Comment

Lessons to Learn from the Development Process in Nagaland

The write-up below is an old document. It is a paper I had prepared for a seminar held in Kohima on the theme of, “Development constraint in Nagaland.” Although old, the thoughts expressed in the paper have continuing relevance. The paper was presented at the seminar which was attended by important personalities of Nagaland. Being a seminar, the audience was naturally rather small. We felt that the views expressed in the paper and various historical details therein should reach a much wider audience. Hence, we are reproducing it in this issue of Ishani. I hope the readers of Ishani will welcome this attempt.

N.Th.
Important Characteristics of Naga society and impact of changes:

Several official and non-official publications tell us that the Naga society is a tribal society consisting of 15 to 16 major Naga tribes. Each tribe has its own independent language, dress, customs and manners. The entire topography of Nagaland is the hilly terrain. It is covered with thick growth of evergreen vegetation. All villages are situated on the hilltops. These also used to be fortified with impenetrable bamboo stockades. The location of villages on the hilltop and its fortification was resorted to for the protection of the village against head hunting raids.

A careful study of the older times shows that the practise of head hunting was a vital aspect of Naga way of life. It is no longer in vogue today but it had been in practise till the 19th century. It is necessary to take note of this system, as it has been responsible in shaping the character of a Naga person as well as the Naga society. An important function of the traditional village administration was to look after and manage situations that might emerge as a result of the raid by a hostile village or vice versa. The practise of head hunting also led to the cultivation of special traits of the Naga character. A Naga does not easily panic or lose nerve. Every Naga also grew to be an alert, watchful, agile and a hardy person.

The grooming of youth in warfare, tradition, history, social ceremonies and songs and dances took place at the Morungs. This typical Naga institution at times has been misunderstood in the past as a mere clubhouse or a youth dormitory. The Morungs also served as dormitories, but more than that, they were the village academies to train the youth as soldier-farmers. The skill of fighting an enemy and the skill for producing food were two important skills, which were a must for survival. A strict code prevailed at these Morungs; in which the seniors controlled and disciplined the juniors. The Naga villages were in reality the communes of soldier farmers. Militancy and martial qualities were an essential fact of Naga life. Simultaneously every Naga had to engage in agriculture to produce food.

Each tribe also used to practise its own traditional faith, which consisted of worship of the Sun and the Moon and the rivers and the streams. Pacification of the spirits dwelling in rocks or boulders in or around the village was also a part of traditional ritual. Later on the Christian missionaries of American Baptist denomination introduced Christian religion in the late 19th century. It can be said now that almost the entire population of Nagaland today is Christian by faith. Majority of them are American Baptists but there are a small number of Roman Catholics also.

The Nagas practised subsistence agriculture through the system of Jhum Cultivation i.e., burn-and-slash, cyclic, shifting cultivation. It is still practised in a major part of Nagaland. The system is not as bad as it is
made out to be. But the changes that have come about suggest its modification and adoption to new circumstances. It cannot and should not be given up without adequate thought and intelligent planning. This system of Jhum cultivation is also as vital an aspect of Naga way of life as the much-maligned system of head hunting. One of the advantages of the Jhum system is that it provides every citizen of a village with an access to land and the right-to-till. This provision ensured that nobody remained without two meals in a day. Every able-bodied villager produced his or her requirement of food, which mainly consisted of rice, leafy vegetables and occasionally meat of domesticated animals like cattle, pigs or poultry. The Nagas are very fond of meat, their main source of protein. Each family rears pigs and poultry and some families also rear cattle. This practise of animal husbandry meets with the requirement of meat. Fishing in streams or rivers is also a favourite activity. The Nagas dependence on the outside world was confined to two commodities only i.e., salt and dry fish. Every Naga village was completely self-reliant in the fulfilment of the primary necessities of life, i.e., food, clothing and shelter.

