



# The Politics Of Maternal Peace Activism In Naga Society

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**Abstract:** This study attempts to explore the role of Naga mothers, specifically the Naga Mother's Association(NMA) in conflict resolution and peace building in Naga society. It examines how mothers strategically employ their motherhood identity to mobilize conflicting groups to make peace and how in the process, the NMA have achieved to create a political space for women in a patriarchal Naga society. It primarily emphasizes on NMA engagement in peace activism and peace projects.

**Index Terms** – Peace-building, motherhood politics, activism, peace projects.

## I. INTRODUCTION

More often, the institution of motherhood is considered to be apolitical by many. There is a notion that mothers are by definition apolitical, and the experience that motherhood offers is isolating and individualized, far removed from the muddle of politics and social struggle. This fixed image of mothers and motherhood underlies the belief that motherhood experiences alters women's consciousness in the most conservative way, grounding and quieting the most rebellious women. (Orleck 1997: 3) For the same reason, motherhood as an issue within feminism has been viewed quite differently. Maternity was severely rejected as feminist battle with sexism, male dominance and patriarchy. As clearly pointed out by Nathanson (2008), such examples can be drawn in the prominent Feminist texts including the 'Second Sex' where Simone De Beauvoir attacked marriage and motherhood as a barrier to women's freedom and transcendence. Similarly, Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' vilify work in the home as the cause of women's oppression and addictions. Also, Shulamith Fireston called reproduction a 'bitter trap' for women. Many feminist writings, protest the private –public distinctions, seeking to end dominance and defying the essentialist conception, form the core ideology of feminism and hence, motherhood was understood as the very source of women's oppression.

However, recent studies on maternal agencies and maternal activism indicate an alternative understanding contrary to its conventional image that motherhood is politically unaffected. Increasingly, new reality is taking root where motherhood in many ways has been politicized. In many cases, motherhood has become the bases of maternal activism for many women and mother's movements. Voices of mothers were radicalized at various stages of mothering experience. Once mothers became politically aware or active they used mothering experience strategically for the reason that motherhood is seen as one of the 'tolerated' space of protest by women in a male dominated society.

One of the definitions of maternal activism as given by Naples holds that "maternal activism is the care for children beyond the nuclear family and the relationship between that care, motherhood and community action. While Orleck claims that maternal activism is the "means by which women have sought to regain control over their lives and the lives of their children (Naples and Orleck qtd. in Nathanson 2008, p-245). In most cases, mothers mobilize because

they perceive inequities or threats to the well being of their families and community. Such activism among mothers is not uncommon in all parts of the world. For example, the Mother's of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina demanded that those who tortured and murdered their children in the Dirty war be persecuted. Similarly, the Soldiers' Mother's Committee in Russia demonstrated and held hunger strikes to protest hazing practices inflicted on their sons and to call for military reform and also the Mothers' Against Drunk Driving (MADD) of US who raised national consciousness about the dangers of driving drunk.(O'Reilly 2010: 12-13). Maternal activism crosses race, ethnic and different socioeconomic groups and is prevalent among low, middle or upper class mothers although the nature of their activism varies. Not all maternal activism are radical in response to crisis, rather it is evenly applied to everyday activities that embrace the needs of children in communities.

Despite severe criticism, many women agencies have found in motherhood, a spark for radical change and have used motherhood strategically from peace activism to environmental activism and to anti- militarist activism because they are aware that speaking as mothers gives them more credibility in patriarchal societies than they would have been as individual women. This is apparent in the study of women's movement and agencies across the globe. Thus, motherhood is regarded as one of the "tolerated" space of protest by women which are also conspicuously portrayed of women's activism in the North-east states in India.

Taking similar case of motherhood politics in the North-east state of Nagaland, the study explores the role of the Naga Mothers Association (NMA), a voluntary women's organisation which is now recognised as the most notable and legitimate women's peace groups in North east India ( Banerjee and Dey 2012: 17). The role undertaken by NMA in peace, social and political activism has come close as to change the local politics in Nagaland. It also tries to provide the peaceful alternative to the politics that is confrontational in nature.

