



Lotha Naga Village Administration And The British Colonial Construction Of *Dobashi* And *Gaonbura*: Continuities And Change

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Abstract

In the pre-British colonial period, every Lotha Naga village was an independent entity and a self-reliant unit with strong village administration. However, in 19th century, colonialism in the Naga Hills had brought about a change in such village administration; the Britishers, for their administrative convenience, constructed the *Dobashi* system. Indeed, the introduction of modern administration demoted, at least in the title, several Naga village chiefs to that of a *Goanbura* (literally ‘Village Elders’) or a *Dobashis* (literally ‘interpreters’); implying the sheer disregard of the hierarchy that was maintained in the administration of ancient Lotha Naga villages. Overtime, the *Dobashis*, chiefly because of their interpretive faculty, became more useful for the British administration in the Naga Hills. There is a continual usage of the term *Dobashi* and its institution remains in function in the present 21st century. This paper therefore analyzes the continuities and change of this institution in contemporary times. It also examines how the colonial construction of *Dobashis* led to the loss of power of the *Ekyung* (meaning ‘chief’ in Lotha Naga dialect) and the relevancy of *Ekyung-ship* in the administration of Lotha villages.

Keywords: Lotha, Naga, *Ekyung*, *Dobashi*, village administration

The present state of Nagaland - sans its eastern frontier that was once considered a British colonial free Naga territory - in 1866 was first made a district of Assam under the title the ‘Naga Hills’ with Samaguting (present Chumukedima) as its headquarter and with Lt. John Gregory as the first Deputy Commissioner. In 1878, the headquarter was shifted to Kohima from wokha, the first sub-division of the Naga Hills District was established in Wokha (this place today is one district in the state of Nagaland that houses the Lotha people) only to be shifted later on to Mokokchung in 1889 (Government of Nagaland, 2019, p. 11). After India attained independence from British India on 15th August 1947, Naga Hills District continued to remain within the state

of Assam till she attained statehood in 1963. The 13th Constitutional Amendment Act, Bill No.7 of 1962 was introduced in the Lok Sabha for the creation of a separate state of Nagaland and the president gave his assent on 4th Sept 1962. Eventually, the state of Nagaland was created as the sixteenth state of the Indian union. The Act provided that no Act of Parliament in respect of - “Religious or social practices of the Nagas; Naga Customary law and procedure; Administration of Civil and Criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga Customary law; and Ownership and transfer of land and its resources, shall apply to the new state unless the legislative assembly of Nagaland by a resolution so decides” (Government of Nagaland, 2019, p.21). On 1st December 1963, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the then president of India, inaugurated the state of Nagaland having a representative government with a unicameral legislature, and the first Legislative Assembly of the state was held in the month of January in 1964. Indeed, even after the attainment of statehood, much like in the pre-colonial period, customary law and practices continue to occupy an important place in the Nagas’ life world.

Confirming the oral narration, it has been recorded that during the pre-colonial period every Naga village was independent having its own village administration. According to Mills (2003, p. 96), “Every village is an independent unit in the tribe”, and customs and traditions of the village was respected and strictly upheld by the villagers. As a matter of fact, it was the era where identification was based on village and not tribe. It was also the era where the village customary law was sacrosanct and held supreme for settling any disputes. Adherence to the age-old customs and traditions were required for well-being of the society and security of that village. In fact, for village security’s sake, the Nagas always build their villages on top of the hills to defend themselves and their village from enemies’ attack. To this day, sans the villages established after the arrival of modernity, specifically, Britishers, Christianity, and Western Education, almost all the ancient Naga villages are perched on the hilltop. This indeed is true for the Lotha Naga as well. “At the entrance of most of the Lotha villages are huge trees which serve as a wind screen for the village in addition to serving the sentries of the village a convenient place for look- outpost,” stated Mills (2003, p. 22). Headhunting was the warfare of the ancient Nagas and such warfare was “reportedly continued until the 1960s in unadministered areas of Nagalim, also popularly known as ‘Free Naga territory’” (Longvah 2017, p. 137). It is discernable therefore that the Nagas looked to the exploits of their chiefs mostly for security but also for development and well-being of the village. With modernity, the chief system has continued but accompanied by various changes and modifications.

