

# Struggling Lives: Delineating History in the Poetry of Nagaland

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## **Abstract**

Nagaland exists as an indigenous subaltern state in the North- East India, bountiful with the beauty of nature. Being a tribal state and marginalised from the mainstream of the nation, Nagaland's history and culture are silenced and repressed in the historiography of India. This indigenous state where the Nagas migrated and occupied long before in history is destitute of any written documents regarding their past. Like the traditional folk songs that eulogise the ancestors of the tribes, their poems reveal the enigmatic past of the Naga people; a voice for themselves. It can be argued that the poetry of Nagaland is zealously seen as a discourse on their freedom struggle; which the elite historians perceive as insurgency. This paper thus deliberates on the contribution of poetry in rejuvenating the unwritten history of the Naga people. The poems discussed in this paper are by the Naga poets Ayngela Longkumer, Easterine Iralu, N Rong, Haralu Lhusi, Steve-Al- Masihi and Josephine Changkija. The verses excavate the unheard and untold truth of the Naga people in history. The people of Nagaland are seen as caught between the revolutionary ideals of the militants and the disillusionment occasioned by the fall of those professed ideals. Thus, the Naga poems are not only about the unending beauty of hills, valleys, and rivers but also about those riots and conflicts which they have endured. It is irrefutable that the recorded historical events of the nation veil the real trauma of the common masses who inevitably suffer from the grassroots.

**Keywords :** Ayngela Longkumer; Easterine Iralu; Freedom; History; N Rong; Nagaland.

Nagaland exists as an indigenous subaltern state in the North- East India, bountiful with the beauty of nature. Being a tribal state and marginalised from the mainstream of the nation, Nagaland's history and culture are

silenced and repressed in the historiography of India. This indigenous state where the Nagas migrated and occupied long before in history is destitute of any written documents about their past. Easterine Iralu while giving a note of the Naga history in her article, "The Conflict in Nagaland: Through a Poet's eyes" states that Claudius Ptolemy mentions about the existence of Naga people in the Naga Hills as early as 150 AD. But the threat of occupation and annexation has always altered the history of the Naga Hills. In 1228 AD, the Ahom rulers were repulsed in their efforts to conquer the villages of Nagaland. The Imperial forces of Britain struggled to establish an uneasy rule between 1832 and 1947 over the proud tribesmen who performed their cultural duty of protecting their lands at great cost to themselves and the invading forces.

Finally, Britain ceded the Naga Hills to India on her departure from her South Asian Empire in 1947. "However, a letter had been sent to the UN by Naga political leaders to state the declaration of Naga Independence on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947. Following this a war was unleashed where official statistics puts the number of Nagas killed at above two hundred thousand from the 1950s till the present time" (Iralu 1). The State of Nagaland was formally inaugurated on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, as the 16<sup>th</sup> State of the Indian Union. But Nagaland continued to fight for a separate nation through various rebel groups from mid-twentieth century. After thirty-seven years of armed struggle and twenty years of negotiations, The National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Isak-Muviah (NSCN-IM) and the Government of India has signed a "framework agreement" for a final settlement to co-exist with a "shared sovereignty" in August, 2015. This framework which recognised the uniqueness of Naga History and Culture is a sign of hope for the peaceful co-existence and also a brighter political era for the Nagas.

As they celebrate the fifty-eighth anniversary of the formation of their state, the new generation of Naga community endeavours to record the history of their bygone days through their literature. Literature becomes their voice in history which in turn is a manifestation of the "History from below". In his renowned essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", Ranajit Guha claimed that there existed an independent domain of the politics of people that was organized differently than the politics of the elite. He states: "For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country- that is, the people" (4). Writing

such history exposes the forms of power/knowledge that oppress subaltern people and also provide liberating alternatives. This can be achieved only if the historians and post-colonial critics stand together against colonial narratives and listen to the subalterns, allow them to speak, talk back to the powers that marginalize them and document their past. Such a discourse is possible through literature which carries the mind and spirit of every age. Ranajit Guha states that "the elitist historiography should be resolutely fought by developing an alternative discourse based on the rejection of the spurious and un-historical monism characteristic of its view of Indian nationalism and on the recognition of the co-existence and interaction of the elite and subaltern domains of politics" (7).