## II. FORMATION OF NAGA MOTHER'S ASSOCIATION

On 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 1984, the NMA was formally and officially established with Dr. K.K Angami as the Convenor. Because Ms. Nicky Haralu and Mrs. Chubala Ao declined, Mrs. Sano Vamuzo and Mrs. Neidonuo Angami were unanimously elected to the post of president and secretary respectively while Mrs. Vizouno Meru was elected as the treasurer. The initial activities of NMA are fighting against social evils, injustices, smuggling of drugs and alcohol, immoral video screening, women trafficking and molestations, deforestations, issues related to problems and for electoral reforms, and so on. The mothers organized public meetings and gatherings to create awareness about women's rights, responsibilities as well as empowering women to become accountable citizens. With the changing needs in the Naga society, the mothers focused their attention from one issue to another and actively contributed to healing and resolving conflicts in the society. Though initiated by few concerned mothers, the association is open to all Naga women with a "clear objective of combating all social evils confronting the society. The NMA with its motto "Human Integrity" (Das 2007, NMA silver Jubilee souvenir 2009) aims to provide a common platform as a channel of communication for Naga Women's mutual interest and welfare, and also to uphold the spirit of motherhood , dignity of human values and rights. The organization does not have any rigid structures of rules and procedures, and usually operated through tribal women's organizations, calling upon them to send representatives to mass rallies, programs and supporting local women's groups in their activities.

The NMA mandate for its members is to fulfil the role as 'mothers' to make society whole and healthy. NMA initial objectives was to counter social evils threatening the Naga society, nonetheless, NMA has evolved as an organization that aims for promoting social welfare to advocating peace and focusing on women's strategic rights in the recent times. However, this paper emphasize and explore the role of NMA in Peace activism.

### III. SHED NO MORE BLOOD: NMA JOURNEY'S TOWARDS PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION (MATERNAL PEACE ACTIVISM)

Grounded in their position as mothers, the NMA language of mobilization and appeal revolves around motherhood. The word 'mother' in the nomenclature Naga Mothers' Association has great significance. As Vamuzo writes, "many people over the years have questioned us why we choose the word 'Mother' instead of women and suggested that we change it so as to be more inclusive for general understanding. Nonetheless, there are several reasons why we have not change it. First, culturally among Nagas, the word 'mother' is a term of endearment as well as respect. She continues, "We not only call our biological mothers as mother, but we also call her sister as "mother." A woman may not have biological children, but her nieces and nephews, or children of her peers who are not necessarily related to her through blood ties may call her mother, In this context, every Naga woman is a mother. This also explains that NMA membership is not limited to women who are married, but all women irrespective of whether they are married or not. Hence, though there has been question of exclusivity of the nomenclature, as some members clarifies, the name continues to stay. Another member, Humtsoe says "we are more comfortable working in the name of mothers. Mothers are respected by all sections in society and we earn respect if mother identity is used. It has more social acceptability than women".<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, like many women's organizations, the NMA have played a key role in translating their traditional roles as mothers to social and political agents and have successfully used the social sanction of being a 'protector' that motherhood offers.

The social sanction for Naga women's peace advocacy may be attributed to their traditional role as peacemakers between warring villages since the headhunting days, when a 'pukrelia' (a woman mediator or peacemaker) would step forward in the thick of conflict and prevent bloodshed. (Aier 2017:103) Another example of a mediating act is a woman's story in Jotsoma village. She proudly explained how, when the Indian army arrived in the area to seek for Naga armed groups, it was women who stepped up and interfered.

The NMA concept of peace activism is born out of the maternal responsibility that every mother performs within the family. Vamuzo explains that children are attached to mothers and when children fights; mother intervenes without taking sides. They listen to each child and create a situation making them forgive each other. The same applies for a quarrel between a father and his children. She claims that mothers have traditionally served as mediators. Conflict is unavoidable, whether at home, in the neighbourhood, or in society as a whole, and women are expected to take on a mediating role beyond the house. Mothers use a family approach to resolve all issues. She added, "We gave birth to all mankind, so mankind's problems are our problems. She says that wherever mothers go, they create a welcoming atmosphere."<sup>2</sup>

Incessant violence in the state during the 1980s and 1990s pushed the social welfare organization into taking responsibility for working towards peace. In the early 1990s, NMA addressed the violence that tore Nagaland apart; atrocities by the Indian state army against the Naga armed groups and civilians, and then years of fratricidal killings between various Naga factions'. In the service of the general welfare of the Naga people and women in particular, the organization had to undergo critical public attention as well as misconception about its aims and objectives. Despite criticisms due to its involvements in political issues, the NMA in 1994 during its 5<sup>th</sup> General Assembly held at Zunheboto, brought into focus the agony and the cries of the people and thus resolved to set aside a Day for mourning in memory of all those killed due to political turmoil in the land, irrespective of Nagas or non-Nagas.

