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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNITY IN COMBATING COVID 19: A CASE STUDY OF NAGALAND

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ABSTRACT: The role of the Church is crucial in fighting Covid 19 because it plays an important social pillar that has huge influence on people in any given time. It is in this context that this paper will discuss the role of the Church and how the communities aided the government in warding off the virus from the state. Nagaland has a rich community life and it has played a vital role in the life of its community pre-pandemic, during pandemic and it will continue to play its role even in the future. Religion plays an equally important role in the lives of the Nagas as it plays an essential part in the decision making of the individuals, families and society at large.

KEYWORDS: Covid 19, Nagaland, Church, Community, Youth

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID - 19 has come as a shock to society, health systems, economies and governments worldwide. In the midst of extraordinary challenges and uncertainty, leaders are constantly under pressure to take decisions on managing the immediate impact of the pandemic and its consequences. Governments are struggling to control and contain the virus and ease lockdowns safely for the different communities. Collective action within communities is likely to facilitate a more rapid and peaceful exit from the present situation.

Some of the issues and challenges that the state has encountered in the last few months are addressed keeping in view the evolving nature of the virus and the social situations. As the state fights to contain the spread of the virus, the government along with the civil society, NGOs, Church and the community at large has been facing multiple challenges and hardships. As positive cases spiked in the state, the fear of community spread was at large and rumors were adding more obstacles. News items on returnees who had been recklessly breaking the protocols and not adhering to the SOPs as desired of them have been constantly reported.

II. DESCRIPTION OF NAGALAND

Nagaland is a state carved out of Assam as the 16th state of the Indian Union on December 1st 1963. The State is bordered by Manipur in the South, Assam in the West, Myanmar in the East, Arunachal Pradesh and a part of Assam in the North. Kohima is the state capital and is 1,444.12m above sea level. Population of Nagaland stands at 19, 78,502 (2011 Census) making it one of the smallest states of India. Density of population is 119 per sq. km. English is the official language of the state and Dimapur is the commercial capital. Nagaland covers an area of 16,579 sq kms and topographically is located in a mountainous region. The only airport and railway station is located in Dimapur which is connected with Kolkata and the rest of the country. The state has a road transport system and is reachable from the neighboring states.

Tribe traditions and loyalties play an important role in Naga society. Naga villages were mostly constructed on the hill tops during the olden days due to security reasons. They have a strong warrior background; they used to make armed raids to the nearby villages. Once a prevalent ritual, Head Hunting has now become obsolete. In this ritual, the warring tribes used to take the heads of their enemies in order to establish triumph. These tribes carry certain folklores depicting the gallant acts of their ancestors. Music is an integral part of life; folk songs eulogizing ancestors, the brave deeds of warriors and traditional heroes, poetic love songs immortalizing ancient tragic love stories, gospel songs and the modern tunes that renders exquisite mood. Their costumes aptly display the ancestral lineage. The design of shawl denotes the social status of the wearer. The attire worn by the males include a conical red headgear decorated with Hornbill's black and white feathers and wild boar's canine teeth. Also, one cannot overlook the necklaces, the bangles and the tattoos which are reminiscent of the old age wars and sacrifices. However, the Nagas claim that they belonged to one family, having common source of origin and common history and culture, which are forced to live in different geographical areas (Lanununsang and Ovung, 2012: 6).

Nagaland has a rich linguistic tradition with as many languages as there are tribes, each exclusive to itself. Every village has a slightly different variation even within the same dialect and this variance progressively increases with the geographical distance. This makes inter-tribe and intra-tribe communication very difficult. Therefore, in these circumstances, English has come to serve as the State language while Nagamese has become the common lingua. The sixteen major tribes in Nagaland have their own respective festival that revolve around the agricultural cycle and many of these festivals are connected to spring, sowing seeds, first crop, harvest, physical and spiritual sanctification, end of the year and so on. Over 85% population of Nagaland is directly dependent on agriculture and lives in a thousand and odd villages situated on high hill tops or slopes (Nagaland State Portal, 2021).

Every Naga festival revolves mainly around agriculture because of the fact that agriculture is their main economy. Although some religious and spiritual sentiments are interwoven into secular rites and rituals, the predominant theme of the festivals is the offering of prayers to a supreme being, which has different names in different Naga dialects. At these festivals, the gods are propitiated with sacrifices by the head of the village for a bountiful harvest, either before sowing or on the eve of the harvest. In fact, agricultural work and religion are so interwoven in Naga society that it is difficult to describe the festivals independent of the processes of agriculture. In the olden days, the Nagas followed the lunar calendar for the celebrations of their festivals in their traditional animistic religion. Waiting for the phases of the moon, the animist village priest chooses the days between the half moon and the full moon to celebrate their festivals (Lanununsang and Ovung, 2012). The priest announces the days of the festival at the top of his voice after the villagers have completed the mandatory agriculture operations for celebrations of such festivals.

