

The History of Nagaland Reflected in its Literature

(By Charles Chasie, President, Kohima Educational Society)

Early History

Before the advent of the American Missionaries, Nagas were illiterate, practised headhunting and lived in their village-states, mostly in isolation from each other. History and culture were passed down through word of mouth, from generation to generation. There was a rich tradition of oral literature but no question of books or written literature then.

The first literary figure to make his presence felt in the region was E.W. Clarke, an American missionary of Dutch origin. With a journalistic background, he arrived in Assam in 1869 and was stationed at Sibsagar (Sivasagar) Mission. Armed with a printing press and an Assamese assistant (Godhula) in particular, he used to make forays into the Ao Naga hills. Slowly he started having converts. For the sake of his converts, he first translated and printed a hymn book and the Lord's Prayer. He, finally, climbed the hills for a base at Molungyimsen Village in Ao Naga country in 1872. In 1884, the first printing press, called Molung Printing Press, was set up in Molunyimsen village. The same year The Gospels of Mathew and John were translated into Ao language. W.E Witter's *Grammar and Vocabulary* in Lotha language came out in 1888. The book, *St Mathew*, in Angami language followed in 1889 and the *Sema Primer* by Rev H B Dickson in 1908. Later, E W Clarke brought out a "dictionary" in the Ao language in 1911. So while the primary objective was to teach the new Naga converts to pray, read the Bible and sing hymns, literacy/education slowly followed in its wake.

Earlier, the British Colonialists had made their presence felt in 1832, when they decided to consolidate the areas under their control, particularly the Manipuri kingdom which they received, following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. Naga country lay between the Manipuri kingdom and their headquarters in Assam. This was the point of contact and conflict with the Nagas when the British attempted to trace a land route to connect the two parts. After about 50 years of fighting the Nagas, the British managed to consolidate their position over western part of Naga areas.

The first big exposure of the Nagas to the outside world was when several thousand Nagas went to Europe and, possibly, Mesopotamia, as part of the Labour Corps, to assist the Allied Forces in the WW1. The main benefit seemed

to have been a consciousness among the disparate Naga tribes that they were a people and separate from others. This “consciousness” would come to fruition in 1918 through the formation of the Naga Club where the educated Nagas from different tribes would assemble regularly. Initially a social club, this would finally emerge as the birthplace of Naga political aspirations.

But as far as literature and books were concerned, no writings had appeared on the scene except, perhaps, some reports by British officers who served in the Naga Hills. Even much of the “travelogues” by serving British officers would appear later. These were, not surprisingly, mostly descriptive in nature. There was no serious research even in the fields of Sociology and Anthropology although, given the absence of published material, some of these “travelogues” were sometimes given the status of specialised studies.

In the latter part of 1920s, following some consolidation of Naga brotherhood from their common experience in France and elsewhere, and the formation of the Naga Club, the need for political action took over. This was epitomised in the submission of the now famous Memorandum to the Simon Commission on January 10, 1929, asking the British Government to leave the Naga people out of the proposed Reformed Scheme of India. This was the first Naga expression of wanting to remain outside of and separate from India. The Nagas were left out of the Reformed Scheme as per Government of India Act, 1935, which took effect in 1937. But soon all the principal players – British, Indians and Nagas – would be engulfed in the WW 2, with the battlefields all over Naga inhabited areas. Once more, violence engulfed much of the Naga Hills. The battle for survival took precedence over everything else.

On the whole, there was no time for the few well educated Nagas to devote their time to writing or even educating their fellow Nagas in the few schools available. They were in great demand everywhere as the Naga people decided to take up cudgels with the soon to become Independent India as Nagas decided that they also wanted to be politically independent. Several parleys took place with India’s leaders but these did not bear fruit. And as Naga Society, once more, descended into what a writer would later call the violent “Night of the Guerrillas”, there was no question of literature and books.