The mourning day was observed on 5<sup>th</sup> August, 1994, at Nagaland State Academy Hall, Kohima, starting with church- bell of different denominations, tolling in funeral tones early in the morning. Banners and Posters in black background with messages like "Mothers anguished over tragic killings and deaths", "Forgive and unite" were placed all over the capital town<sup>3</sup>. About three thousand mothers from different Naga tribes gathered together in tears and prayed for healing in Naga society. Many public and church leaders were also present to share the same emotion and grief with the organisation. The day was dedicated to the spirit of reconciliation and re-establishment of brotherhood and fraternity among Naga People.

<sup>1</sup> Personal Interview with NMA members on 16/6/2023.

<sup>2</sup> Personal Interview with Sano Vamuzo on 3/08/2024

<sup>3</sup> NMA pamphlet on Shed No More Blood.

As an outcome of the day, following resolutions were unanimously adopted:

1. Resolved to form a team as "NMA Peace Team" under the theme "Shed No More Blood"
2. That, the team shall appeal to all groups of Naga National Workers, our brothers and sisters to stop killing one another in the spirit of forgiveness. While appreciating the selfless sacrifice they have rendered for our people, we also appeal to them to remember that each drop of blood shed is draining away the life-blood of our Nation.
3. To restore our broken society, we resolved to first set our homes in order through setting up of family altar.<sup>4</sup>

The same Peace Team was engaged in the task of meeting the leaders of Naga National Workers, State Politicians, Tribal leaders and people in general, to create awareness and conscience to "Shed no more blood." Following, a public peace rally was organised on November 22, 1995, in Kohima, and awareness on "Human integrity and Consequences of killing" was created by the speakers of the rally which was described by the media "Historic event".

In many of those days, when unclaimed bodies were seen lying in the open markets, the NMA in alliance with the churches wrapped the bodies in Naga shawl and perform a dignified funeral ritual. Whenever there are casualties, Tribal Hohos and NMA were called by the police to identify dead bodies and handed over to the families. However in cases when identities are not known, the mothers will cover them with traditional shawls or clean clothes. The mothers claimed that numbers of killings were overwhelming that they had to ask donation of traditional shawls from women tribal units and with their help they continued to offer dignified burial. The mothers explains that in Naga culture, irrespective of whether a person is good or bad, she/ he should be given a proper and respectful final rites. The understanding reached was that that every district administration will provide coffins for the unclaimed death bodies, police administration to arrange transportation to handover bodies to the families, town committees to take care of the burial and the NMA to provide shawls to the dead bodies.

The peace project initiated by the NMA did not focus only the killings by the army but also by the Naga armed groups. It released a pamphlet on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1995 which wrote that 'the way in which our society is being run whether by the over-ground government or the underground government, has become simply intolerable' (Banerjee and Dey 2012: 17). They further appeal all parties indulging in the violent conflict to stop killing, as the:

*"Assassinated man may be a husband, a father, a son or a brother. His whole family is shattered by his violent liquidation no matter what reasons his liquidators choose to give for snuffing out of his life".* (Banerjee 2000)

Through tribal affiliations, the mothers reached out to the tribal segregated factions listening to their grievances like a 'mother' and talking to them into reconciliation. They claimed, as mothers they are trusted by all sides, as declared one member, 'for women they are no factions. We are still united; it is the men who have misunderstandings as struggle for power has divided them' (Manchanda and Kakran 2017:71).

Besides appealing for peace to different parties the NMA has been directly involved in mediating between conflicting parties. Some of such incidents are narrated in the following ;

### 3.1.1 Pfutsero Incident

During those times, different Naga armed factions tried taking over regions to exert control over areas. The Phek regions was taken over by both NNC and NSCN-IM and have set up camps in the northern and southern part of the region respectively and situation became highly tensed that casualties could occur anytime. The civilians sought multiple appeals from both parties to vacate the area but they refused. Then NMA were called to persuade the factions. The members on reaching wanted to meet the NNC but denied so they meet the NSCN-IM and requested them to leave. They continuously appeal saying "come and meet us, we are your mothers"<sup>5</sup>. With much apprehension they withdrew from the area. Narrating the incident, Vamuzo remarked " We are mothers and we don't take sides, irrespective of what factions".<sup>6</sup>. Members further claims that whenever there arise conflict between any parties they are called. They also meet different

<sup>4</sup> NMA pamphlet on shed no more blood, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sano Vamuzo on 3/8/2024

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with Sano Vamuzo on 3/8/2024

factions and plead them to maintain peace. The NMA do not only mediate between different factions but also between public and government in times of conflict.