Yet another special feature of the Naga community is the collective ownership of land. Amongst the Ao Nagas a clan owns the land collectively. The village as a whole also owns some land in a village. There are, however, variations in the form of ownership from village to village and tribe to tribe. Yet another noteworthy feature is that the land of a particular village is retained within that village only. It cannot be sold to a non-villager; leave aside the question of selling it to a non-Naga. This provision has great virtue and needs to be protected. The institution of individual ownership of land has also emerged. But here too the Naga customary practise prevents even an individual owner from disposing off his land to a non-villager.

On a proper examination of the functioning of Naga villages it can be seen that these functioned as fully independent village states. Nagaland in reality is an assembly of self governing, self-reliant, sovereign village nations situated in a contiguous geographical area. This to my mind is a major strength of the traditional Naga society. These villages can be transformed into ideal communities of the future by resorting to modern science & technology. Transformation of villages on these lines should in fact be the objective of planning in the future.

The traditional Naga system of self-governing villages is fortunately intact so far but it is likely to get weakened. The element of self-reliance of a village has already disappeared by now. It is suspected that the process of the socio-economic development that has been followed so far is one factor responsible for the erosion of the traditional strength of Naga community. This paper, while acknowledging some positive outcome of the development process, further discusses down below, this fear of the
erosion of traditional strength. Some distortions have emerged on some fronts which cause anxiety.

The winds of change started blowing over Naga society with the creation of an independent district named as Naga Hills district and the advent of Dr. E.W. Clerk, the first Christian Missionary of American Baptist denomination. He arrived towards the close of the 19th century and settled in the Ao Naga country of Nagaland. Then came the 2nd World War during which the British fought a decisive battle against the Japanese in and around Kohima and drove them back. Yet another change with far reaching implications for the Nagas was the transfer of power by the erstwhile British regime to the successor Government of Free India. A quick review of the new situation that emerged is necessary here.

**Freedom of India and its aftermath:**

The holocaust that accompanied freedom of India, the massive transfer of population from both sides, ruthless massacre of one community by the other, untold miseries for men, women and children, difficulties related to the resettlement of population and similar other situations were a nightmare for the nation as a whole. It was a tough challenge for the leaders at the helm of affairs. This was not all. There were also disturbances in Kashmir and in Hyderabad. The availability of food during those days was also scarce. We had to get food from foreign countries. There was jubilation over India winning freedom, but there were also these baffling developments to tackle. These caused great concern and anxiety.

India was also deprived of its most precious possession soon after independence when a thoughtless assassin murdered Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. All these developments took place within a short period of India emerging as a free nation. Some even feared whether India could continue to remain a free country in the face of these tough challenges. The biggest concern, therefore, was to guard against any threat to India’s security and integrity. Although India had leaders of extraordinary qualities of head & heart, they were under tremendous stress. It was in the midst of such a stress and anxiety that a section in the Naga Hills district in Assam raised the banner of revolt. Initially it was free from violence. But it was no doubt, an alarming and irritating development to handle for the then Government of Assam and the Government at the Centre. The disturbances in Naga Hills rose to a higher level in the later half of the 1950s. The agitation that was described initially as "Civil Disobedience" took a violent turn later. This spell of violence, which began in 1956, has continued till date.

**Birth of the 16th State of the Indian Union - Nagaland:**
Since the Naga unrest took a violent form leading to loss of lives, the government's first priority was to restore normalcy and curb violence. The guardians of law and order had to be ordered to intervene. Simultaneously with the measures to curb violence, certain administrative changes were introduced. Sincere attempts were made through these changes to fulfil the aspirations of the Naga people. This led to far reaching changes at a fairly rapid pace.

A major change on political and administrative front was the transformation of the district of Naga Hills into a Union Territory named as Naga Hills Tuensang Area (NHTA) and then into a full-fledged State of the Indian Union. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the then President of India inaugurated the new State on the 1st December, 1963. The Indian Union at that stage consisted of 15 states. Nagaland thus became the youngest and the sixteenth state of the Indian Union. I had the privilege of witnessing the inaugural ceremony of the statehood at Kohima as a member of a large crowd that had assembled on the historical football ground there. There was jubilation all over the State. The representatives of different Naga Tribes largely attended the function at Kohima. The tribal groups decked in their ceremonial attire performed traditional dances on the occasion. There was gaiety and fanfare all over.

