

## **A Silent Holocaust: Unheard Tales of Independence from the Voices of Naga Women**

*Tania Khatun*

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Raja Peary Mohan College, Hooghly, West Bengal

### **Abstract**

In documenting the freedom struggle of India, the contribution of the North-East has not found its due place in popular discourse. The history and the struggle of north-eastern tribes are one of the least-discovered and discussed matters of Indian history. On one side we have a Partition that physically separated northeast India from the rest of the country and transformed it into an alien land for the mainland Indians. On the other post-independence strategies of the Indian Government for national integration worsened the relationship of this hilly region with the central government. After Independence, the Indian government failed to respond to the intricate realities of the North-East sensitively and seemed to follow the colonial policy of isolation and alienation. This step-motherly treatment caused dissatisfaction and distrust among the tribal folks of this region and gave birth to various insurgent movements in this majestic land of hills. Due to the ignorance of the cultural multiplicity of these ethnic groups, the Delhi government chose the path of forceful assimilation by implementing the AFSPA, 1958. The brutal oppressive measures taken by the government created repugnance among the people and provided the groundwork for armed confrontation. In the post-independent era, India's northeast witnessed a holocaust due to the conflicts between the insurgents and the military forces. Among all these suppressed terror tales the most unheard was the voice of women who in the words of Sanjoy Hazarika "are the most vulnerable and marginalized from either side". As literature can revive the lost history, this article through extensive reading of the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire tries to explore Independence and insurgence from the eyes of the Naga women.

**Keywords:** Independence, insurgence, Nagaland, violence, women

The 200 years of British Rule ended with Jawaharlal Nehru's famous speech on "India's Tryst with Destiny" at midnight on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947. India's journey towards Independence should consider the struggle, sacrifice, and participation of every part of India irrespective of class, caste, gender, and religion to make their country free from the clutches of colonial powers. But the contribution of the North-East has not found its due place in popular discourse while documenting the freedom struggle of India. The people of India do not recognize the courageous leadership of Birbala Kanaklata Barua or Bhogeswari Phukanani who laid down their lives for their motherland in fighting

against British imperialism. Deep buried in oblivion, are the tales of fortitude and indomitable spirit of Rani Gaidinliu, a Naga spiritual and political leader who at the age of thirteen led an armed resistance against the British Raj and was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. The connection of the Naga people with INA and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the dedication and contribution of Gopinath Bordoloi to the national freedom movement, and the sacrifices of Taji Mideren, Kushal Konwar, Shoorvir Pasaltha, Tikendra Jit Singh and many others have become a forgotten history of India's freedom struggle. The Partition of 1947 physically separated northeast India from the rest of the country and transformed it into an alien land for the mainland Indians. Even in terms of narratives of Partition and post-Partition displacement of northeast India remained the least discovered and discussed area. Sanjoy Hazarika, a political scientist, and an author points out that "the North-East suffered the impact of not one but two partitions" (Hazarika, xi), first the separation of Burma in 1937 which partitioned the Nagas, Mizos, Manipuris, and the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and second the culmination of Radcliffe Line in 1947 which not only separated the Bengal and Punjab Province but also made Sylhet a part of East Pakistan and thus divided the smaller ethnic communities like the Khasis, Garos, Hajongs, Rabhas, Karbis Koch-Rajbongshis, the Chakmas, and many more. These hill tribes, who "for ages depended on their trade with the plains" (Misra 115) due to their strong inter-community linkages, were internally split at the stroke of a pen into Indians and Pakistanis. Therefore, the interprovincial borders became international boundaries which had adverse effects on their socio-economic lives. In the words of Rammathot Khongreiw, "Northeast India is suffering from problems arising from a colonial legacy and postcolonial indifference" (Khongreiw, 2009). Subir Bhaumik, a veteran BBC journalist and analyst of eastern and north-eastern India, states, "The British administered India's northeast as an imperial frontier and treated it as a buffer zone between the Bengal plains and the highlands of China and Burma" (Bhaumik, 2007). So, as per their convenience, the British colonizers created artificial frontiers and boundaries through cartographic surgery in this hilly region and thus separated the ethnic inhabitants of this land physically, politically, and psychologically. Now the problem is that these people had already "defined their boundaries or the limits of their territories using certain prominent landmarks, such as rivers and mountains; and their jurisdictions were confined to their respective territories as defined by such landscapes landmarks through mutual agreements and (verbal) treaties between two or more of them" (Khongreiw, 2009) before the British set their foot there. While working on the frontiers C.S. Elliott, Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1881, found it difficult and impracticable to restrain the Nagas within an imaginary line that was not based on tribal boundaries or natural barriers like mountains, streams, and rivers to which they were accustomed. Therefore, it proves that "Colonial maps, treaties, and boundaries were adequate for western needs, in that they resulted in territorial definition while avoiding costly colonial wars, but they were not particularly relevant to the local environment" (Solomon, 1970). Unlike the British who were quite content to leave the Northeast on their own, post-colonial India sought to integrate this largely Mongoloid region into the national mainstream. At the time of implementing their national integration policies, the newly formed Indian Government did not do away with the colonial mistakes and "either divided an ethnic group... or merged a host of incongruous and disparate ethnic groups... by drawing imaginary lines/boundaries for their own political expediencies or administrative conveniences" (Khongreiw, 2009). To address their grievances and dissatisfaction with

