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Peace Channel: A channel for human rights education and peace in Nagaland.

Fr. Rev. C.P. Anto

Director Peace Channel

Post Box. No. 03, Dimapur, Nagaland

India: 797112

www.peacechannel.in

Context of conflict or development situation of the Naga society

Nagas are a group of tribes of Southeast Asian origins culturally distinct from the Indo-Aryan cultural mainstream. They live in relative independence from one another scattered over large tracts of hills in the Northeastern region of India adjoining Myanmar. Naga tribes in the present state of Nagaland became part of India only after Indian independence in 1947 – a case which is still contested by armed Naga nationalist groups who also simultaneously declared independence and run a parallel underground government throughout Naga inhabited areas. According to 2001 Census 19,88,639 Naga population live in Nagaland state with an area of 16,579 sqkm. The state is situated between 93°20'E and 95°15' E and between 25°6' and 27°4' N. The state has common boundaries with Myanmar in the East, Assam in the West; Arunachal Pradesh and a part of Assam in the North with Manipur in the south. Nagaland is home to 16 major tribes who are known for their own distinct character and identify of each tribe in terms of Tradition, custom, language and attire. About 90% of the state's population is Christian and there are a good many number of churches located in all parts of the state. For this reason Nagaland is popularly known as the "most Baptist state in the world". Christianity began to set foot among the Naga tribes in 1839; by 1930 there were 60,000 members in several Churches.

The state of Nagaland was created in 1963 as a negotiated settlement of the conflict following 9 years of bloody war with the Indian army. It was a great achievement for independent India but a great compromise for the Naga National Council (NNC). Under Article 371A of the constitution of India, Naga enjoys relative freedom in social, cultural and religious affairs. The NNC rejected the settlement and established a Federal Government of Nagaland with its own constitution and army. They fought wars of independence, which were settled by the Shillong Accord in 1975. The expectation of the accord was absolute independence and unification of all Naga tribes from the neighboring states of Assam, Arunachal, Manipur and Myanmar in the form of an independent country called "Nagalim". Against this aspiration the Shillong Accord turned out to be a total sell-out for staunch nationalist groups as it included acceptance of the Indian Constitution. This led to fission in NNC resulting in the formation of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) which split up again in 1988 into NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K). In 1997 NSCN (IM) struck another ceasefire agreement to reach a negotiated settlement on the core issue: Nagalim. Unfortunately, the aspirations of and demands for Nagalim on the part of the collective Naga leadership negotiating in Govt of India has earned bitter relations and distrust with all the non-Naga neighboring states surrounding them. The peace talks still continue for over a decade with intermittent factional killings among the armed groups.

Amidst the cycle of war and brief periods of peace younger generations of Naga people grew up in the situation of lawlessness, violence, and corruption without a sense of direction and purpose. Since its inception the state government of Nagaland has been functioning under a series of popularly elected governments, whose aim has been the socio-economic welfare of the people and the state. The Churches are caring for other development and welfare needs of the poorer sections of the population. Serious divisions among the people are resulting in frustration and confusion among the younger generation. Drug use and the incidence of HIV and AIDS in the community have become among the highest in India. A recent opinion survey of school/college students in Nagaland revealed that a lack of economic opportunity and employment, broken families and lack of guidance, and social inequality and corruption are among their primary concerns.

New shoots from the ashes of violent devastations

With periodic cycles of war and peace the Naga Conflict has undergone five stages.¹ The fifth stage which falls in the post-conflict scenario is a stage of reconciliation, regeneration and renewal. Studies have shown that it takes decades, even generations, to reform and rebuild systems and change people's opinions of each other even after dramatic political change. With over four decades of bloody war and factional violence, the armed Naga conflict with India and factions within the community are in a state of agreed ceasefire and are engaged in a series of peace talks with the Government of India. Naga civil society, particularly the Churches based on gospel truth, have been instrumental in bringing about the ceasefire and peace talks. However, over the last decade and a half Naga women across tribes and neighboring states, based on their common experiences of sufferings over decades of armed violence, emerged as a formidable non-violent force in Naga society. The collective efforts of Churches and Women organizations having been able to bring all factions for reconciliation also ensure continuation of the processes through constant vigil and persuasion; they have created their own safe space and legitimacy in the society. Naga women in collaboration with the international indigenous forum and network of women work

¹ Caritas International, *Peacebuilding: A Caritas Manual*, Vatican city, 2002

as effective pressure groups on both sides, talking about human rights and non-violence, and peace education to rebuild relations within the community and also with neighboring communities.