An interim body initially governed the newly constituted State of Nagaland. But after a short while the elections to the State Legislative Assembly were held. In course of time the interest in the electioneering process grew and keen contests were witnessed in most constituencies of the State. Soon after the elections were over; the affairs of the State were entirely managed by the elected representatives of the people of Nagaland. Even the bureaucracy mainly consists of the Nagas from the highest to the lowest level. The creation of the State of Nagaland, a major and noteworthy political development can rightly be described as a part of the over all development process.

Introduction of universal adult franchise gave equal rights to both the sexes. This was a radical development in traditionally patriarchal Naga society. Women are traditionally placed on a lower footing. But the adult franchise put women at par with men as far as the process of electioneering was concerned. This was also a major change with far reaching implications. Even the process of voting by secret ballot was an entirely unknown phenomenon. Its introduction was another major change. The system of parliamentary democracy thus got initiated in a society which had followed primitive communism so far and which also had elements of regimentation in its functioning.

The beginning of socio-economic development process
The socio-economic development process in Nagaland certainly began with India winning its freedom. The erstwhile British administration had evolved a special kind of administration for Naga Hills District. The Nagas were exempted from most of the taxation prevailing in British India (this practice has remained undisturbed till date). The Nagas had to pay only one form of taxation namely the "house tax" collected from each household. The traditional village councils governed the affairs of each village according to the traditional customary procedure. The district administrative head, however, exercised his authority with due firmness all over the district in those areas of administration, which fell within his jurisdiction. The British policy was of least interference in the traditional way of life of the Nagas. But at the same time, no significant socio-economic development was initiated by the British administration. Socio-economic development was not their goal.

The case with the Government of Independent India was different. India was pledged to function as a democratic welfare state. There was also a commitment in the Constitution of Independent India to promote socio-economic development of the weaker sections of the society such as the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes through special concessions and provisions. In case of the tribal communities of the N.E. India in particular, the Indian Constitution had a special provision to constitute autonomous district councils in the districts populated by the tribal groups to enable them to manage their own affairs according to their traditional norms and to enable them to protect their ethnic identity.

As we have already observed above, the development process in Nagaland commenced only after India won freedom. Modest advancement in the field of education began even when it was merely a district of Assam. The areas of development widened and momentum increased with the creation of the union territory of Naga Hills Tuensang Area (NHTA). But the development process really gained strength as well as greater momentum only after Nagaland became a full-fledged state.

It can be said with a sense of satisfaction that one of the impressive achievements of the country as a whole is its success in initiating the development process in Nagaland and achieving significant success in the field of education, particularly higher education. The success in the field of infrastructure development was also equally impressive. Medical facilities, piped drinking water supply systems, network of roads (every Naga village by now is connected by an approach road), electricity supply in every village are some of the major gains. The table below is a comparative statement of the achievements in major areas of development between 1962-'63 to 2001-'02.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>UNIT</th>
<th>1962-63</th>
<th>2001- '02</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total length of road</td>
<td>Kms</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>9860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of villages covered</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water supply provided</td>
<td>No. villages</td>
<td>Nill</td>
<td>1,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation of Elect. power</td>
<td>Mw</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villages electrified</td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>1691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>17.91</td>
<td>67.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment in Primary School</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital &amp; Dispensaries</td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area under irrigation</td>
<td>000 HA</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>65.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food grains products</td>
<td>000 Tones</td>
<td>61.82</td>
<td>292.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: The Development Commissioner, Nagaland.)

It needs to be re-emphasised that these developments took place in the midst of a long-spell of disturbance and violence that had taken a heavy toll of lives and property. Yet the results are impressive! A lot, however, has remained unfulfilled.

