

MODERN DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES AND INDIGENOUS POLITICAL TRADITIONS AMONG THE NAGAS

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Abstract

Modern democratic practices, particularly electoral democracy, have shaped the socio-political life of the Nagas in the state of Nagaland. The introduction of competitive elections and modern democratic institutions after statehood in 1963 has significantly altered indigenous democratic practices that were predominantly communitarian rather than individualistic in orientation. While liberal democratic norms focus on individual autonomy, secret ballots and party competition, Naga society has historically prioritised collective decision-making rooted in clan, village and customary authority. Drawing on secondary sources, the study situates Naga political traditions within their historical context of village republics, customary laws and consensus-based governance. The paper highlights how electoral practices such as bloc voting, household voting and the selection of "consensus candidates" reflect local adaptations to modern democracy rather than outright rejection of it. At the same time, the study identifies contemporary challenges such as money politics, erosion of community integration and tensions between constitutional democracy and customary norms. The paper argues for a contextualised understanding of democracy that recognises the plurality of democratic expressions.

Keywords: Nagas, Electoral democracy, Customary institutions, Consensus politics, Indigenous governance.

Introduction

The extension of universal suffrage marked a significant transformation in the political processes of the Western world. The significance of free, fair and transparent elections was formally recognised with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, which recognised participatory government as a fundamental human right. In India, the right to vote is constitutionally guaranteed and further reinforced through the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Voting, as a form of political participation, represents a key democratic power exercised by ordinary citizens. Within a democratic system, elections serve as the primary mechanism through which the consent of the people is expressed in the selection of their representatives. They also legitimise the authority of the government and ensure accountability of those in power (Sirsikar, 1973).

This paper attempts to explain the impact and relevance of contemporary democratic practice on the hilly tribal state of Nagaland, predominantly inhabited by the ethnic Naga community. Notably, the concept of ethnicity plays a crucial role in understanding political behaviour in such contexts. Donald L. Horowitz conceptualises ethnicity as a sense of collective identity that may be rooted in shared descent, language, history, culture, race or religion (Horowitz, 2011). However, James Manor cautions against viewing ethnicity through a single defining marker. Despite India's vast social and cultural diversity, ethnicity has not posed a fundamental threat to national unity, as ethnic identities often overlap and intersect rather than remain rigid or exclusive (Manor, 1996).

Historical Foundations of Naga Political Life

The term "Naga" is a broad and inclusive category, collectively comprising of distinct sub-tribes, who identify themselves collectively as Naga, in addition to the identities and loyalties that come with their separate clan, village and tribal affiliations. While Nagaland officially recognises seventeen tribes, a significant number of Naga communities also inhabit the neighbouring states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as regions across the border in Myanmar. They live in harmonious relationship with the surrounding natural environment, which helps in maintaining and preserving the ecological balance, despite the absence of formal education or possessing scientific knowledge.

Any practices and norms that have been sanctioned or legitimised by the people is regarded as a customary law. Customary law is significant in Naga society. These laws are derived from multiple sources, including social customs, public opinion, religious beliefs and the directives of village chiefs. Among these, social customs remain the most authoritative source. The Nagas traditionally followed a chieftainship system in which the village chief, selected either through hereditary succession or election, performs multiple roles as an administrative authority, religious leader, chief judicial figure and military commander during times of conflict. The chief exercises his powers with the aid and advice of his council along democratic lines. Each village maintained a well-structured political system that included a village council. The village chief is assisted by the village councillors who represent various clans. The chief's decisions were taken in consultation with the councillors, leaving little scope for unilateral action except in situations where customary or religious norms were ambiguous. Consequently, the village council formed the backbone of customary administration. Matters of collective importance were deliberated in the village assembly, and the resolutions adopted were implemented by the council.

In the pre-state period, Naga society was often described as comprising "village republics", made up of independent or semi-independent political units. For the traditional Nagas, the village constituted the core of socio-cultural and political life and functioned as an autonomous and self-governing entity. Colonial officer J. P. Mills observed that among the Nagas, the village represented the fundamental political unit, each with its own history and a high degree of sovereignty and self-sufficiency. Although Naga villages developed largely in isolation, they were not entirely cut off, as interactions with the neighbouring Assam plains did exist. In contrast to many parts of India where electoral behaviour is strongly shaped by caste dynamics, the democratic experience of Nagaland, which is deeply rooted in its distinctive local context, presents a distinctive understanding of democracy within the Indian political landscape.

Electoral Democracy in Local Practice

Jelle J.P. Wouters analysed the 2013 Nagaland State Assembly election at the village level, focussing on a Chakhesang Naga village (called Phugwumi). Usually the norm is to go by the liberal democratic principle of "one man, one vote", but the author observed that in this particular village, the council had endorsed the concept of "household voting" which empowered the head of each household to cast the votes of his dependents, along with the polling of bogus votes. The distinctive nature of Naga electoral behaviour must also be understood in the context of the community's historical challenge to the legitimacy of the Indian state. The long-standing struggle for independence and self-determination led to repeated boycotts of general elections prior to the attainment of statehood in 1963. Even after the introduction of electoral democracy, political engagement at the village level has remained largely detached from party ideologies, election manifestos or public policy debates. Instead, voting decisions are often shaped by kinship ties, clan loyalties and the reputations and past conduct of candidates' families and ancestors. As Wouters observes, local electoral politics in Phugwumi is shaped by village-specific narratives involving internal rivalries, struggles over status and disputes related to land and property, rather than broader ideological considerations.