Naga peace talks are over a decade old but a sense of *negative peace* prevails as opposed to *positive peace*. Naga society seeks to undergo a transformation from a model of militarized, fragmented and exclusive society to one of unique and prosperous people living in harmony and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors and natural environment. USAID recognizes that conflict is an inherent and legitimate part of social and political life, and is often precursor to positive social change. The recognition of the unique history of Naga by the Government of India, as a result of the ongoing peace talks in this regard, is a positive indication of future promise of the dialogue.

As the peace process has established their identity in the international community and average Naga people, women in particular, feel more secure, as possibilities of relapse to armed violence become less likely, every Naga today is proud of being Naga. But the path to reconciliation between factions, regions, tribes and with neighbors in Naga society is beset with huge challenges and problems.

Human rights situation: impediments to human rights education

In a region known for its racial, religious traditions, linguistic cultural diversities and hostilities, where people lived in relative isolation for better part of their history with sporadic contacts through war and /or barter or trading activities, human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), is a new concept. Our diversities, tribal and factional differences have been great barriers to realization of human rights within communities and across. Furthermore, when different tribes and communities across and within India began to interact or slowly come together from their relative isolation they began with hostilities and wars that caused bitter experiences in the minds of the people.

When independent India began to wage an internal war with the Armed Forces Special Power Act (1958) giving swiping power to even non-commission officers with full legal impunity it sparked cultural and racial prejudices. Any one can guess the level of cultural and racial prejudices with which the forces operated in the region. Human rights movements, organizations and institutions in the region are most often mutually perceived as anti-state or anti-national or racial movement from both sides. If a Naga is killed, it is a human right issue, but if a non-Naga is killed it is non-issue. Human rights movements in the region are also closely linked to community identity rather than individual rights. Every ethnic community or tribe has a human rights organization to protect the rights of their own people. The strongest and most influential human rights organizations have also been those that are closely associated with a political or community identity. The Naga People's Movement Human Rights as one of the most pioneering, effective and influential organizations, among many others, has played a crucial role in the Naga national movement at international forums. There is also a regional level human rights network organization but it is weak in its effects and influence. These factors further compound the human rights situation with presence large number of armed groups representing different tribes and ethnic groups who do not tolerate opposition and differences. Thousands of lives are already lost in in-fighting, political assassinations and factional killings among different armed groups.

The memories of mutual destruction, violence and killings and sufferings between factions, the growing social and economic divides between advance and backward tribes,

competition over leadership, tribe identities and religious and ideological differences, and the emerging gender dimensions can prove to be major hurdles. Outside the Naga community how do we relate with neighboring communities without intimidations or mutual threats and violence, so as to have peaceful co-existence where every Naga, and for that matter people from different neighboring communities, feels safe and secure where ever s/he moves in Nagaland and the region? How do we at the same time re-orient the younger generations from an a situation of war-ravaged acutely dependent economy to a new work culture to engaged in productive activities, from white color job to farming activities, and lead a dignified life with a sense of community responsibility and duty for making Naga a secure-self reliant community? How does Naga position and respond to India's Look East Policy frame and development processes, with its diversely rich natural forest, minerals, herbal, natural and cultural resources, and contribute to the growing South East and South Asian economy, reaping benefits from it for greater development and advancement of its people? How do we change people's attitude from the belief that "violent pays" of the war economy to "peace pays" of the peace economy of local resource based sustainable development? These are some of the questions/ challenges facing the Naga society.

It is in this context that the Peace Channel is set to shape and prepare the young generation of Naga society to actively participate and manage the post-conflict rebuilding processes through human rights education. Human rights education essentially brings about dialogue between individuals and groups, but the danger is in leaving it in the hands of militant organizations alone. The onus of peace building in Naga society can neither be nor should it be left in the hands of ex-combatants and militant leaders. The third millennium must belong to Church and civil society, women organizations in particular less a hard earned peace should fizzle out into another cycle of war.²

Church and Women: Human rights foundation in Naga society

Human Rights Education must equip the present generation with life skills for self protection, preservation, progress building goodwill and relations with different cultural identities in the manner that mutually ensures and enriches human rights awareness and practices. Human rights education must overcome factional differences and inter-tribal feuds, and transcend tribal, communal, racial and cultural barriers, embrace diversities to transform the culture of violence.

