement. Thus he wrote,

"The Nagas and other tribal of North East India followed the Southward movements toward Indo-China. It has been seen that the ancestors of the Nagas had lived at Sea Coast in the remote past. This has been inferred from the various evidences that the Nagas at one distant past were living near the Sea. This theory is further supported and upheld by the very fact that the last take-off in their migration was from Thangdut in Burma. The last migration from Samsok (Thangdut) in Burma to Makhel in Mao, Longpi and Hunphun in Ukhrul District is very clear and most recent and is supported by historical facts and monuments."

According to Keans, the movement of population had undoubtedly been first southward from the Asiatic mainland, then from the Archipelago eastward to the Pacific. In accordance with this view, it is sure that Nagas were one of the groups from Asiatic mainland who migrated southward direction but they retreated to North West direction to the Naga Hills after reaching the Southern seas of Moulmein. Some tribes from Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia are seems to be the same group of Nagas who retreated from the Southern Seas.

It is believed that some other groups of Nagas went down further from Moulmein to Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. Quoting Shimray's view, "It is very probable that the Nagas had first followed the southward movement and after reaching the coast or some Islands, they turned North-west leaving their brothers somewhere near the coast or perhaps in some Islands."

When we study the history of Malaysian origin - they also traced back their origin to Yunnan province in China. The Nagas once lived near the Moulmein seas coast but probable they did not lived in the Island. If they lived in Island there is less possibility to retreat to Naga Hills. But it is sure that once they lived near the Seas coast or must have come from the Seas coast.

It is supported by historical facts (folktale, folklore, legends etc) and the evidences showed that Nagas uses the cowries-shells and conch-shells in decorating their dresses (kilts), which is not found in the hills. The cowries-shells are not found in Naga Hills but the Nagas are fond of cowry's shells and familiar with the marine shells in decorating their Kilts (pant). They must have used marine shells during their sojourned and acquired the knowledge from the Southern seas of Myanmar.

Shakespeare, who wrote the history of Assam, also wrote that Nagas are resembled to those tribes of Dyaks and they loved the marine-shells, which is not found in Naga village.

Dr. Horam, an eminent Naga scholar writes, "Some people believe the present group of Nagas came from the Philippines where there is a place called Naga" However the above belief is just an assumption because the Naga village (present Naga city) in Philippines was name by Spanish troops

only in 1573, when they discovered a flourishing Bikol village with abundance of NARRA TREES in that place.

This Naga city is named after Narra trees, in Bikol Narra is known as Naga. The folk songs and legends of Poumai Naga narrated that they (Nagas) came from Deimaofii, (literal meaning Island or land with water) and ultimately reached MAKHEL following the big rivers. Here Deimaofii may also refer to Seas Coast since the Nagas probable did not come from Island. One of the Naga Scholars Late Shimray also believed that Nagas must have come from the seacoast or at least some Islands. Thus he wrote,

"The hypothesis that the Nagas must have come from the seacoast or at least seen some Islands or the seas is strengthened by the life-style of the Nagas and the ornaments being used till today in many Naga villages. The Naga being left undisturbed for such a long time, have retained the culture of the most ancient times till today. Their fondness of Cowries shells for beautifying the dress, and use of Conch shells as ornaments (precious ornaments for them) and the facts that the Nagas have many customs and way of life very similar to that of those living in the remote parts of Borneo, Sarawak, Indonesia, Malaysia etc. indicates that their ancient abode was near the sea, if not in some islands."

The folktales and folksongs precisely tell that the Naga crossed the Indo-Myanmar border and came to the present Naga Hills. According to the folktale and mythology of Poumai Naga, the Pou or Shiipfowo was one of the old man who led the Nagas from Indo-Myanmar to MAKHEL (Dispersal site of Nagas) where, all the Nagas were dispersed to various parts of Naga Hills. The entire groups of the people who emigrate from Irrawaddy valley (Myanmar) to MAKHEL were known as NAGA.

It was only after they dispersed from MAKHEL, they called by the name of tribe naming after their progenitor (forefather). For example, Poumai Naga tribe is named after their progenitor name POU and Mao tribe after the name of MEO. Thus different name of the Naga tribes like Seema, Lotha, Angami, Ao, Tangkhul, Poumai Naga etc came to exist after they departed from MAKHEL.

The whole Naga tribes came for a meeting for a deliberation at Shajouba Village near the Makhel before their departure from Makhel. According to the legend of Poumai Naga, a man name POU (of the prominent leader of Naga) erected his walking stick on the ground after the meeting and left for home. But his walking stick sprouted and rooted inside the earth. The then walking stick growth to be a wild pear tree (Tyaobe) is still alive at Shajouba near Makhel. Whether it is sprouted from Pou's walking stick or not - the Pear tree is believed to be planted during the Nagas departure from Makhel. The Nagas called this Pear tree as departure tree since it was planted during their departure. The wild

Pear tree (Tyaobe) or departure tree planted during their departure meeting is a very important tree, which is still kept reverence by all the Nagas who migrated from Makhel.