The experience of Tuensang district further illustrates the uneven incorporation of modern democratic institutions in Nagaland. During the colonial period, Tuensang region of Nagaland was declared as an "Excluded Area", and remained largely unadministered contributing to its relative economic backwardness. As a result, the recognition of statehood to Nagaland came with special constitutional provisions for Tuensang district. Instead of an immediate participation in

competitive elections, a regional council was established to govern the district for a period of ten years. Members of this regional council were selected on the basis of tribe and region through local consensus, a process facilitated by the limited number of educated individuals at the time. The regional council was empowered to nominate and not elect, its representatives to the state assembly. This “selection mechanism” existed for ten years after which the regional council ceased to exist and the people of the district were made to participate in competitive elections to elect their representatives. The broader tension between indigenous political practices and modern democratic norms reflects the historical foundations of liberal democracy in European political thought. Central elements such as universal adult franchise, secret ballot, a free press and a multi-party system are based on the idea of voters as autonomous individuals capable of independent decision-making. Ashis Nandy argues that while global democratic frameworks formally extend voting rights, they often fail to accommodate local moral worlds and culturally embedded political understandings. In this sense, the historical experiences and local narratives that shape contemporary electoral behaviour represent what Nandy describes as “odd cultural ideas and morality”, which are frequently marginalised by dominant models of political modernity.

Given these complexities, it becomes necessary to move beyond a rigid, status-quo understanding of democracy. Drawing on Rodney Needham’s notion of the “polythetic nature of democracy”, this study emphasises the importance of recognising democracy as a multifaceted, evolving concept characterised by multiple values and culturally specific moral expressions.

Challenges of Electoral Politics in Naga Society

The introduction of modern Indian democratic institutions and competitive elections after the formation of Nagaland state radically changed the democratic experiences and expressions of the Nagas. The formal establishment of electoral democracy disrupted the long-standing practices of consensus-based decision-making that had characterised traditional Naga political life. Scholars and political actors view this intervention as an indicator of a corroding and a gradual erosion of the communitarian ethos of Naga society. This has not only caused a political disjunction between the centre and the Nagas but also began to alter the Naga homegrown democratic and public sphere in radical ways resulting in a disorderly and confused political practices among the contemporary Naga society. However, the disconnection is somewhat mitigated by the current practice of the selection of “consensus candidates”, which is reported across constituencies in Nagaland. Nevertheless, even among higher authorities, there are criticism against the current electoral system. For instance, a minister contested that the present election system went against the “Naga way of life”. According to this view, loyalty to family and village constitutes a central moral duty, requiring individuals to subordinate personal preferences to the will of the community. A former Chief Minister also advocated the replacement of the current system with that of “selection”, which he considered as necessary for a good Naga society based on faith and common values. He further claimed that this will not hinder the power of the state government but rather help in achieving progress and good government. This communitarian ideal was articulated by A. Z. Phizo, the former President of the Naga National Council (NNC), who described Naga political philosophy through the expression *Mechii medo zotuo*, or “the binding will of the community.” This concept reflects a vision of governance based not on the rule of the numerical majority, but on collective consent and the unity of the people as a whole.

While communitarian societies are often assumed to subordinate the individual entirely to the collective, the Naga experience presents a more complex reality. Among the Angami Naga, including the Chakhesang Naga, every man follows the dictates of his own will, which is essentially a form of the purest democracy. In reality, the Naga individual possessed a dual essence of both the individual and the community, and this duality defined the Naga democratic and social system. The traditional Naga institutions and political practices witnessed a radical transformation after the arrival of both colonial officers and Baptist missionaries, which gradually led to the categorisation and classification of Nagas into new forms of identities that transcend beyond earlier clan- and village-based affiliations.

The functioning of democratic institutions in Nagaland continues to face serious challenges. The prolonged presence of armed forces, allegations of human rights violations and the enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or the AFSPA, have raised concerns regarding democratic accountability and civil liberties. The Act, which has been in force across Nagaland since 1995, has effectively placed the armed forces beyond ordinary administrative, legislative and judicial oversight, giving rise to the perception of a “state within a state”. Although recent efforts by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to reduce the number of “disturbed areas” in Nagaland and neighbouring states signal a partial shift in policy, concerns persist among intellectuals and civil society actors about the erosion of Naga identity, cultural autonomy and democratic space.

Conclusion

Democratic institutions, particularly elections, have resulted in divisive politics among the Nagas, resulting in the corrosion of community integration, giving rise to the phenomenon of “money politics”. These developments have altered the moral foundations of Naga political culture, replacing earlier norms of consensus, collective responsibility and mutual trust, with individualised and transactional forms of political engagement. Therefore, a substantial change is needed, which might not be an easy task without undermining the Indian constitution. A constructive and inclusive approach, one that involves community leaders, civil society organisations, political representatives and constitutional authorities, is essential to explore institutional arrangements that are both democratically legitimate and culturally aligned.

By recognising the plurality of democratic practices and acknowledging the validity of indigenous political values, it becomes possible to imagine a more context-sensitive model of democracy in Nagaland. Such an approach would seek to reduce political inequality, restore community trust and strengthen democratic accountability while remaining within the

broader constitutional order. Ultimately, the Naga experience underscores the need to move beyond rigid and universalistic conceptions of democracy and move towards a more flexible understanding that accommodates diverse historical experiences, moral frameworks and political aspirations.

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