Naga society has a solid foundation for human rights in the Church that has become part of every Naga family. Although feminists look at Church as masculine gender or a male domain, the Naga Church, unlike the European Church, has always played a softer role in Naga armed struggles as mid-wife and intermediary for peaceful solutions to Naga political issues. The Naga Church neither approved nor directly participated in the armed struggles. The Church has rather been exploited and abused by the nationalist armed organizations at times by adopting "Nagaland for Christ" as a motto of the armed struggles; women in Naga society have been affected in the same manner.³

² Matthew Hughes & Matthew S. Seligmann, *Does Peace Lead to War? Peace Settlements and Conflict in the Modern age*, (Sutton Publishing, England, 2002).

³ Triveni Goswami, *Role of women as peacebuilder with special reference to Nagaland*, Peace Studies Paper 06, OKDISCD, Assam, India, 2006.

Moreover, Church is described as having a feminine character. *Church is a mother and a teacher. The Church has been established by Jesus Christ as mother and teacher of nations, so that all who in the course of centuries come to her living embrace may find salvation as well as the fullness of life.*⁴ It further says, *The Church, as a loving mother should try to protect a better the living conditions of her people. This is a mandate, she cannot remain ignorant of.* Church therefore is in the likeness of women – the mother, nurturer and provider. Therefore, in Naga context Church and Women institutions provide the only foundation for human rights education.

These institutions provide the strength and opportunity for human rights education in Naga society. However, to prepare the present generation of youth as Channels of peace through human rights education and life skills we needed an alternative discourse, a space to experience a culture of peace nurtured with our own local resources. The project Peace Channel is all about this alternative discourse and living new experiences.

“Adequate protection of human rights depends on the individuals concerned about knowing what their rights are. ...education should also include teaching people how to defend their rights. If human rights awareness is successfully instilled into a society, this can help to prevent violations. Human rights education is therefore a useful shield from human rights abuse.”⁵

*The hostile past has to be abandoned in favor of peace and stability. Church has a clear mandate to be a peacemaker and get fully involved in the process of peacemaking. Conflict reduction management has to begin with the preaching of peace. New dreams of collective well-being will serve the purpose of healing the wound of hatred and animosity.*⁶

Peace Channel: a theoretical consideration

Upholding human dignity is essential for order and peace in society. *“The dignity of the person is manifested in all its radiance when the person’s origin and destiny are considered: created by God in his image and likeness as well as redeemed by the most precious blood Christ ... from this very reason every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offence against the creator of the individual”* (Christifideles laici, n. 37).

Theologically trained concerned senior Naga Christians have been in search of a theological statement (1995) through the years to transform Naga society when they realized there *unholy and worldly alliance between the Church and state government giving rise to evils*; they also lament that the *Church has failed to be prophetic in her mission.*⁷ Expressing firm believe that *we have no right to take away anyone’s life*, they stated that the *Church*

⁴ Lazar Jeyaseelan, *Conflict Resolution in Northeast India: Becoming Advocates of Peace and Justice*, Catholic Manipur Publication, Manipur, India, 2007.

⁵ Amnesty International, 1987

⁶ Lazar Jeyaseelan, *Conflict Resolution in Northeast India: Becoming Advocates of Peace and Justice*.

⁷ In search of theological statements, A group of Naga Theologically trained concerned people, Vision Press, Dimapur, Nagaland, India, 1995.

should move beyond a mere neutral theological stance to a radical theology or transformation.

Human rights echo the sentiments of pro-life. Life is a precious gift of God. Ethno-totalitarianism or ethno-centricism is the main culprit. *Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation of this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precious because he is a person, he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable, so they cannot in any way be surrendered. (Pacem in terries, n.9).*

War originates in the minds of the people and so peace must also be sought in the minds of the people. Similarly, generations of youths have been resources for violent culture through education, training, role modeling and acculturation processes. It is believed that the youths can be resources for peaceful co-existence and social harmony through human rights education, training, role modeling and acculturation processes in institutional and social environment. Given the existing structures and institutional setup that promote culture violence an alternative discourse must be sought that has local relevance and existential realities.