the Government these disillusioned ethnic groups organized their respective militias or revolutionary organizations. They sought autonomy within the states they are forced to be part of by political accidents or by politically framed strategies. Their resentment and resistance against the policies of Govt. of India gave birth to the issues of insurgency and various social, political, and law and order problems in northeast India, which are addressed by Baruah as "Northeast India's Durable Disorder." This "durable disorder" is further aggravated by the problem of Bangladeshi immigrants and Burmese refugees, especially in Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram, and also by the indifference of the Delhi Govt. to these issues. Distance from mainland India and the ignorance of mainland Indians about the problems of this region have always created a sense of isolation among these hilly tribes and have led them to choose a path of violence as a means of protest to attract more attention. To suppress the insurgent movements Central Govt. relied "as much on co-optation as on military operations" (Bhaumik, 2007) and implemented laws like AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) 1958, UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) 2004, and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA, 1985). The deployment of military forces to counter-insurgency operations led to rampant violations of human rights, countless extra judicial killings, mysterious disappearances, fake encounters, and large-scale massacres, due to the unrestrained use of terror by both state forces and rebel factions.

In post-independent India, the Northeast has witnessed a holocaust that transforms this region of green hills, lush valleys, incessant rain, and dark forests into a land of gunfire and armed militancy. Insurgency, conflict, and war affect the life of the people, the entire economy, livelihood, and the social fabric of the ethnic communities. As the troubled post-colonial history of Northeast India does not go comfortably with the standard narrative of India's democracy, the struggles, and sufferings of these hilly tribes are either silenced or misrepresented. Writers from the Northeast have served the purpose of giving a voice to silenced experiences that otherwise would not be heard. Among all these suppressed terror tales the most unheard was the voice of women who in the words of Sanjoy Hazarika "are the most vulnerable and marginalized from either side". As literature can revive the lost history, this article through extensive reading of the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire tries to explore Independence and insurgence from the eyes of the Naga women.

Nagaland is one of the eight states, labeled together as Northeast, and with that, the individuality of the Naga tribes, their cultural identity, and ethnicity are taken away from them. As Baruah points out, "Such generic locational place-names are attractive to political engineers because they evoke no historical memory or collective consciousness" (Baruah 19). The Naga community dates back to very ancient times and has a rich cultural heritage. The values, customs, beliefs, and opinions of Naga society were handed down from their ancestors to successors through oral tradition until the arrival of British colonizers in the Northeast with their mission of civilizing the savage. The westernization of the Nagas and their conversion to Christianity disconnected them from their roots and destroyed their culture, values, and tribal way of life so that the past was lost to them. Being a prominent voice of Northeast India, Temsula Ao states in her essay "Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective" about the effects of globalization on the tribes of North East India. "The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization.... Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity" (Ao, 7). Ao, a

poet, writer, and ethnographer, recounts and revives the history, culture, tradition, and beliefs of her people (the Nagas) through her works and attempts to trace the sense of loss in her community. She says in one of her poems:

Then came a tribe of strangers  
Into our primordial territories  
Armed with only a Book and  
Promises of a land called Heaven.  
Declaring that our trees and Mountains  
Rocks and Rivers were no Gods  
And that our songs and stories  
Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense.  
We listened in confusion  
To the new stories and too soon  
Allowed our knowledge of other days  
To be trivialized into taboo. (Blood Of Other Days, 13-24)