What did stand out was that the few educated Nagas had real quality education -- the political writings of late T. Sakhrie, in particular, could be cited as example. Sadly, this would place them, the Naga people, and foreign missionaries for no fault of theirs, in an unfortunate situation because Government of India could not believe that Nagas could write so well and,

therefore, suspected that the foreign missionaries in Nagaland must be writing the political letters of the Nagas. It made life difficult for the foreign missionaries; it did not benefit Government of India in any way except for propaganda purpose and the Nagas felt insulted and became more determined about their independence, which quickly became a Cause. The violence would continue, throttling any potential for growth of Naga literature.

This political pre-occupation of the Nagas continued for a very long time – indeed, a political agreement is still to be arrived at as I write this in latter half of 2014. So, writings by Nagas, about themselves or others, continued to suffer drought. Only with the passage of time and a more sizeable population getting education, particularly higher education, from 1970s onwards, would emerge Nagas who would start writing. This category included Nagas who were in Government service. Where Naga literature is concerned, Nagaland Statehood established in 1963, although controversial in some quarters, had proved to be an enabling institution. With regular salary and some security over livelihood, some could devote time to writing. Of course, these early writers would write on non-political or politically non-controversial subjects. Some like Alemchiba Ao, would delve into history and culture. But they paved the way for others to follow.

There were other writers who wrote mostly on the Naga Political Issue. People usually write about what concerns them most. Naturally, Politics, (Naga) History, and Religion became the three favourite topics for early Naga writers. The obsession of Nagas for politics and history, as subjects of writing, is understandable. Indeed, there would arise a category of writers who might be described as Naga politico-historians, who would try to prove that historically Nagas had nothing to do with India, that the two are separate in every way, and that the only meeting point between the two is the military invasion of Naga country by Government of India. Thus, in this brand of writing a closeness of affinity between Naga history and the independence movement makes them almost synonymous.

Religion seems less visible but permeates every strata of Naga society. In extreme situations of violence and privations, as Nagas have seen, people have often found an anchor in religion. Faith has sustained the Nagas. Church and promotion of faith became a full time pre-occupation for many Nagas and explains, to some extent, the Naga mentality for evangelization. Some denominations are committed to sending “missionaries” outside Nagaland, in India and even abroad despite the violence and other ills, still prevalent in their own society. Religion and Church have converged and often become a

necessary self-definer for most Nagas and cannot be questioned! This is why even in Naga politics, both “Overground” and “Underground”, the Church remains a most powerful institution in Naga Society.

Thus we find writings on Nagas seem to have been limited to a few subjects. It was also, sometimes, not just writers choosing a limited number of subjects to write on but a general unavailability of readership. The following factors are worth noting.

1. Prolonged years of intense fighting and privations forced most Nagas into eking out a living. Survival took precedence over everything else, including schooling and literacy.
2. It must also be remembered that many became refugees because of the armed conflict, having to settle down far away from their own homes and villages. As displaced persons, their priorities became totally different and they became disoriented. Their identity and lives were clear in their given village-state/s but no longer available to them in their new homes/villages. They had to rebuild a whole new identity by re-inventing themselves! Such a situation was not conducive to reading and writing, much less promoting the growth of literature.
3. The few who wrote anything, not necessarily books, did so with an overwhelming sense of needing to set the records of history and politics straight as they saw/perceived them.
4. Not having had a tradition of written literature, and still operating within the customary social relationships of the village-state, there was a tendency among some Nagas to take any published criticism about them as “hostile” and as a “personal attack”. This is so even today, made worse by the fighting and opposition among the political factions. This makes objective writing on some subjects very difficult.
5. Naga ability for artistic creation was there. Their indigenous knowledge systems, often found more scientific and superior, by visiting scientists themselves, were inbuilt in the Nagas, but they were usually too exhausted, disoriented or pre-occupied with the business of surviving. In any case, the knowledge system/s, widely shared across tribes, would make it seem unnecessary for people with similar knowledge to purchase and read published works.