For encouraging inter-tribal cultural interaction and bringing together the festivals of the various tribes under one umbrella, the government of Nagaland has evolved a festival called the Hornbill festival where one can see a mélange of Naga cultural displays at one place. Organized by the State Directorate of Tourism every year between December 1 and 7 in Kohima since 2000, the festival is intended to revive, protect and preserve the richness and uniqueness of the Naga heritage and attract tourists. The festival is also a tribute to the hornbill, a bird most admired by the Naga people for its qualities of alertness and grandeur. This majestic bird is linked closely with the social and cultural life of the people, and their status, as is evident in tribal folklores, dances and songs. The awe and admiration for the bird is symbolically displayed on almost all traditional headgears worn during festivities. This festival is a cultural extravaganza where the government, local communities and various NGOs get a chance to revive, exhibit, protect and preserve the richness and uniqueness of the Naga heritage.

III. METHODOLOGY ADOPTED FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study has been conducted purely based on the secondary resources available pertaining to the issue at hand. Materials and information has been collected from books, research papers, newspapers and information available on different websites that have been crucial in disseminating information during the pandemic.

IV. ANALYSIS: SCENARIO IN NAGALAND

As a consequence of the COVID -19 pandemic individuals are seeking the comfort and the security of their own homes, either out of choice or out of compulsion. Return at this juncture is considered to be dangerous as if any of them is infected the deadly disease is going to reach villages where healthcare infrastructure is extremely poor (Nagaland Post, 2020). Return migration, and possibly carrying the virus home, can have devastating impact on the indigenous communities. On March 24th 2020, as lockdown was announced to contain the spread of the novel corona virus. The short, four-hour notice for the shutdown effectively trapped the country's 470 million migrant workers. Like all other communities, this particular announcement created anxiety and uncertainty amongst thousands of Nagas who were studying and working in different parts of India. Students, workers and their families were welcomed to their own land but their return exodus also created fear and panic in Nagaland as there was no positive case of COVID -19 prior to the arrival of the returnees. As on June, 2021 Nagaland stood at 24629 confirmed cases, with 1509 being active, 21945 having recovered with 465 deaths (Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Nagaland) with the onslaught of the second wave of COVID-19.

Over 18,000 stranded Nagas registered with the government to return home. There were websites, portals that were dedicated to deal with the issues and concerns of the returnees. Special trains were arranged by the government to bring back the stranded Nagas from across the country and the first special train reached Nagaland on the 22nd of May, 2020, from Chennai, carrying 1463 stranded citizens of Nagaland. As of 5th July 2020, 17,157 returnees had returned to Nagaland from different parts of the country (Nagaland Post, 6th July 2020).

Indian Railways started nationwide special Shramik Express trains on 1st May 2020. Though such measures were necessary to facilitate the safe movement of those stranded away from their homes, this 'reverse migration' also raised the risk of the spread of infection to the hinterlands of the receiving states that often lack crucial healthcare infrastructure for testing, isolation wards and ventilators. As per the report given by the Head of Empowered Group (HEG) for COVID -19 and Agriculture Production Commissioner (APC), 6,800 returnees arrived by the special trains arranged by the state government and another 4, 312 by regular trains. He further mentioned that the last special train was expected to reach Dimapur from Bangalore with 500 returnees on 6th July 2020.

IV. i) The Role of the Church

Churches have played an important role in society as most of the citizens of Nagaland are Christians. They have extended their assistance since the first wave of COVID-19 swept through the State. With Nagaland fighting the second wave of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, things have not been any different as Churches across the state have extended their assistance to the government.

The Kohima Ao Baptist church provided the church's Jubilee Memorial Centre (JMC) located at Lerie in Kohima to be used as a quarantine centre for healthcare workers (EastMojo, 2021). The Church's JMC was used as a quarantine centre for frontline workers in 2020 as well. It had appealed to the authority concerned to make use of the facilities at JMC by following the guidelines laid down by the JMC managing board. Recently, the Catholic Church also announced its decision to raise money to help those affected by the pandemic. Secretary to the Bishop of Kohima had informed that priests of Kohima diocese had created a fund to help people affected by the pandemic.