The commission appointed by the central Government under the chairmanship of the then member of the Planning Commission, Shri Shukla has assessed the infrastructure gap for Nagaland at Rs.11,000 crore. When we observe the progress reflected in the above statement, it convinces us of the sincere steps taken to develop Nagaland. This precedent also generates confidence that the remaining aspirations of the Nagas will also be fulfilled equally well, if not better. Thanks to the humanistic idealism promoted during India's freedom movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, there is a rich fund of goodwill for the Nagas in rest of the country both at the level of common citizenry and the leadership in socio political circles. The leadership of the Union Government of India has also been uniformly generous, irrespective of their affiliations with one political group or the other.

The effect and outcome of development process:

We have dealt with the major aspects of the traditional Naga society. We have also expressed fear that the ongoing process of development may pose a threat to some of these aspects. No society can remain static forever. Changes do take place and changes are desirable. But there is an absence of adequate assessment of its impact. Ongoing monitoring and assessment of the changes by the State as well as the society is essential.

The development process in Nagaland has not succeeded yet in building a sound economy. Nagas, today, are more prosperous than before. There is a lot of cash in their hands. The houses in all towns and in several villages
are now permanent structures with CGI sheets roofing. The RCC structures are also sprouting up everywhere. But this prosperity has come about as a result of Government spending and through the salaries earned by the Naga employees in the Government. The Government is the biggest and the only employer in the State. But the saturation point has been reached by now.

We have said elsewhere that the spread of education in Nagaland is no doubt a major and impressive achievement. But the moment a young man or a woman gets educated, he or she is a misfit in the village. The effect of education is such that the individual concerned and also the society thinks that the correct option for him or her is to apply for a salaried job to earn a living. The number of educated unemployed youth in Nagaland is on the increase. Lack of employment or lack of involvement in creative pursuits creates a vacuum in the minds of the young. They often go astray. Some of these youth also get sucked in militant organisations. Planning in the field of education in future will have to be undertaken after a careful review of the experience so far.

One of the fearful situations that has emerged is the widespread alcoholism and drug addiction. Nagaland is also one of the Indian states stricken with high percentage of HIV-AIDS. There is no scope in this paper to deal elaborately with the violence, which has existed for nearly five decades by now. The opinions vary about the genesis of violence and its validity in Nagaland context. But the common people are fed up with it and would strongly favour an end to it. This culture of violence has harmed Naga society in many ways. One wonders if culture of violence played any indirect role in creating the distortions like drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. There is a breakdown of discipline at many levels and the ethical norms are weakened. Violence, of course, is also a major impediment in the conduct of development process on right lines and at a desirable pace. The State and the society together must join hands and eliminate this culture of violence urgently.

**Migration from villages to towns - a serious threat:**

There is one more frightening impact of change in Nagaland; the migration from villages to the towns of Nagaland. The author of this paper is of the opinion that this is a serious threat to Naga identity and to many of the positive features of the Naga way of life. We have already observed that the educated youth tends to get away from the village and wants to move to the towns. There is a large-scale drift from all corners of Nagaland to the major town of Dimapur. This town is the largest urban centre in Nagaland today and it is growing bigger and bigger everyday. This place is also notorious for drug trafficking, alcoholism and small dacoities, shoot-outs, etc., etc. It wears a deserted look after sunset, as it is not considered safe to move around. There is congestion, filth, poor
sanitation and pollution. In contrast to this, the hilltop Naga villages have fresh air, they are commodious; even though the dwelling house may be a thatched house, there is enough space in the house. The entire environment in the village is more congenial to healthy growth of body and mind. Migration to towns uproots an individual from his original soil that consisted of all the psychological nutrients and right climate to survive with self-confidence and dignity.

There is another aspect to this phenomenon of migration. If the drift continues at the present pace the villages are bound to get depopulated and grow weak. They will be left with mainly the aged population. The traditional institutions will also get weakened. Such a situation is bound to create vacuum. It may also lead to the collapse of the special culture and identity of the Naga Community. Lest I am misunderstood, a small clarification is due here. It is not intended by the above statements to keep the Naga villages as they were. The intention is to see that the villages get urbanised. Full benefit of the scientific and technological advancement should be taken, and as said earlier these villages can be developed as communities of future - prosperous and industrious.