In the introduction of the *Book of Songs*, Prasad remarks that ‘she searches for the past that has disappeared into the mists of time...’ (xiv). The word ‘Songs’ in the titles of all her poetry collections, *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs from the Other Life* (2007) reflects the oral tradition of Nagaland. “...poems are songs in oral cultures and Temsula Ao sees herself as a Naga woman poet in search of tradition” (Prasad, xvii). In the introductory poem of her first collection *Songs That Tell* (1998), she states:

Songs  
Which sometimes  
Imitate  
Greater bards  
To indicate  
Similar response  
To corresponding chords. (“Songs Dedicatory”, 14-20)

For Ao, these ‘songs’ are a way to revive her connection with her community and experience their joys, pains, and sorrows similarly as her ancestors did. Like Ao, Easterine Kire, a poet, short story writer, and novelist from Nagaland has also promoted the indigenous Naga culture and has told the tales of those who are mostly unheard of. Besides that, both these writers have sketched pictures of conflict-ridden Nagaland and its effects on their community. Insurgency and the armed confrontation between the insurgents and the state forces play a major role in the history of Nagaland. The pain, suffering, and vulnerability of people at the hands of underground rebel groups and the military forces are reflected in both Ao and Kire’s writings.

The silent struggle of Naga women in this situation, the trauma, and the violence that they have gone through are excellently portrayed in the two short story collections of Temsula Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). Women have experienced both emotional and physical violence in situations of conflict. On one side they are in constant fear of losing their husbands, children, and brothers in the hands of either the underground rebels or the Government forces, and on the other, they become the victims of them. In “The Curfew Man”

Jemtila's fears are justified when she comes to know about her husband's job as an informer for the SDO. She is so furious that she even wants to sacrifice their settled life in Mokokchung town and suggests that they will go back to their village. "She also threatened him by saying, 'Just wait and see, one of these days the other guys will come for you'" (*THCH*, 38). When Punaba joins the underground army in "The Jungle Major", the government forces come to the village and interrogate the villagers and also the wife, Khatila. "They even cautioned Khatila that if she was lying to them, she would be punished in a very special way. 'We know how to deal with women like you,' the officer said giving her a lascivious look" (*THCH*, 4). What the intimidating officer hints at Khatila here, has turned out to be true in Apenyo's life in "The Last Song". The 'singing beauty' Apenyo lives with her mother Libeni, "who was slowly building a future for her daughter and herself" (*THCH*, 24). "Libeni's joy knew no bounds. She was happy that all those years of loneliness and hardship were all rewarded by God through her beautiful and talented daughter" (*THCH*, 25). Unfortunately, the singing of her daughter leads both Libeni and Apenyo toward their tragic death. When the army attacks the church Apenyo's song comes out as a resistance against the brutishness of the soldiers. "Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on.... Her mother...saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns..." (*THCH*, 27-28). Ao also depicts here the violence that a woman's body is subjected to experience in times of conflict through the rape scene of the mother and the daughter:

When she came upon the scene at last, what she saw turned her stomach: the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn. The mother, crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward... but a soldier grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground.... he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body, using the woman's new lungi afterwards, which he had flung aside, to wipe himself. (*THCH*, 28)

The Naga insurgents want an independent Nagaland for their people, but to run that movement they put pressure on the villages to pay taxes and provide supplies to them. Willingly or reluctantly the villagers have to listen to them and Apenyo's village is one of such villages. Consequences of denial can be fatal as Ao portrays it in "The Letter":

The villagers sensed immediately that their plans for utilizing the hard-earned cash would come to nothing because they knew that these fierce-looking goons from the forest had come to the village... to rob them in the name of the underground government. Resisting them was of no use: they carried guns and the consequences of any conflict would only mean retaliation. (*Laburnum for My Head*, 55)

But supporting the underground rebels can make the government officers furious and lead them to destroy the villages.

The houses were ransacked by the security forces ... people themselves were herded into camps ... and kept in virtual imprisonment .... This form of group incarceration was the infamous 'grouping of villages' which the Nagas hated .... Numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones ... would be hung upside down and subjected to

unspeakable tortures like chili powder being rammed into their extremities.  
(*THCH*, 3)

The Naga women have to choose either the underground government or the Indian government but the tragedy is that both parties have disappointed them and failed to assure a place for women where they can be free from all subordination and suppression. Their agendas do not include an independent nation where women can raise their voices, are respected and treated as equal to men, and are not recognized as the vulnerable or weaker sex.