Thus, a new encryption of history is delineated; a chronicle of events in the state literally chartered, that voices and represents the Nagas in the nation. It is precise that poetry transpires the source of articulation. Murali Sivaramkrishnan's observation that "Poetry is the community's voice; poetry is the individual's hope", can hitherto be applied to the poetry of Nagaland. Nagaland is enriched with nature's bounty and the life of the people is entwined with its ecology. They are committed to their land and preserve it as their blood. Like the traditional folk songs that eulogise the ancestors of the tribes, the poems reveal the enigmatic past of the Naga people; a voice for themselves. It can be argued that the poetry of Nagaland is zealously seen as a discourse on their freedom struggle; which the elite historians call insurgency. This paper thus discusses the contribution of poetry in rejuvenating the unwritten history of the people.

Nagas through their writings try to construct a Naga genealogy; a history narrated from the perspective of a Naga. Gramsci while discussing the rewriting of history by the subalterns says: "Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should ... be of incalculable value for the integral historian" (qtd. in Zene 4). The countenance of historical events as experienced by the people of Nagaland leaves traces for the integral historian to rewrite an inclusive History of the nation. De Certeau in his renowned work *The Writing of History* explains the production of historiography as "operation" and "fabrication" of texts by the "circles of writing" and "institutions of power" which transform findings through the "practice of interpretation" into a "science", thus preserving the authority of official history and achieving a kind of hegemony. According to Certeau, this is History with a capital H, since all others are "small histories", in lower case. Yet "official History" - although a fabrication - contains "traces" that the hegemonic historiography is unable to eliminate, thus preserving traces of "small histories" if only to contradict them" (qtd.

in Zene 5). The poems of the Nagas excavate the unheard and untold truth of the Naga people in history. In their struggle for freedom, they had to undergo military actions along with the political negotiations. The people of Nagaland are seen as caught between the revolutionary ideals of the militants and the disillusionment occasioned by the fall of those professed ideals. It is irrefutable that the recorded historical events of the nation veil the real trauma of the common masses who inevitably suffer from the grassroots. The literature of the Nagas nevertheless explores those unwritten strategies of power and the trauma of the unrecorded citizens in the state hitherto tracing a history of the people. Thus, Naga poems are traces of those riots and conflicts which they endured. The poem "A Tribute to the Unsung Heroes of OB" written by N. Rong is a humble tribute to the civilians who were killed in the Operation Bluebird:

Operation Bluebird wreaked havoc the hills

The serene hills of Oinam was shaken

The terror was unleashed and horror haunts

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Your names remain

Beyond graves, you live on

Leaving behind the legacy

The legacy of supreme sacrifice

The legacy of heroic endurance

The legacy of courage and love. (1-3, 14-19)

"Operation Blue Bird", is the code name used for counter-insurgency operation launched on 11th July 1987 to recover the seized arms and ammunition taken away by the Naga underground group (suspected National Socialist Council of Nagaland). It was one of the biggest operations carried out by the Indian Security Forces since 1950 in Naga areas. This remarkable day brought to memories the extraordinary sufferings, pains, agonies and torments the poor villagers endured, the supreme sacrifice made by those who were killed in the incidents, the women who were raped and molested, the hardships and pain endured by student leaders, politicians

and many others. Later on, it became a unique struggle in Naga history.

Being a subaltern state in India, Nagaland's History of revolution is undermined in the Nation's History. Easterine Iralu remembers the warriors who lost their lives in the Indo-Naga conflicts in the poem, "Kelhoukevira, a lament for Nagaland". Kelhoukevira is an Angami word which means a land where everything is good to live. Nagaland is indeed a beautiful place with its flora and fauna and ravishes the mankind there. The poem is but a lament for the patriots who fought for the freedom of the state. The poet describes the arrival of dead bodies at night and addresses them as the brave beloved of Gods. They are proud and mighty warriors who are about to rest under the troubled skies of Nagaland. The warriors fought so that "some portion of a vanquished field/May forever remain Nagaland" (6-7). The battle was for having Nagaland as their own state. In the second stanza of the poem, Iralu gives a depiction of the blood-stained fields and the blue hills of Nagaland:

The golden fields, they lay unreaped and sere

As blood freely flowed

And mingled with the rains

And stained the virgin soil

Like a thousand scarlet sunsets

Back of the blue, blue hills. (8-13)