Creating awareness on COVID-19 vaccine, District Immunization Officer of Dimapur said that Churches were the most effective platform in creating awareness as they not only delivered spiritual food but could also be used to disseminate information regarding various activities in the state. At an awareness seminar on COVID-19 vaccine organized by the Lotha Baptist Church, Dimapur, she said that platforms where wrong information, rumors, messages were being circulated, should be counteracted by equipping ourselves with the right messages and spreading the right information through right platforms so that vaccination drive could be implemented successfully in order to overcome the pandemic and get back to normal life. She called upon community participation and to do away with any misconception.

Church leaders of the State have expressed their willingness to come forward to work with the State government agencies to fight COVID-19 pandemic together (Nagaland Post, 2021). This was conveyed to the State Chief Secretary when State COVID-19 War Room members held a videoconference with Church bodies like the Nagaland Baptist Church Council, Diocese of Kohima, Catholic Church, Nagaland Christian Revival Church and Pentecostal Church. After getting the views and concerns of Church bodies, various issues were discussed including education and awareness on COVID-19 and health appropriate behavior. The Church leaders agreed to provide volunteers to assist in the management of the care centers run by the government as support staff and services, and also in training and dissemination of COVID-19 appropriate information.

Nagaland Joint Christian Forum (NJCF) called for a state-wide prayer by way of holding prayer walk and family prayer time. It called for prayer in two phases. The first phase in the morning from 4: am to 5: am as a prayer walk to pray for protection of the state, where pastors, deacons and church workers were requested to hold the prayer walk in the colony, village and in towns for God's protection, claim God's protection over the people and pray for the sick and the families that were going through a difficult time. The second phase in the evening from 5: pm to 6: pm where leaders of the denomination were requested to prepare prayer points and disseminate the information to the pastors for prayer of thanksgiving, confession, pray for special needs, pray for the state and national leaders and policy makers, pray for district administration, pray for the sick and COVID patients for speedy recovery, pray for the global community, for the bereaved family for God's comfort, for the frontline workers, for Kohima and Dimapur (the epicenter of the virus), for the farmers, for the children those who are outside of the state and for the church leaders.

IV. ii) The Role of the Community

Ease in restrictions and surge in cases, especially in the second wave, called for a rethink of the pandemic control strategies. The focus shifted to community participation which had been lacking in the state's COVID-19 responses. Despite the rising cases, people seemed to be complacent and were not being cautious. The importance of active engagement with the community was highlighted by many. Community involvement plays a key role in planning local level actions in collaboration with local bodies to identify, develop and provide support to the vulnerable and the needy. Although there had been periodic community efforts, the efforts were needed to be built upon and scaled for effective and sustained community engagement.

During the pandemic, the government has advocated large-scale behavior modifications like maintaining physical distancing, hand washing, cough etiquette and following the rules of the lockdown to curb infection transmission (NSDMA Official Portal, Government of Nagaland). These measures could be effective only if the community was engaged and they accepted these interventions actively. The WHO also noted that community engagement is the one factor that underlies the success of all control measures.

There have been instances where the communities came forward to help each other and also those in need. In the earlier phase of the lockdown when Nagaland was hit with the first wave, quarantine centers were provided meals prepared by different communities volunteering their assistance and support. The community kitchens were conceived, organized and run by the people, and such initiatives served as a possible solution during the lockdown. Help were provided to the old and the needy, the elderly and the vulnerable sections of the society. However, most of these were informal initiatives undertaken by the communities and required necessary engagement to unlock their full potential.

IV. iii) The Role of the Youth

While most young people are not at high risk of severe disease during the COVID-19 pandemic, they play an important role in the collective responsibility to help stop the virus transmission, said World Health Organization (WHO) (Barnale, 2020). WHO Director-General, together with UNESCO's Director-General recognized young people, youth organizations, and youth networks around the world for their collective action during COVID-19. He was quoted as saying, 'This pandemic is having a major impact on the future of young adults—not just from the virus itself, but because of its impacts on the economy, employment, education, and the overall health system'. He further asked young people to be informed and make choices about their health to prepare for long and healthy lives. He pointed out that it is critical that young people are engaged now to start the journey to understanding their own health.

The WHO chief further left three requests for them. First, he called on organizations, institutions and governments to listen, engage and empower young adults as partners in action as our future is their future. Second, young people should be given a much larger role in political decision-making. Their voices often go unheard, even though more than half of the world's population is under 35 years old. Finally, and most importantly, to young adults around the world, he asked them to: 'Think big and be bold. We count on you for your creativity and your fresh ideas'. He added that working together, from everywhere in the world, can overcome this pandemic.