Out of 50 years of suffering, the impact of violence directly on their body and soul, women as mothers and active members of Church have begun to respond to the conflict situation with an alternative paradigm. Naga Mothers Association in unequivocal terms outlined the foundation of human rights education in their campaign ***Shed No More Blood***. In order to implement their theory women have been physically reaching out between fighting groups; between factions; between Naga army and security forces. By shuttling between faction camps and between Naga nationalist leaders and Indian leaders they have also been putting pressure to keep dialoguing about the issues. Peace channel began in September 2006 in the state after it took shape and matured from a culture of violence in Nagaland through personal experiences of suffering in the hands of armed nationalist youths. Peace channel is reaching out to children in Nagaland and across states in India and nations making each child a channel for peace. Objectives of Peace Channel are Promotion of peace, love, and justice in conflict; empowerment marginalized sections of society to live in harmony with God, nature, and bringing out the potentials in each of being responsible, transparent, honest and diligent leaders; staying clean of Drugs and pre-marital sex; Facilitating collective learning, sharing for development; Accelerating socio-economic sustainable development for the poor and Facilitating collaboration and networking across boundaries.

Peace Channel promotes belief in One Supreme God: *All are His Children*; relationship; Mutuality; Co-sharing; Inner peace; Return to the source; Union and Righteousness; Forgiveness and reconciliation; concerns for other while being self responsible; Compassion with adversaries; Working for justice and healing. Propagate spirit of sacrifice for peace; Honoring inherent dignity and worth of every body; Keeping aside petty interests for common good and being Enthusiastic and committed. Voluntary service and Radical commitment to genuine human services; Readiness to accept individuals and communities as they are; Embracing differences and valuing others and Being open to oneself and others; Hospitality to strangers; Pastoral care for all; Reaching out to poor, weak and marginalized; Non-discrimination and Rediscovery of solidarity

Long-term goals include transformation of Nagaland to a place of peace and Making India a model for peace in South Asia. Short-term goals include Setting up Peace Channel

Units to form Model Peace Zone; Nagaland People Forum for Peace (NPFP) and Model Peace Region.

Preparing the young generation of children and people in communities towards a transformed society is done through several activities, such as formation of Peace Clubs in schools/colleges and villages; inter-religious dialogue and harmony; Action for locality development; Promoting Art and technique of living together with immediate neighbors; training for youths, students, employees, and professionals; seminars, symposium, training on Life skills; Outreaching to education to less privilege sections of society and Advocacy and human rights awareness. It is believed that through these activities there shall be Peaceful minds; ecumenical Harmony through inter-religious dialogue; Creating peace at homes and workplaces; Dealing with Lust, Anger, Greed, Hatred, Envy, Jealousy, Ill-will, Worry, Stress and strains; Participation in national events and Protection of environment.

Peace Club and its processes:

Peace clubs in school/ Community is the basic foundation for social transformation at grass roots level. It comprises of 15 Members with local contributions and lifetime membership and conducts fortnightly regular meeting. Peace clubs engages in advocacy and awareness; conflict transformation; addressing local conflicts and violence and promoting peaceful co-existence. The club meets 2-3 times a month regularly. Whenever members of club meet they start by greeting one another “Peace to you” and “Peace to you, too.” before sitting in a circle with a light candle in the middle. One among the member in the circle leads a peace prayer in any faith tradition of one’s pursuance and then followed with 7-Step group processes. It begins with a common peace prayer with each member touching the head of the person on the right. Second step is a short meditation which involves silent self awareness, and through breathing seeking reconciliation. Third step is life skills session on the any important situation/ issue/theme. In the forth step members identify a local issue, discuss and come up with a response action plan for implementation. Members then together evaluate the day’s process for further improvement as fifth step. Saying a peace pledge and singing a peace anthem is the sixth and seventh steps, which end the regular peace club meeting.

To conclude, a peace channel is a project for social transformation that is inspired by human suffering and higher values of life; it employs such methodologies and beliefs harnessed in the deeper philosophies of religious scriptures to respond to the contemporary situation of a violent culture. The project is a long term engagement with younger generations and civil society in participatory learning and change processes. The project will be successful when one day young people confidently say, “peace pays better in my life”.