With the coming of the British colonial rulers and the introduction of modern administration by the British government and the American missionaries to the Lotha Naga areas, one can see the breakdown of customs and traditions of the people slowly. For instance, *Chumpo* (the term for ‘Morung’ in Lotha dialect) or the bachelor house that played an important role in the lives of the Lotha Nagas falls into disuse particularly with the people becoming Christians, in spite of the non-Christian offering stiff opposition to the changes taking place in the villages. Ornaments and shawls of both men and women with different patterns, worn by both men and women which were worn as insignia for achievements by giving feast of merit were dying out, the suppression of traditional customs, ceremonies and dances were stopped on the plea that those are non-

Christian practices, striking at the whole social structure and proved very disastrous for the sustenance of ancient Lotha Nagas way of life. With modernity, the once powerful role of the *Ekyung*, i.e., the chief, was diminished to mere 'representative and interpreters' of the British government.

In the pre-British colonial period, every Naga village was an independent entity and a self-reliant unit with strong village administration. As it has been a custom for several centuries among the other Naga tribes, likewise, among the Lotha Naga villages, the *Ekyung* assisted by a council of elders called *Tongti*, the upper division; *Chochang*, the lower division and under them a *Pangiden* wielded the authority over the village governance. However, colonialism in the Naga Hills had brought about a change in such village administration; the Britishers, for their administrative convenience, constructed the *Dobashi* system. With the introduction of modern administration, the political agents of the government of British India demoted, at least in the title, several Naga village chiefs to that of a *Gaonburas* (literally 'Village Elders') or *Dobashis* (literally 'interpreters'). The status of *Ekyung* became equivalent to the composite of *Tongti*, *Chochang* and *Pangiden* implying the sheer disregard of the hierarchy that was maintained in the administration of ancient Lotha Naga villages. Indeed, in the British administration, the Naga village chiefs became appointed either as *Gaonburas*, who took care of village administration or *Dobashis*, who mainly performed the role of 'interpreter' and the 'middle person' between the British officials and the locals. But overtime, the *Dobashis*, chiefly because of their interpretive faculty, became more useful for the British administration in the Naga Hills. As found in the written literatures and also in oral narratives, *Dobashis* popularly assisted colonial administrators in the settlement of many domestic disputes. In a sense, *Dobashi* as an institution had helped the Britishers in building their relationship with the Nagas. There is a continual usage of the term *Dobashi* and its institution remains in function in the present 21st century. This paper therefore examines the role of *Ekyung* in the pre-British colonial Lotha villages; studies the construction of *Dobashi* as an institution by the colonial administration; and analyzes the continuities and change of this institution in contemporary times.

The role of *Ekyung* (Village Chief) and security of Lotha Villages

According to Nshoka (2009), Naga villages without exceptions were governed by chiefs whose offices were either hereditary, monarchical or democratic, and every chief had undoubted authority over his village. It, in fact, is a well discourse subject that the practice of power of the Naga chiefs differs from tribe to tribe. For instances, the Semas have hereditary chiefs so also the Chang and Konyak tribes; Ao and Tangkhul villages were "governed by bodies of elders representing the principal kindred's in the village" Mills (2003, p. xxxiii), while the Angami, Lothas and Sangtams have democratic institutions. Whether the source of power is autocratic or democratic, in pre-colonial period the chiefs enjoyed commanding positions in their respective village. It was a practice in the ancient Naga society that a man becomes the chief of a village when he finds a new habitable space for his people and transforms that space by making it function as a village, in the olden days by founding a village a man becomes the *Ekyung*.