At the closure of the first wave of COVID 19, Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, was strongly of the opinion that the young brigade of the country had played a huge role in battling the corona virus pandemic (Srivastava, 2021). The Minister commented that in times of crisis the youth of the country had always stood tall in front of any troublesome situation and thanked the young guns for saving the country from the deadly virus. He was quoted as saying, 'Whenever any crisis came in, the youth always stood in front of the line during the coronavirus pandemic. We have to understand the contribution of youngsters'. He shared his happiness with the youngsters and thanked them for their service to the country.

Local communities across Nagaland and other states in the North East have constituted their own task forces, issued set of standard operating procedures and set up quarantine centres for all returnees (Chakrabati and Longkumer, 2000). Young people form a huge chunk of volunteers who are part of these task forces and are monitoring the movement of people in their own colonies and also reaching out to the needy and the poor. In Kohima, such community quarantine centers have been set up in 10 of the city's 19 wards. They are being run and maintained by the communities themselves with little help from the government, according to Kohima Municipal Council Chairman. The 13-member team, mainly comprising youth volunteers of the area, had been tasked with registering the returnees and maintaining the community quarantine centers.

The youth are involved in cooking and serving food to those staying in the quarantine centers and they also carried out different chores. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the district administrations and several NGOs from the state were helping the stranded students and labourers, daily-wage earners and those who were affected due to the nationwide lockdown. Joining fight against COVID-19, the Northern Angami Youth Organisation (NAYO) reached out to the orphans and the senior citizens housed in shelter homes of Kohima and distributed essential commodities (Ambrocia, 2020). Led by its president, the tribal youth body visited the Kohima orphanage and destitute home, old age home at Meriema, and the Bright Morning Star children home in Kohima and distributed essential commodities. They pointed out that this little act went a long way in proving that all are together in the fight against COVID. They also pointed how during this time, when all Nagas were extending help and supporting one another, the need was felt to reach out to the orphans and old people who were sheltered in the designated homes. At such times when people are obliged to maintain social distancing, the youth body decided to donate and deliver essential goods to these shelter homes.

Another way in which communities in Nagaland have come together to support each other during lockdown was to encourage young people to grow their own food (Krocha, 2021). Young people were taking the lead in cultivating fallow fields and the greatest realization of the community was the importance of growing their own food. The lockdown has taught the importance of self-reliance, as the future is unknown.

During the trying times, the close knit family is falling back on the sense of community and kinship that has been passed down over generations in Nagaland. A professor at the Department of English, Nagaland University, claims that Nagaland is a great example of how communities rise to the occasion where commitment towards community is an integral part of Naga culture. It was further pointed out that be it in death or celebration, Nagas are taught to stand by each other and this was reflected through the outpouring of generosity from individuals and communities and organizations towards the less fortunate, returnees, and daily wage workers who faced the brunt of lockdown in the state.

V. CONCLUSION

Community participation is essential in the collective response to Covid-19, from compliance with lockdown, to the steps that need to be taken as countries ease restrictions, to community support through volunteering. The importance of community participation has also been emphasized by the global health guidelines. Incorporating insights and ideas from diverse communities is central for the coproduction of health, whereby health professionals work together with communities to plan, research, deliver, and evaluate the best possible health promotion and health-care services. Across nations and countries, response to the pandemic has largely involved governments telling communities what to do with minimal community input. Yet communities, including vulnerable and marginalised groups, can identify solutions: they know what knowledge and rumours are circulating; they can provide insight into stigma and structural barriers; and they are well placed to work with others from their communities to devise collective responses. Such community participation matters because unpopular measures risk low compliance. With communities on side, innovative, solutions can be arrived at that meet the full range of needs of our diverse populations. Meaningful relationships between communities and providers should be nurtured to ensure sustainable and inclusive participation. Managing participatory spaces takes sensitivity and care to recognise and harness the different types of knowledge and experiences brought by diverse communities and individuals.

Churches happened to be the most effective platform in creating awareness as they not only deliver spiritual food but could also be used to disseminate information regarding various activities in the state. Different platforms where wrong information, rumors, messages were being circulated, one should counteract by equipping oneself with the right messages and spreading the right information through right platforms. The right information should be delivered so that vaccination drive could be implemented successfully in order to overcome the pandemic and get back to normal life. The need of the hour is for community participation and to do away with any misconception. Herd immunity would be achieved when a significant number of people (at least 60%) in the community produce immunity or antibodies which would also help by breaking the chain of transmission of the virus. Churches provided volunteers that assisted in the management of the care centers run by the government as support staff and services and also training and dissemination of COVID-19 appropriate information. Corona virus is real, it is cruel and it has shattered lives, families and community. People live in fear but one must continue to trust in God and seek His mercy in a situation such as this. In times like

this, Churches are in prayer for God's intervention and as everyone does their part, one must also continue to pray as a Christian majority state so that God will be gracious to all.

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