This conflict-ridden atmosphere has not only destroyed the villages and houses of women but also damaged their relationships, and their families, and has robbed the peace of their life. It has even divided the families into two sections, as it is shown in the conversation between the two brothers, Vini and Leto in *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) by Easterine Kire:

Do you know how frustrating it is to be a Naga and live with the fear of being shot all the time? Do you know what it does to your insides when you hear about the people tortured and killed by the army and you can't do anything about it? And then, this smart Alec comes along who thinks it is alright to stop fighting for freedom, to stop being men and be sitting at an office desk, having sold your identity away for a bundle of money. (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 24)

In *A Terrible Matriarchy* Kire has portrayed a picture of the Naga patriarchal society, and she has also emphasized the effects of conflict on the young generation, their disappointment, and disillusionment. The anxiety of Vini's mother to losing her son at the hands of the Indian army is an example of the state of every mother in Nagaland during the conflicts. The life of the Boss's wife Imtila in Ao's "Soaba" suddenly changes due to her husband's connection with the government officers. Imtila is a simple housewife and she is happy with her husband and children in her life. Her husband's job and the change in his nature have gradually turned her happy family into a broken one. "She could no longer call her home her personal domain, there was no peace and quiet for her or the children because her husband's lackeys seemed to be everywhere ... some even had the audacity to enter their bedroom on the pretext of giving a message to Boss" (*THCH*, 15). She silently witnesses her husband's brutality over the innocent Naga people in the name of interrogation. "Then the night would erupt with the unearthly screams and cries of the victims and even though the record player did its best to muffle the sounds, the walls of the house seemed to reverberate with their agony; and the poor woman with this knowledge in her heart would writhe in an agony of helplessness" (*THCH*, 16). It affects the relationship between the husband and wife. "Boss ... had no time for his wife or children now, they were becoming more like receding blurs than real persons .... His wife had gone away from the sanctuary of their relationship and had retreated into a world where he had no place" (*THCH*, 16). But Imtila finds some peace in her affection and care for the stupid town orphan Soaba. But Soaba's death by her drunk husband in front of her eyes devastates her completely and after the funeral,

Imtila locked herself in her room and stayed there for three days .... On the fourth day she came out and ordered the servants to remove all signs of Soaba's existence from the compound. The cot, piled high with his old clothes, was

taken to a far corner of the garden and burnt. It was as though she was obliterating a painful chapter of her own life through this ritual. (*THCH*, 20)

For years women of this hilly region have been trying to erase their pain and suffering. The physical scars can be healed, but not the psychological ones.

During the conflict between the Naga insurgents and the armed forces, only two voices are heard, the voices of underground rebels who have been fighting since the colonial period for their autonomy, for an independent Nagaland, and the version of the Indian government who have gone to every extent including Sham (reconciliation through negotiations), Dam (monetary inducements through the transfer of federal largesse), Danda (use of force through military operations) and Bhed (Split in rebel ranks) to make Nagaland a part of independent India. But there is a third voice, the voice of women, which is being constantly ignored and often brutally silenced. There are three ways in which women are affected by conflict. One is in the personal sphere as individuals, in which they have life threats from landmines, bullets, bombs, etc. They are also vulnerable to rape and sexual violence. The restricted mobility as a consequence of fear of personal danger has deeply affected their livelihood and survival during the phase of armed conflict and also affected their mental and physical well-being. The second dimension is the private sphere. Insurgency and conflict affect the survival of the family, which is the principal arena of a women's responsibility. The third dimension is the public sphere in which the policies and social rules alienate and oppress the human rights of women. In many post-conflict reconstruction phases, women are denied participation, and their social role is restricted to the household level. Women hardly get support from community structures that are built on the premise of patriarchal values. Both the insurgents and the Government have talked about better Nagaland, but neither of them has even discussed the betterment of Naga women. When the elders in "The Last Song" denies the burial of Apenyo and her mother's body inside the village graveyard, the villagers for whom Apenyo stands against the army remain silent. Khatila's intelligence saves her husband Punaba from the Captain but it is construed differently and the credit is attributed to her husband. Her presence of mind remains unrecognized. Independence for Naga women is not what is being promised by the insurgents or not the opportunities that the Government is providing, it is a state where their voice will be counted instead of being hushed by their husbands, clan members, or by the guns of the army. Women like Apenyo, Khatila, and Imtila have dreamt of an independent nation where they can live peacefully without the fear of getting raped or sexually harassed.

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