In pre-British period, when the Nagas 'lived in permanently established village-states, much like the Greek city states' (Shimray, 2005, p.34); a Lotha village was ruled by *Ekyung*. Mills (2003) discoursed in detail that

in the days when Nagas were constantly at war with each other, the *Ekyung* was assisted in the administration of the village by ‘an informal council of elders’ called *Tongti* the upper division and *Chochang* the lower division and ‘under them is a council of vague dimension called *Pangi*’. The *Tongti* is superior in rank to *Chochang* and *Pangi* or *Pangiden*, the number of *pangi* elected depends on the population of the village. Persons whose lineage cannot be traced are never chosen to assist the *Ekyung*. According to Mills (2003, p. 96), for the Lothas, “chieftainship was hereditary in the family of the man who originally founded the village, but it did not necessarily pass on from father to son.” Upon the demise of the *Ekyung*, the most suitable man in his family circle becomes the *Ekyung*.

A powerful village depends a lot on the personality and charismatic leadership of the *Ekyung*. His word, in the pre-colonial period, was considered the law which eventually came to be adhered and practiced as the customary law. Such law bounded the social, economic, cultural, religious, and security activities of the Lotha Naga. For instance, since the main occupation of the Lotha Naga being agriculture, all activities relating to cultivation, like deciding the day for slashing, clearing the forest by burning, sowing seeds, harvesting of paddy and community hunting are decided by the *Ekyung*. In religious activities the village priest and his assistant in consultation with the *Ekyung* makes all important announcements with regard to celebrations of festivals in the village as well as conducting all religious ceremony concerning the welfare of the whole village.

The main function of the *Ekyung* was to be a leader in war to defend his village from the enemy raids. The pre-colonial period was the time of headhunting, and thus his leadership, skill, ability and wisdom contribute to keeping the enemies at bay. Mills (2003) narrated that among the Lothas it was forbidden to take head from the same tribe. Unless there is peace agreement with villages from a different tribe, headhunting was considered a fair game. Lothas indiscriminately took the head of men, women and children except infants because a head without teeth is not counted in a warrior collection of heads. Then again, a women’s head is considered a prized trophy because women are mostly guarded by men. When a raid is planned and ready to be executed, participants for the raids gather at the house of the *Ekyung* and slaughter a pig and a cock killed to prepare a meal and when the cock’s throat is being cut if it squawked, it is considered a bad omen and the expedition put off. On the same note if a man hiccupped while having pork, he must stay back because the traditional belief was that if he goes misfortune would ‘befall him’. When a head is taken, the credit especially goes to the person who managed to get the head in the first, second or third spearing and while proceeding home with a head, when the party reaches within the earshot of the village, they began to sing victory song, a sign for merriment and celebration in the village. In the case of the *Ekyung*, when a head was taken, he performed the head taking genna and to signify his social status as a warrior of note, he wore *Rukhusu* (‘Enemy frightening cloth’), a prestigious shawl that befits only the *Ekyung*.

In every Lotha village it was important that a man should “either take a head or at least touch an enemy’s corpse, for unless he had done so he could not put on ornaments of a warrior - Hornbill feather in his Bear skin wig, Boar’s tusk necklace, red-fringed gauntlets, red *dao*-belt and dark blue length with red lines. One Hornbill feather could be worn for each head-taking ceremony,” narrated Mills (2003, p. 109). The warrior

status of the *Ekyung* and brave Lotha man – the status best earned in the practice of headhunting warfare - was however rendered insignificant with the arrival of the Britishers, Christianity and in all the modernity. As mentioned earlier, with the coming of the Britishers to the Naga Hills the powers once enjoyed by the village chiefs and his assistants in the village automatically passed into the hands of the British government, more specifically to the *Dobashis* who were made to exercise the powers of a first-class magistrate by the British government. Reportedly, such power was not rendered to the *Gaonburas*, although they too were assigned with many big responsibilities as is explained in the following section.