Naga wisdom passed down through the generations say that songs and music get promoted when there is peace and prosperity and are leisure occupations. Literature even in the broad sense can be said to belong in this group. Unless your means of survival, and those close to you, have been assured, it is difficult to have a free and objective mind to do scholarly work or write good, imaginative literature.

Despite these challenges and problems, it is comforting to see that the descendants of some of those who suffered greatly have since done well in their studies and have managed to find financially sound employments and placed well in society.

But surely, Naga Society has lost one generation, may be even two, of potential writers and promoters of Naga literature because of conflict situation. Only during latter part of 1970s works by Naga writers started appearing even though still tempered by questions of how the Government of India may view the works and if they may be banned or disallowed and/or authors branded “rebels” or “hostiles”. The pioneers in the field of writing, as mentioned above, were Nagaland/Indian Government civil servants or those who were accepted as “Overground”. They, quite naturally, wrote on subjects that were not controversial or wrote it in a way that their views would not be interpreted adversely by Government of India. Nevertheless, they laid down the foundation for other writers to follow.

Publishing

Book writing and literature are usually encouraged and promoted by publishing houses and publishers who go in search of products for sale. These publishers are usually business houses. Sometimes, even individuals who act as patrons of authors come on the scene. On the whole, however, self publishing by authors who are moved by events to write form the foundations of publishing. Very often it is also the Church and religious people who begin the process. And Nagaland was no exception.

Given the history of conflict and violence in Nagaland, there were hardly any publishers for authors. This was the reason many of the early books by Naga authors were self-published, apart from the Church as mentioned above. Happily, in limited circles, there were also Literature Committees among tribes and in Church circles which promoted publishing of books in fields of their interest. One of the earliest such secular local bodies in Nagaland is Ura

Academy in Kohima; this year (2014) they celebrated their Platinum Jubilee with a book fair-cum-sale.

Since the turn of the century some business publishing houses have come up, with ISBN numbers, and focussing on quality products. There are at least three business publishing houses of repute now in Nagaland, plus one in the region, and more than 8 publishing houses on the mainland, including international publishers now promoting books from/on Nagaland and in the North-eastern region. The formation of the North East Writers Forum has also created a platform of interaction among NE writers and with others from outside the region.

The Indian mainland has recently discovered the richness of subjects in the North East and more and more publishers are coming forward and promoting books from the region, including Nagaland. Zubaan Books, which promotes women writers, has been making quite a lot of efforts to promote books from Nagaland. Their efforts are often altruistic. Ms Preeti Gill of Zubaan Books says, "Writing from the North East brought to the mainland a sense of the vast richness and diversity of culture, its literature a rich mapping of not just social and historical events but also brought to the readers here some of the most wonderful writers from the seven states of the Northeast. Alongside stories of violence and conflict, of simmering anger and outrage we have stories of human courage and endurance, of exceptional beauty and hope, the hope of a peaceful tomorrow. And it was the sheer talent, the vigour and strength of this writing that captured the imagination of the people in the mainland and that has made mainstream publishers wake and take note of the huge pool of talent".

What is interesting here is that what was often perceived as a disadvantage in the region has been turned into a positive. Most people in North East belong to small language groups and publishing in their own tongues would not have given them adequate readership. But because of this difficulty most writers from Nagaland and North East write in English. This gives them an international audience and readership. Because their writings are in English, it also makes it easier for publishers to display their books at book fairs, both nationally and internationally. It goes without saying that book fairs are one of the most important ways of promoting books and literature. It is at such fairs that book rights are sold giving writers bigger audience and reward as well. Ms Easterine Kire, a Naga author, for example, has sold German and Norwegian rights for some of her books.