The falling of any branches from the wild pear tree due to storm or wind signifies the bad omen. If any branches of that tree fall, the Makhelian (Poumai, Angami, Mao, Tangkhul, Zeliangrong Seema, Lotha, Maram and other Nagas) who dispersed from the dispersal site observed a day, which is forbidden to work in the field. People were strictly restricted to choke-off even a small branch from that tree. It is believed to be a sacred tree for the Nagas. It is believed that anybody who cuts down any branches of that tree will die instantly and heavy rain and storm would come to the areas.

The folktale and folksong of Poumai is convincing that the old man POU led the Naga people from Indo-Myanmar border to the Naga dispersal site (Makhel). It is because the wild pear tree is still alive as evidence. The Nagas considered the wild pear tree as sacred and no one dares to cut any branches from that wild pear tree (Tyaobe). The folksong and folktale of Tangkhul tribe also supported that the Nagas came from Myanmar. Thus Shimray an authority of Nagas wrote,

"The party that went to the right (Northeast) were the Tangkhuls and the Somras. The legend goes that one very brave man called 'Shimray' led Tangkhul Nagas. This party went on cutting down the bananas trees so that those who would be coming after them may follow the sign. However, since the banana trees sprouted quickly, the later wave of migration followed the left party thinking that it would be difficult to catch them (Tangkhuls). This is why the majority of the Nagas are found in the Mao-Maram, Tamenglong and Nagaland areas. The Tangkhul and Somrah Nagas were very small in number compared to the other party went leftward."

The legends of Tangkhul narrated that they went to Northeast and other greater group went to northwest and settled at Makhel, Senapati District, Manipur, from there the various Naga tribes were dispersed to the Naga Hills. The majority of the Tangkhuls might have went to the north east side during the retreat from Myanmar to Manipur, but the historical facts showed that many of the Tangkhuls were the descendants of Pou or Shiipfowo who were dispersed from Makhel.

The Moi clan (now Muivah clan, Tangkhul) was the descendants of Pou. Basically the Muivah clan was Poumai. The folktales and legends precisely shows the evidence that Nagas were migrated from Myanmar and settled at MAKHEL (Dispersal site of Nagas). The folktale and legends of different tribes of Naga showed that they were migrated from Myanmar. However still there is not any scientific proof about the original place of Nagas, where from they came to Naga Hills.

**Conclusion**

From the oral history, we may conclude that Nagas hailed from mainland of China who migrated to Myanmar along the rivers and corridors. They migrated to the Southern Seas of Myanmar along the rivers and lived near the Seas coast of Moulmein (Myanmar) for generations before they retreated to Irrawaddy and Chindwin valleys. They lived for generations in Irrawaddy valley but most probably they were driven out to the hills by more advanced races in warfare. The Nagas emigrated from Irrawaddy valley through Indo-Myanmar corridor and settled down at MAKHEL (Dispersal site of Naga tribes), where they were believed to be dispersed to various parts of Naga Hills.

**References**

- [1] R.R.Shimray Origin and Culture of Nagasi: Somsok Publications,New Delhi, 1985 p-2
- [2] J.P. Mills: The Lothas Nagas,; Macmillan & Co. Ltd, London1922 p-16
- [3] Iralu D. Kaka Nagaland history and their relations with other communities, (2001):
- [4] Gangmumei Kabui: history of Manipur,; National publishing house New Delhi,2003 p-21-23
- [5] Op cit. Shimray (1985) p-10
- [6] J.P. Hutton: The Angami Nagas, Oxford University Press, 1921 p-39
- [7] Gen. Maj. Sardespande : The Pakoi Nagas,, Daya Publishing House. Delhi, 1987,p-7,
- [8] R.R. Shimray : Origin and Culture of Nagas, New Delhi: Somsok Publications,1985 p-6,
- [9] Johnstone Sir James K.C.S.I : Manipur and the Naga Hills, Delhi Cultural Publishing House,1896 p-28,
- [10] J.P. Hutton : The Angami Nagas, Oxford University Press,1921 p-8, 1921
- [11] op.cit. shimray, 1985, p-3
- [12] M. Horam : Naga Polity: B.R. Publishing Co.New Delhi, 1975, p-28,
- [13] Shimray R.R.,1985 p-21,
- [14] Ibid p-13
- [15] Shakespeare L.W. : History of upper Assam, Upper Burma and North East Frontier, 1914 p-197\
- [16] Interview by R.B. Thoh Pou : Saluni P. (Head man Koide village) interviewed on 23 May, 2003
- [17] Shimray (1985), p-13
- [18] Ibid, p-31