Dobashi and Gaonbura Systems: Converging the traditional and modern roles of the Ekyung

When British India took over the Naga Hills, an awareness that the Hills were not economically viable was there but they had to befriend and win the confidence of the hostile Nagas because of the need to protect their economic interest in Assam (Ketholesie, 2015). With the coming of the colonial rulers and the introduction of modern administration by the British government, changes took place in the Lotha village administration in that the *Ekyung* and his assistants were come to be appointed as *Dobashis* and *Gaonburas*. In other words, the systems of *Dobashi* and *Gaonbura* were constructed and institutionalized for administrative convenience purpose. Subsequently, they became an agent of the government and as a sign of their responsibility they were presented with 'Red Blankets' by the British government. Specifically, the *Gaonburas* were assigned to collect revenues within their village for the government. Ghosh (1979) explained that in this way the *Gaonburas* were made responsible for their village. Such responsibility in pre-British period was the domain of the *Ekyung*. Evidently, thus the British administration brought about changes in the traditional administration of the Lotha Naga. Replacing the pre-British colonial roles of the *Ekyung* and his assistants with that of the *Dobashis* and *Gaonburas*, the government came to maintained law and order in the villages through such newly constructed systems. It received the annual house tax that is collected by the *Gaonburas* and left the day-to-day administration of the village in the hands of the *Gaonburas* thereby saving the government from the costly affair of administration (Venuh 2019). *Gaonburas* as an institution was introduced by the British administration and "they are the liaison officer between the Government and the villagers" (Ghosh 1982, p.152), all important works related to the village under his jurisdiction gets done through the *Gaonbura*.

It is popularly reported and also recorded that the British administration did not interfere in the internal affairs of the Nagas; the government simply utilized the services of the traditional leaders with modern identity, the *Dobashis* and *Gaonburas*, for effective administration of the villages. The district official intervened only in cases which could not be settled by the *Gaonburas* and the *Dobashis*. Reiterating again that in the colonial period, the village *Ekyung* became appointed as *Dobashi* and *Gaonbura* with whom the villagers had direct contact with and not the British officials. In addition, the *Dobashi* acted as an interpreter and a go-between between the Britishers and the *Gaonbura* and at times the villagers as well, thereby gaining the confidence of both the Britishers and the villagers. In gist, the British administration hardly disturbed the social settings of the Lotha Naga. Although the powers of the *Ekyung* got transformed and replaced, given a modern name and converged into the *Gaonbura* and *Dobashi* systems, yet their functions remained traditional in character even

to this day. Indeed, when the British government made Naga Hills a part of British India, they did not make any drastic changes in the traditional village administration of the Nagas, stated Sema (1992, pp.28-30). They were made to govern themselves based on their own customs and traditions; the colonial rulers integrated the Naga traditional system with modern system of administration in administering the Naga Hills.

The traditional village administration of the Nagas got permanently transformed with the advent of the British in their hills in the quarter of the 19th century. And with it also transformed the hands of those who dominated the functioning of the Naga customary law, which before the advent of the British was considered the exclusive domain of the village *Ekyung* but in the British and post-British era, a new institution, *Dobashi*, constructed by the British, replaced such exclusivity. Initially, *Dobashis* were known as residentiary delegates but later on their ability to translate local dialects to English and Assamese – thus becoming the medium of communication between the Nagas and the British officials - impressed the British officers who made it a requisite qualification to be appointed as a *Dobashi*. In fact, the word *Dobashi* is derived from the Hindi word *Dobashias* or *Dobasha* meaning a man of two languages. With the passage of time, they became very powerful pillars of the British administration in Naga Hills for “as the personnel of the intelligence department all government orders were communicated through them” (Sema, 1992, p. 35). In other words, *Dobashi* as a system became institutionalized when the usage of Nagas as interpreter proved useful to the British government. Such system was first started in 1842 on a trial basis where residentiary delegates were sent from different Naga tribes (Sema, 1992). However, in 1860, when the system was proved to be useful for the promotion of the Anglo-Naga relations, it continued on regular basis and officially became permanent only in 1881(Sema, 1992). Today the Naga society in general and Lotha Naga in particular have *Dobashi* courts attached to the Deputy Commissioner office.