It may not be out of place to go back to history and divide the periods of growth of books and literature in Nagaland. Let us broadly separate the periods into the following categories for the sake of convenience:-

1. **British period:** This period covers until the departure of the British from India. During this time not much is known about written literature although there was a rich Naga oral history. What is known are some of the publications by people like E W Clark and other Christian Missionaries. Some anthropological writings by Johnstone, Mackenzie etc. are mentioned. Second, there were, naturally, official documents of communication between British officers and their Government in the UK. Some of these would become important documents for the Naga people. Third, surprisingly, there was a budding sense of literary consciousness when three early educated Nagas from Kohima Village (Zhapuzhülie, Khiezhie and Lhoulienyü) translated John Bunyan's English classic, "Pilgrim's Progress" into Angami language during this period.
2. **Post British period to early 1970s:** From during the British period there were a number of people -- officials, missionaries, and some anthropologists -- who were on the scene and whose writings we now read. Some came soon after departure of the British. However, their writings were largely published much later. Most of the "travelogues" by British officials and anthropologists were also published in the 1960s. An easy example is Verrier Elwin's "Nagas in the Nineteenth Century" by Oxford University Press which came out in 1969. This was also a period of drought by Naga authors. Interestingly, a Naga author, Mr Tajenyuba Ao, made an appearance with his "A History of Anglo-Naga Affairs" in 1958. This was an exception as was the earlier translation of Pilgrim's Progress mentioned above.
3. **1970s to turn of century:** With formation of Nagaland Statehood, livelihood security of the Government servants and spread of education, some writings started appearing, including by those who were serving employees of the government. What was more, newspapers also started appearing -- beginning with tabloid weekly newspapers which could be said to be the first publishing houses in Nagaland. Four tabloid newspapers -- namely, Citizen's Voice, Nagaland Times, Ura mail and Platform news -- were published during this period. By the 1980s and 1990s more and more books started appearing as more people attained higher education.

4. **New Millennium:** By the turn of the century, the dawn of writing in Nagaland truly began. There is still more poetry than book writing and more non-fiction than imaginative writing. But, at least, one could say the direction now appears more secure than before. What is of great significance is that Naga business publishing houses have now come up to encourage Naga authors. There are also now many others from the mainland as well as from international publishers interested and willing to promote Naga authors although there is still much reluctance among some to publish what Nagas might think is their right to express their feelings, particularly in the area that falls under “politics”. But the road ahead is much brighter today.

Still, in a place like Nagaland, it is simply not possible for a writer to survive on his/her writings alone if such writings are confined to a local readership. The fact that traditional Naga society sustained itself through word of mouth history and education does not help, given their man-land relationship and hangover mentality that books were not essential for survival. Further the presence of high inflation for all (essential) commodities in Naga society has a dampening effect on growth of scholarly works as the people are left with less to spend on ‘non-essential’ things. Naga society had jumped straight into War Economy from Barter Economy during the 2nd World War. Since then the continuing conflict situation has kept the prices of all goods very high. Nagaland continues to be one of the costliest places in India.

By the end of the last century and the turn of the Millennium, more writers started appearing on the scene. Poetry and creative writings started coming out although poets seemed to greatly outnumber other creative writers. Works of fiction also started coming out including book-length narratives and short stories. The creative works component of Naga writing is making remarkable progress in the hands of a few writers but conscious and planned steps will have to be taken to promote further growth. The same goes for other kinds of literature be they scholarly, discursive or imaginative non-fiction.

A few suggestions

1. Research and documentation of existing literature of all types (written and oral) would be a good start in not just disseminating knowledge about a society so rich in sociological and political material, but in inspiring a new generation of writers on a host of subjects.

2. There is need to break out of the traditional word of mouth history mould and give due credit, through reward and recognition, to those who provide society with adequate ideas for the future. In other words, knowledge-keepers and idea-givers will need to be given status and wealth by the society. If the people who can provide the thinking for Naga Society cease to function, Naga Society can only lose. This is how Naga Society, and Nagaland Government, must view this entire issue. Anything less than this would be inadequate. Reward and recognition can also, hopefully, make the literary and scholarly situation vibrant for ideas to emerge from those capable of giving ideas. Our University/ies and institutions of higher learning will need to play their true roles as productive agents and of advocacy in this regard. Societal and governmental practice of recognition and reward must embrace all the knowledge keepers and the idea-givers.