The poet further describes the people who gathered for the mourning. She says that the hearts of the blue hills too grieved to heed the harvest. The maidens ceased their song and mourned the brave ones. Nature mourns with the Naga people and the sky blindly followed a broken people: "who turned their backs/and slowly walked away/from a burning village" (17-19). Iralu after describing the burial of the warriors in the battle comes with a note of protest. She says that there are some people in foreign lands who still wanted Kelhoukevira. Her fields lay barren and desecrated. Her songs are sacrificed to the wind and her warriors to the Great Spirit. They trampled her silent hills and squeezed the life out of her and washed their hands in her blood. The poet's angust bloodshed for the land is evident and she lashes at the invaders who stained their serene land. Her voice of protest through the poem against the atrocities on her land is an act of resistance by the subaltern people.

Ayangla Longkumer in her poem "Dimapur" speaks about the unwritten history and lost grandeur of Dimapur. The voice of the oppressed people can be found in Histories only when they start giving their own accounts of the past. The true History of a Nation will be "the memory of the glorious deeds of one's ancestors" (Chatterjee 3). The poem "Dimapur" throws a flashlight on the splendid days of the place which is now obliterated in History. Dimapur has witnessed the abundance of the land and perceived the invasions hurled on it. The land's bounty and humanity's mayhem juxtapose the poem. The poet speaks about the obliterated legends of Dimapur oppressed by the invaders:

And if you had such legends

They are all but obliterated

By descending hordes

Fighting for space

Writing their own history. (5-9)

Dimapur, once a powerful and predominant state in the North-East now has nothing graceful to offer other than the vast lushness. During World War II, Dimapur had been the centre of action between British India and Imperial Japan. The invaders have but destroyed the grandeur of the place and erased its glory in the History of Nation. Even when the intruders of the land kill for survival, the land seduces assiduously with the mingling sounds of hymns, the namaaz, temple bells and ululations. The poet laments with protest that:

But the dust does not settle

as if to shroud

in an opaque veil

the lacerations wrought

by a hungry mob

all claiming

a piece of paradise (31-37).

The poet is critical of the violence and bloodshed in the land in the battle for freedom. In another poem "Mokokchung", Ayanla Longkumer speaks of the past grandeur becoming a memory and remembered in fickle nostalgia:

The silence of the dark streets  
whisper defeat in the rustling  
of a hushed breeze  
Fading into anonymity  
Struggling to find a place in history  
Discarded, disregarded. (7-12)

Longkumer fears that the battle they endured will fade into anonymity; cast-off and overlooked over the passage of time. She is an advocate of peace and asks in her poem "Freedom", "what is freedom/ if peace cannot be achieved?" (12-13). She perpetuates that the Nagas needn't want freedom if the price is to be paid with the blood of their fathers and brothers.

Easterine Iralu's poem "After Reading Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" speaks about the pain of colonisation of their native land and the loss of their brothers in the freedom struggle associated with its liberation. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, is a book by the American writer Dee Brown narrating the history of Native Americans in the American West in the late nineteenth century. The book expresses a Native American perspective on the injustices and betrayals committed by the US government. Brown describes Native Americans' displacement through forced relocations and years of warfare waged by the United States federal government. The government's dealings are portrayed as a continuing effort to destroy the culture, religion, and way of life of Native American people. Easterine Iralu got inspired after reading the book and wrote this poem. The poem begins with the ecstasy of the people to have the beautiful land of hills, rivers and mountains as their own. They were little children playing on the nature's lap in the spirit of its bounty. But then the invasion of the land by the oppressors shook them. The white men and the brown men oppressed them and claimed their land as a different entity: "and fifty years it has been now/ that they have been telling us/ we are not our own" (9-11). These lines clearly express the anguish of a group of people who lost their innate birth land one

morning. The poet further deciphers the pain of losing their men, women and children who were killed in the struggle for freedom. The poet is upset that she cannot recall such murderous acts by the colonisers since she believes: "for these are not the things/ out of which one can make/ songs or poems or dreams" (15-17).