Another non-omissible faculty of the *Dobashis* were their expertise on customary laws and on this base they, therefore, advised the administrative officers in the settlement of any cases related to customs and traditions of the local people. It was because of the *Dobashis* that the British administrators were able to administer the Naga tribes efficiently and won the confidence of the people. While the power exercised by a Naga chief can vary from tribe to tribe and village to village, the *Dobashi* system of administration was uniform all over the districts in the Naga Hills. One may question why the Nagas readily accepted this new system. The rationale behind this was that the Britishers engineered this change by having fully acknowledged the primacy of customary law to the Nagas and therefore, hardly interferes with issues related to tradition, culture and custom of the Nagas. Since they administer the Nagas with the help of the Nagas, that is, the *Dobashis* which happen to be a system made up by respected locals, who may either be the village chiefs or efficient individuals; thus, in the words of Sema (1992), “this comes to bore no direct weight of alien rule on the Nagas.” Indeed, the British rule did not in any way seriously affect the basic social structure of the Nagas; it remained traditional in character and content. The colonial administration recognized the traditional authority of the village chief as an effective means of administration at the village level.

In the then and now, the *Dobashi* court was and is headed by a Head *Dobashi* and on promotion they hold the post of Political Assistant to Deputy Commissioner (PA to DC). Based on their efficiency, the senior *Dobashis* were sometimes even given charge of a Sub- Division. The loyalty and efficiency of the *Dobashis* in discharging their duties in fact earned them great powers and their office thus gain such wide recognition that the British rule vis-à-vis the Nagas in Nagaland become incomplete without considering it. The importance of the system as already stated was indeed felt even after the departure of the British. Today these courts functions alongside the mainland judicial system.

Maranan (2010) stated that in Nagaland, the *Dobashi* court runs parallel to main stream legal system, with jurisdiction in both civil and criminal cases, because the customary law of the Nagas is recognized and protected under Article 371 A of the Indian Constitution. Every district in Nagaland has a *Dobashi* court alias customary court attached to the office of the Deputy Commissioner. In order to address their grievances, the people have the option to decide whether to approach the *Dobashi* court or to approach the State High Court. The rulings of the *Dobashi* courts are recognized by the law of the land, meaning, such courts function in accordance with the Naga customary law which again is strongly protected by Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution. *Dobashi* courts are found to be popular with the people mainly because of speedy settlement of cases. However, it is often accused that most of the rulings of the *Dobashi* court have been in favor of man mainly because it settles cases as per the Naga customary law that is often bended in favor of men but also, perhaps, because the court is composed of only male population. Thus, one of the primary defects of this system is gender discrimination. Indeed, the *Dobashi* and the *Gaonbura* systems are yet to come up with the strategy to counter the challenge of gender equality and giving more space to Naga women in decision making process.

Continuities and change in the function of the *Dobashis*

The administration of the Britishers over the Nagas would not have been so effective had it not been for the well calculated construction of the *Dobashsi* system and clever and purposeful utilization of the *Dobashsis*. The British officials heavily relied on the *Dobashis* to administer the Lotha Naga villages and to interpret intricate customary laws of the people so as to settle disputes based on the customary usages and practices of the people. For their honesty, integrity and efficiency in discharging their duties, the *Dobashis* earned the respect of the British officials and thereby came to enjoy very powerful position under the British rule. It has been decades since the Britishers left the Naga Hills and so much technological advancement has been made today, yet, the *Dobashis* still continues to play a role. Although some of their powers and functions had remain unchanged, yet, the present time is witnessing considerable transformation inducing many to question its relevancy. The change and continuities in the function of the *Dobashis* is given below:

1. The Britishers empowered the *Dobashis*, to exercise the powers of a first-class magistrate (equivalent to today's IAS officer), the type of work entrusted to the interpreters (Residentary Delegates) in the Naga Hills was of the nature which was not entrusted to an officer below the rank of a Sub- Deputy Collector in the plains. The Delegates performed their assigned duties with enthusiasm, dedication, honesty and

integrity which was highly admirable The *Dobashis* they have to endure a great deal of travelling “by forced marched in all weather and their work is so exhausting that they hardly hold out long enough to obtain a pension. It is clear I think that the hard marching and exposure to which they are subjected tells very severely on the *Dobashi* staff, they have been in their time very useful and faithful servants of the government” (Government of Nagaland, 1919, file No. III-E. I F of 1919, Assam Secretariat: Financial Department. Finance- A. March 1919. Nos:107-119.) but in the present, they no longer enjoy the same powers, status, and respect, they command in the past.