The places like district headquarters, capital towns, etc. will continue to exist. These places are bound to be multiethnic, cosmopolitan habitats. It is obvious that these places cannot be governed by customary norms and procedures. What is however necessary is to restrict the growth of the individual units and their total number.

An example of what has taken place in Mizoram is relevant here. According to the 1991 census, there were a total of 671 villages in Mizoram and the total population then was 6.89 lakhs, whereas the population of the capital town of Aizawl alone was 1.55 lakhs! This means that more than 22.5% of the population of entire Mizoram stays in Aizawl town alone! Another population of 1.62 lakhs or 23.5% of total population was in 21 notified towns. This shows that out of 671 villages of the state nearly a half of its population had drifted to 22 towns. This example is an eye opener. Nagaland must take a note of this and resort to precautionary measures to avoid migration from Naga villages to towns. An obvious remedy is to modernise villages and make available all amenities of life at the doorstep of every village. In some respects like piped water supply, this has already taken place although a process of revamping is lagging behind. Another important step required is to develop a kind of economy, which will create adequate opportunities for self-employment and self-reliance, as was the case in Nagaland of earlier days. Needless to say, that the new economy cannot be merely a subsistence economy. The target will be to create an affluent village community that is capable of meeting all wants of life created by change of times.

**Impediments to development**
We have already dealt with a major impediment in this paper; absence of peace as a result of the pervading climate of violence. This no doubt is a major stumbling block. The real power to deal with this situation of absence of peace is in the hands of the people themselves. They must act.

It is whispered by, big and small, that the quality and the quantum of development would have been much better if only the management of state finances would have been more judicious. There are leakages galore! Everyone speaks about it but it is now high time to act against it. Here too the answer lies in cultivating enlightened public opinion. No democracy can progress on the right lines unless an enlightened and informed public opinion is created. Yet another measure is the decentralisation of the functioning of the state machinery. Nagas are relatively more qualified to sustain such provision because of their own traditional system of village government. The state government has already acted in this direction. We shall briefly discuss these Governmental measures a little later.

Yet another major impediment to the sustenance of social services and amenities is the absence of regular maintenance of assets, equipments, roads, electricity supply, water supply systems, and public buildings. Absence of maintenance, no doubt leads to heavy losses but it also deprives the community from the benefits of development. The functionaries engaged for maintenance of assets and systems need much better training, motivation and discipline.

**State interventions in the right direction**

It must be said that there have been positive developments in the right direction also. A few important legislations have been enacted. An enactment by the very first Legislative Assembly of the new State of Nagaland was to accord recognition to the traditional village councils of all Naga tribes. This was a step in the right direction. It retained the authority of traditional local-self-government intact and enabled the village councils to function according to customary procedures. This first legislation had also provided for the functioning of range and tribal councils. The range and tribal councils functioned for a while but did not continue after a brief spell due to lack of enthusiasm on the part of successor State governments. The State will do well even now to examine this old provision again.

Another progressive and innovative intervention was the constitution of village development boards (VDB). To explain the VDBs briefly, these bodies are entrusted with planning as well as execution of development schemes of their respective villages in collaboration with and under the guidance of the traditional Village-Councils. A VDB, in fact, is the
development wing of a village council. The overall experience of its functioning so far is encouraging. Improvements have to be gradually inculcated in any new measure. Hopefully the people concerned will look into the improvements in VDBs as well. There is no scope here to dwell at length on this important creation. We conclude dealing with this new institution with following suggestions.