The poet's mood changes from sorrow to a highly determined self. She says they were betrayed and have learnt to betray. She is now no more afraid of death, but life. She asks to bury her heart also at Wounded knee:

Betrayed we have learnt to betray  
 my brothers are riding out  
 to seek my brothers' lives  
 and I stand here alone  
 waiting, in the shadows  
 afraid, of life, not death. (18-23)

Naga people as subalterns exist outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony and colonial homeland. Poetry gives them voice to speak for their homeland. In Gramsci's observation: "Subaltern classes are opposed to the dominant class and they are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class implying that they lack relative political power. Yet they are not passive as they rebel against their conditions and anxiously defend themselves" (Green 8). Poetry is a mode of liberation for the Nagas and they try to reconstruct History through their poems. The spirit of rebellion, angst, sufferings, and struggle for a peaceful homeland come alive in their verses.

The "Silent Hills II" by LhusiHaralu is a tribute to Nagaland. The poet laments the state of Nagaland. She expresses her anguish and pain for the State. She begins the poem by hailing Nagaland as blood-thirsty land. The land is desolated and destructed. The poet finds Nagaland as nature in itself. She describes the ruined nature to bring out the reality of Nagaland. The wounded hills of the State are stripped bare. The cruel slopes are stained with the blood that is drained from her sons. Haralu expresses her distress that Nagaland ill spared the lives of young people. The braves were gone and none is left to dare say "Let's right the wrongs" (9). The poet then articulates her hope that: "When silent hills forget their songs, /

Then, the wind will moan with the coming dawn, / The wind will moan with the coming dawn" (10-12).

Nature is indispensable in the vibes of the Nagas. The wind becoming their trumpet is a strong indicator of this notion. Haralu depicts the violent incidents in the hills of Nagaland:

The green hills stood  
while schemers brewed  
ov'r deeds bloody and vile;  
unseen, unheard  
They crept and rushed  
at him who has no guile.  
Then shots rang out at dead of night  
with screams and blood and bile;  
and one by one my brothers fell (13-21).

The poet says that the empty hills with shudder tell the wind which moans with the coming dawn. These instances of attack on the Nagas are unrecorded in the history of nation. They are delegated as rebellious riots among the tribes. But these young brothers are martyrs in the history of Nagaland's freedom struggle. The poems of the Nagas thus become the history of the people chronicling the events in their daily life. Haralu finds fault with Nagaland to teach her sons violence. She says that the fair Nagaland is an unworthy land. The poet tells Nagaland: "Hearken, you'll rue the day/ You taught your sons/ To vie with guns/ Told them "Here lies the way" (27-30).

The poet speaks about the terrific life of the *Nagas*. Their cry for freedom was a doorway to death. She goes on saying:

When "freedom" mocks at death's hand knocks  
Upon our door we pray;  
We cringe and cover in disbelief  
Trapped in a tower of silent grief. (31-34)

The painful situation that the Nagas are trapped in is expressed in these lines. Their conflict between belief and disbelief is also mentioned. Even though they lose their belief, they pray for their existence. In the final stanza of the poem, Haralu prays to God. The poet requests God to bless her dear land. She prays that there be no more pain.

Think not of what  
 They have endured  
 Though it's by hate they're slain.  
 But 'tis love which with they loved  
 Which will with us remain;  
 To speak for them those who are dead  
 Upon the hills in silent bed. (41-46)

The people who have lost their lives in the riots are remembered here. Her poem is an obituary for those martyrs. Every Naga citizen wanted to have a peaceful life in the state for which they are praying. Nagaland is their precious motherland where they can lie upon her lap of forest, hills and valleys. They find solace even in the silence of hill beds.

Easterine Iralu very powerfully articulates the determination of the people for liberating their state in the poem "But our dreams stubbornly refuse to die". She gives a description of the violent attacks in Nagaland. They could hear gunshots even deep in the night. Their streets are stained with blood and they feel dullness in their hearts. They could not explain their despair feelings since words fail to define it. She says silences have usurped speech. The core of the poem is expressed in the following lines:

A nation has been waiting fifty-seven years to be born.  
 The exodus is not over.  
 This is not the destiny of the Naga people.  
 What we have now is not what we want. (9-12)

The substance of Naga poetry is committed with a social purpose. Their poems express their innate urge for a nation state. Their struggle for lib-

eration is voiced in these poems and here too Iralu says that the nation is waiting for 57 years to be born. She speaks about how they are silenced and their dreams are killed. But every Naga life dreams of the liberation of truth and their dreams stubbornly refuse to die. The dreams of achieving the status of a nation state refuses to die even though the Nagas lost a lot of people on their side. The insurgency cannot stop them from dreaming again and again. Every Naga life is a stubborn dream for them. Their life is indeed a fighting dream.