2. There has been change in the selection procedure of the *Dobashis*. In the colonial period, the main criterion to be appointed as *Dobashis* was the faculty to interpret and speak English and Assamese languages and were men of influential personalities who was either a village Headman, the son of a village chief or nephews or close relations of the village Chief/Headman. In other words, they were the founders of a village or close relatives of the founder with profound knowledge of customary practices and usages. Today, to be appointed as a *Dobashi*, by common practice the person should be knowledgeable about the customs and traditions of the people. Recruitment of the *Dobashis* is conducted through the District Level Recruitment Board, consisting of the Deputy Commissioner as the chairman, ADC, SDO (Civil), EACs, PA to DC and Head *Dobashi* as members. A person who is appointed a *Dobashi* should have completed the age of (25) years and very well versed in customary laws of the Lotha Nagas. Once they are recruited, they retire at the age of (60) sixty years. The *Dobashis* are Government servants of the state and remains in office until they attain the age of sixty years or thirty years of service or whichever is earlier (Ao, 2019, pp. 173-174). The senior in-service *Dobashis* are promoted to a higher position through the selection of the department promotion committee and once they are promoted, they hold the position of (PA to DC) Political Assistant to Deputy Commissioner.
3. Earlier, the judgement rendered by the *Dobashis* were considered final, for they were generally held as the guardian of the customary law; the only law recognized and accepted in the land of the Lotha society. Undoubtedly, even today, the judgements given by the *Dobashi* court are recognized by the law of the land, since the customary laws of the Nagas are strongly protected under Article 371 (A) of the Indian constitution. Yet their verdict may or may not be considered as final. In case of their verdict been found unsatisfactory, people can always move to the mainland judicial court. For instances, when trying criminal cases, the *Dobashi* court or the district customary court is being empowered to exercise powers but not exceeding that of a first-class magistrate according to the code of criminal procedure, 1973, and in civil cases it follows the “customs and usages applicable to such suit” (Angami, 2008, p. 61), and in matters not covered by customs and age-old usages the code of criminal procedure is followed. The court has also the power to award compensation to an aggrieved person in accordance to the customary usages and practices of the people (Angami, 2008, 58-59).

4. There is also change and continuities regarding the usage of material culture symbolizing the status of the *Dobashis*. For instance, during the British era the *Dobashis* were issued Red Blankets by the British government symbolizing their special responsibility conferred on them and for easy identification as agents of the crown in the Hills. Today the *Dobashis* wear a uniform, a Red Vest known as the *Dobashi* Vest which is red in front and black at the back with a small belt.

Conclusion

Although the policy adopted by the British administrators in the Naga Hills was largely considered convenient for both the rulers and the ruled but it came at the costly expense of the diminishing role of the *Ekyung* and drastic transformation in the ancient Lotha village administration. The *Ekyung-ship* or the kind of village administration led by the *Ekyung* in the pre-British period is being reduced to un-redeemable level with the arrival of the Britishers for it enabled the world of the Lotha Naga to be open to the many facets of modernity like Christianity, western education, etc. Over time, all of these acted against the usefulness and the connectedness of *Ekyung-ship* in the contemporary Lotha society even though the traditional form of administration may have been left predominantly undisturbed in the modern colonial construction of a new system, that is, the *Dobashi* system. The paper also discussed that the power and functions of the *Dobashis* is not rigid, often adjusting to stay connected with the flow of time.

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