### 3.1.2 Jotsoma Incident

There was an indiscriminate firing by both the parties( NSCN-IM and NSCN-K) leading to casualties of both sides. The NMA was compelled to intervene and they met both parties accompanied by few Tribal Hoho members. Since the firing was ongoing they bore a white flag, that signify peace and appeal them to stop killing each other. They reached NSCN-K camp and requested the officer-in-charge to leave the village. Reluctantly both the groups agreed to leave their camp. On inquiring, the parties denied about casualties but there seem to have few lives lost in the incident<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.1.3 Hebron Incident

In April 2012, there was an incident of clash that occurred between the NSCN-IM and the Indian army towards Hebron camp ( then Dimapur) and the situation becomes volatile that violence could erupt anytime. The NMA members were informed, and they rushed down to Hebron and were surprised that the Indian armies have set up check-gates and barricades along the way to Hebron. With much difficulties of frisking, they reached the camp and sat with the then JCO General Seth. They learnt that NSCN-IM cadres have snatched rifles (Guns/ weapons) of the armies, consequently they were compelled to set up camps until they retrieve their weapons. The members also discussed with the officer in-charge of the other party and learn that the army crossed beyond the demarcated line towards the main Hebron camp of the NSCN-IM, compelling them for defense. After long persuasion and negotiation with the NSCN-IM they agreed to return the weapons to the army and in the presence of the Naga Hoho, the weapons were handed over to the Indian army.

### 3.1.4 Tuensang Incident

On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015, while NMA delegation was on its way for a peace dialogue with the NSCN-K, they received a phone call asking if they are safe that Assam Rifles ambushed a vehicle carrying NSCN-K cadres, also killing some civilians. Upon reaching Tuensang, the delegation meet the police officials and AR Officer in-charge of the Tuensang headquarter to restrain from further killings and also call upon the stationed armies around the area. The team also appealed to the NSCN-K to “abstain from any retaliation and give chance for a peaceful dialogue for the sake of peace and tranquility in our land”<sup>8</sup>. The AR officer in-charge reluctantly ordered Jawans to retreat back and the delegation crossed the border and proceeds to meet the NSCN K at Pangsha. Besides these incidents, there were similar incidents in Zunheboto, Meluri etc, where NMA units were involved in making Peace.

In 1997, the NMA mediated between the Indian government and the NSCN (IM) faction and facilitated a ceasefire agreement. Even after the ceasefire between the Indian Government and the Naga groups, the NMA has been active in negotiations. The NMA has re-imagined itself as frontline ‘peace keepers’ and stake holder in the Naga peace process and has been an integral participant in the important civil society initiatives such as the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) (Aier 2017: 105).They have constantly shown commitment to peace by participating in different kinds of community dialogues on peace within and outside the region.

In 1999, the NSCN-IM convened a consultative conference of all Naga leaders in Bangkok for the second time, and the NMA delegation, together with two Naga women from Manipur, participated. Members discussed their peace work and concerns. NSCN-IM commanders challenged guests at the conference to determine who would transmit the message of reconciliation and peace to the NSCN-K factions. Many people pledged to be the mediator and meet Khaplang, but after two months, no organisation or group attempted to do so. Thus, in the latter part of 1999, the NMA began contacting one of its subordinates and embarked on a three-day journey to Myanmar to talk inter-faction peace with Khaplang.

After trekking for days, the mothers rest for the night before continuing their journey till they reach the NSCN-K designated camp. Villagers and NSCN cadres aided them in the midway. When they arrived at camp, they were startled to witness PLA and ULFA members alongside NSCN-K cadres.

<sup>7</sup> Personal Interview with NMA members 16/6/2023

<sup>8</sup> We the Nagas page in Facebook, posted on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2015.

Khaplant was first dismissive of their arrival and talk, but when NMA members expressed concern that they would leave if he did not listen to them, he changed his mind. The members then read the statement announcing the NSCN-IM's readiness to engage in a peace conversation and Khaplant turned emotional, and decided to speak with the other party. That is how NMA became the first group to begin talks between the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K. On their route, they were halted by the Indian army and interrogated, but after hearing the mothers appeal for peace and reconciliation and guaranteeing that they had no paperwork in their possession, they escaped without being noticed. Furthermore, they began appealing to all other factions to work together for peace. Since then, the Association is committed to peace making and peace building activities in the region and beyond.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The NMA is a key member in significant society initiatives like Forum for Naga Reconciliation, Global Naga Forum etc and has re-envisioned itself as frontline 'peace guardians' and a stakeholders in the Naga peace process. (Aier 1017). By actively involving in many community dialogues on peace both within and outside the region, they have consistently demonstrated their dedication to peace. Although, several communities across the world has record of women intervening for peace, the Naga women's renowned standing as "women of peace" however is the result of their consistent and significant contribution to peace-building. Moreover, these achievements appear to be largely dependent on how the mothers strategically used their identity and enter into the public space without succumbing to social criticism.

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