"Song of Nagaland" is a poem exhibiting the apprehensions of the poet about the future of Nagaland. She asks if they kill all the voices of the day, how they can have songs for the next day. The poet is disturbed that their visions of today are killed, that they do not have dreams for tomorrow. The loss of songs and stories also perturbs her. She asks the pertinent question about humanity that: "have we sons for tomorrow/ when we've killed all the fathers of today?" (16-17) Easterine Iralu reiterates the thought as to who will exist in this world to tell their tales tomorrow. The poem exhorts to stop violence and killing. It is a serious issue that people are killed each and every day and the rest of the lot loses their hope, dreams and songs. They will no more be in history and the future world will forget their existence. The struggle and battle they underwent for the cause of Nagaland will be a forgotten history. The poet urges to stop violence and war for a better tomorrow. Naga poets are all set against the violence and atrocities in the state. They can no longer tolerate the violence and blood-shed in the state. They beseech for a peaceful state.

The terror, the pain and the loneliness are frequently seen in the poems of the Nagas. The terrors of what may happen next, will they survive the next day are expressed through their poems. Josephine Changkija through her poem "family dinner" depicts the happiness they had after a family get-together in years. The moments they shared with their kith and kin were so exciting to them. That night was a wonder after so many years. The poet's family managed to sketch a tiny branch of the family tree. "We said "hello" to our brothers/ And sisters" (28-29). That implication of hello is evident of the missing link between the family members. The events in the history of Nagaland have scattered the family life of the people and they all bear the burden of separation and pain in life. The poem ends with a note of danger that may crawl upon them in their private premises. Getting together may lead to the destruction of their whole family when they unexpectedly find ammunitions taking over the group. The poem ends with a prayer:

For:

Much vomit to be spewed out later

Within our own private premises.

May the good Lord bless us all

For our tolerance

In keeping ourselves alive

To have more family dinners. (40-46)

Steve-Al-Masihi's "Unite under the Blue Sky" is a poem exhorting the Naga warriors to arise and unite for a happy land. The poet says that it is time to end the mourning and the great day is coming for all the tribes to join hands. It exhorts to stand firm and strong to face the enemy to whom this land does not belong. The poet exhorts to sing in freedom and celebration for the Nagaland is going to be a unique nation. The lines "Oh Naga, the time has come/ Unite together in the name of the Son" (11-12) has religious undertones. The poet asks to sing the song of freedom from the rooftops, forests, rivers, and the high towers. The poet urges the Nagas to stand as their ancestors stood ending the petty feuds. He exhorts to unite together and let the enemy run.

"UNITE oh NAGA! UNITE into Everlasting future" by Steve-Al-Masihi is also a poem calling every Naga to unite. It is a poem born out of the innate dream of having a happy land with peace and harmony. The poem has religious connotations of having the promised land of God. It is allegorical of the biblical land of glory and everlasting joy:

I dream of Nagalim,

I see now, ever more clearly,

Of a people, I hold so dear,

Where I once sang free,

Where I could be me,

Naga, I call, I call

Hold my hand, before I fall,  
I pray one day, in this world,  
Lift your heads and stand tall.

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Clap your hands, sing without fear,  
Freedom, freedom is coming, so dear  
thousands upon thousands stand before God's throne in the light,  
They had fought the good fight,  
To bring day, into the dark night.  
Naga tribes, UNITE. (8-16, 24-29)

The articulation of the urge for freedom and the struggles the Nagas have undergone, as depicted in the poems, are dealt with in this paper. These poems become the voice of the subaltern group of people who dream of a peaceful living and keep hope in its fulfillment. The oppression and the trauma they endured so far are the markers of their historic past. Bloodshed and violence are no more a horrendous entity for them. The ethnicity and identity of the Naga people, who belongs to different tribes, will also be unified within the Nation-state which they hope for. The hope for a peaceful existence within the Nation is the dream of the common people. As Ranajit Guha stated, the history of the people has started accounting the History of the Nation. This counter discourse in course of time will subvert the History of the Elite Historiographers as this is the voice of the common people. The Naga poets have thus become their voice in history resisting their alienated existence so far. It will lead to new avenues in the history of Nagaland and its literature which is yet to make grounds in world literature.

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