3. Toward this end, the Nagaland Government/Naga Society could institute a proper body to recognize and reward the knowledge-keepers and idea-givers.

- Institute adequate and commensurate awards for excellence in creative and scholarly works, for instance, in the manner government does for sports, Olympians and remarkable achievers in other fields.
- Government could make sure that the good works of creative people are purchased through its departments and disseminate them through the library system throughout the State.
- Invite knowledge-keepers and idea-givers to official functions of the State and make them members of important Boards and Committees.
- Encourage and sponsor Book Fairs and literary/intellectual/creative events in the State.
- What about an annual award for best Writing by Nagas on Nagas?

Once these steps are started, we may find friends offering to assist or at least this will give an opportunity for others to contribute if they so wish. But we must be convinced that knowledge-keepers and idea-givers are important for our society. Here no outsider can help. On such decisions the future of Naga society may very well be cast!

4. In traditional society, Wealth and Status were very important. But Wisdom was treasured more. The introduction of Money Economy has changed the scales of rich and poor. But the craving for wealth and status continues as ever while Wisdom is often forgotten. So, the present Naga milieu, where knowledge-keepers and idea-givers have neither status nor

wealth, is not a conducive environment to promote the creative and scholarly people in society. These categories of people could be given proper status at home and helped to earn from abroad with their works being published in foreign lands. This would also promote and extend Naga contributions to the world family of literature and civilization. Naga society can even start this process by promoting creative workers and their works on mainland India.

It is imperative that right incentives are given to contributors of society. Knowledge-keepers and idea-givers need recognition and reward if society is to progress. Ways of doing it will have to be found so that these productive people can continue to contribute. Without enough to live on and/or finding patronage from the right quarters, their contributions will be in danger of dwindling or disappearing! By extension, knowledge and idea disseminators (including media and the men and women there) must be recognised and rewarded adequately. If the people who can provide the thinking for Naga Society and their agents of dissemination cease to function, Naga Society will begin to decay. This is how Naga Society (and Nagaland Government) must view this entire issue. Anything less than this would prove sorely inadequate.

Last Words

This bibliography is an attempt at providing an exhaustive bibliography of books on Nagas and books by Nagas. This is a seminal effort. In order to make it useful for researchers many self published books on different themes have been included. The early writings on the Nagas were mostly anthropological, and the middle period largely consisted of Government records. But the collection gives an idea of the development of writing in Nagaland. The “brass-tacks” as it were of the bibliography have been prepared by Easterine Kire under the direction of Dr Gordon Graham, an international publisher of long standing and founder president of the Kohima Educational Trust (KET), founded by the British veterans of the Battle of Kohima. My own role has been to give support whenever required and where possible.

Not having been involved in preparing bibliographies before, I only had a rough idea that this would entail a list of books, authors, publishers, and times of publication etc. So, it came as a bit of a shock when my senior friend, Dr Gordon Graham, started raising questions during the course of the preparation of this bibliography of books on Nagas.

As a result of his searching queries, I realized that this bibliography could very well depict what Naga Society has been like as seen through literature and the

literature written on it. My mind started wandering and I began to see the history of the Naga people with different eyes! This also led me to start a little more “digging” on my part including publishing in Nagaland and other facts. What have been presented above are the results of this search.

This Bibliography can be accessed at

<http://www.kohimaeducationaltrust.net/kohima13.htm>

You are warmly invited to go through the site, read and send us your comments. We will also appreciate your informing us if there are literary works that, in your opinion, should be included. This is a continuing work and we will keep updating it. Meanwhile, I wish everyone happy reading on behalf of Kohima Educational Trust and the Kohima Education Educational Society.

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(Note: This publication has been placed under British period in the text because some relatives of the authors are certain there was a private publication before 1944).