The VDB if conducted intelligently has the potential to make their villages self-reliant again. The immediate facilitation required is to make a provision for training and educating a newly elected secretary of a VDB in the procedure and rules and regulations for conducting the affairs of a VDB, training in acquiring administrative skills, preparation of budget, maintenance of proper accounts, etc. Simultaneously, an ongoing orientation, motivation and education of traditional leadership of a village through workshops and seminars are also essential. Yet another essential practice to introduce is a facilitation to prepare a village development plan. Conducting socio-economic survey and preparation of contour maps of the entire village territory will be necessary for preparing a good development plan for the village. Resorting to contour mapping may create misunderstanding that the Government intends interference with the traditional land ownership pattern. This aspect will have to be carefully looked into. The village community should be fully assured that there would be no interference or tampering with the village autonomy or with the land ownership pattern.

Yet another State intervention in the right direction is the decision to communitize services; i.e., to hand over to the village community the management of services like running of primary schools. As in the case of VDB, this communitization process is also in tune with the Naga ethos. Gradually, the village councils will be entrusted with the management of all the social services functioning in the village. This is as it should be. Even under the traditional pattern the village council looked after all aspects of village management. The new times have given new roles to the village councils. Management of social services is one of them. The State Government’s decision to facilitate village council through the communitization process is highly commendable. In a way this new intervention is taking the VDB institution a step further. The State Government is determined to carry it forward.

**Laying Foundation for New Economy**

We have observed the pattern of self-reliance in respect of all wants of life in the traditional society of Nagaland. We have also observed that the self-reliance has disappeared due to changed times and increase in wants. Besides the traditional system of food production on the Jhum fields, the main source of sustenance for Naga people today is government spending and the salaries earned through government jobs. The State is heavily
dependent upon Central Government to meet its requirements. The thinking population of Nagaland has started realizing that the State must have new avenues of income. Some progress did take place in this direction. These are briefly described below. A major experiment undertaken is tree farming. Another modest but impressive success story is of organizing co-operative societies for milk production. There is only one co-operative union in the State functioning in Kohima district with their central dairy at Dimapur. It is marketing milk and milk products under the brand name of 'Komul', which has gained popularity. The State government has already decided to introduce this activity of milk production through co-operative societies in a few other districts as well. Every Naga household rears pigs and it is noticed that the breed of the animal is improved. The management of domestic piggery is also better now. Yet another area where an initiative has been taken is horticulture. Individual entrepreneurs and co-operative societies have recently undertaken decentralized tea growing at a few places. All these innovative projects are relevant and should continue to be implemented. But it must be noted that these are yet in its initial stage only. They have not started generating wealth to a significant extent yet.

One fact of life relevant to Nagaland and the North-east needs to be emphasized here. Experience has shown that sustainable development in the region has to be based on land and vegetation only. This is true of most parts of the North-east. Most impressive example of land-based economic activity undertaken during the British regime is the tea industry. India today is one of the major producers of tea. Within India it is Assam, which produces the major amount of tea in the country.

Land and vegetation based economic activities in Nagaland during days to come can be (a) tree farming, (b) poultry and piggery (c) milk production through co-operative societies, (d) sericulture, (e) bee-keeping, (f) oil-seeds production in certain areas of Nagaland. The key word is decentralization. The hilltop Naga villages are situated in a compact area. These have adequate land resources under their command. There is also rich natural growth of vegetation around the villages. There are streams and small rivers in Nagaland. It will be worthwhile to treat each village as an independent production unit managed by the VDBs and the village councils. Such an action plan can also modernize the villages, improve the standard of living and best of all it will prevent migration of able-bodied population from villages to towns. Nagaland has the potential to develop herself into an ideal de-centralized, prosperous and peaceful society. The future generation of Nagas must accept this challenge.

Efforts were made to establish major industries like paper, sugar and a couple of other industries. This experience has not been very encouraging. One need not go here into the merits and demerits of these
experiments. However, it appears to be realistic to refrain from the thought of establishing large industries.

This paper has undertaken a quick review of the development process that was conducted in Nagaland for more than four decades. We have also dealt with the lessons learnt. A quick look at the future potential has also been attempted. It is hoped that this review will inspire all concerned with Naga destiny to deliberate upon the course, which Nagaland can wisely adopt in future.