



ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE NAGAS: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CHANG NAGA OF TUENSANG DISTRICT, KOHIMA REGION

Debashish Deb¹, Dr.Mamata Pandit²

¹Research Scholar, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya, India

²Research Supervisor, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya, India

ABSTRACT :

The Nagas constitute one of the most culturally diverse indigenous hill populations of Northeast India, inhabiting the Patkai–Naga hill ranges along the India–Myanmar frontier. Rather than a homogenous ethnic unit, the Nagas represent a constellation of tribes bound together through linguistic affinities, shared cultural patterns, and a historically emergent political identity. This paper examines the origins and historical development of the Nagas with particular reference to the Chang Naga tribe of Tuensang district (administratively under eastern Nagaland, with historical links to Kohima as the colonial and postcolonial capital). Using a multidisciplinary approach drawing on oral traditions, linguistic evidence, colonial ethnography, missionary records, and modern anthropological scholarship, the study traces (a) theories of Naga origins and migration, (b) the pre-colonial socio-political life of the Nagas, (c) colonial intervention and its impact on Naga societies, and (d) the specific historical, cultural, and socio-political trajectory of the Chang Nagas. The findings reveal that the Chang Nagas, while sharing broad Tibeto-Burman linguistic roots with other Naga groups, developed a distinctive historical experience shaped by geographic location, village polity, ritual economy, and relatively late colonial and missionary contact. The paper argues that understanding Chang history is crucial for a nuanced comprehension of Naga history as a whole, as it highlights internal diversity, uneven colonial encounters, and regionally specific responses to modernity.

Keywords: Nagas, Chang Naga, Tuensang, Naga origins, Tibeto-Burman, colonial history, oral tradition, Nagaland.

I.Introduction:

The study of Naga origins and history occupies a central position in the historiography of Northeast India. The Nagas inhabit one of the most complex cultural frontiers of South and Southeast Asia, a region characterized by rugged topography, linguistic plurality, and long-standing interactions between hill societies and neighbouring plains civilizations. The very term “Naga” is not indigenous to any single tribe but is a collective label that gained currency through external usage first in pre-colonial plains records and later through colonial administration. Despite this, the Nagas today articulate a strong sense of collective identity rooted in shared historical experiences and political struggles.



Among the many Naga tribes, the Chang Naga occupy a distinctive position. Concentrated primarily in Tuensang district in eastern Nagaland, the Changs are known for their well-preserved ritual traditions, elaborate agricultural festivals, and rich oral literature. Historically, the Chang area remained relatively insulated from early colonial intervention compared to western Naga regions around Kohima and Mokokchung. As a result, Chang society retained many indigenous institutions well into the twentieth century.

This paper seeks to situate the Chang Naga experience within the broader canvas of Naga history. By examining origins, migration theories, pre-colonial village life, colonial and missionary encounters, and post-independence transformations, the study demonstrates that Naga history is not a linear narrative but a layered and regionally differentiated process. Special emphasis is placed on Tuensang district, historically administered from Kohima during the colonial and early postcolonial periods, thereby linking the eastern and central Naga experiences.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of this research are:

- 1] To examine the origins and historical formation of the Naga tribes through linguistic, cultural, and migratory perspectives.
- 2] To analyze the socio-historical development of the Chang Naga tribe in Tuensang district within the broader framework of Naga history.
- 3] To assess the impact of colonial administration, missionary activities, and modern political processes on Chang Naga society and identity.

III. Review of Literature:

The literature on Naga history may broadly be divided into four categories: colonial ethnographies, linguistic and anthropological studies, missionary writings, and contemporary historical analyses. Early colonial works such as T. C. Hodson's *the Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911) and J. P. Mills' ethnographic studies on the Ao and Lhota Nagas provided detailed descriptions of social organization, material culture, and ritual practices. While these accounts remain invaluable, they were shaped by colonial perspectives and administrative concerns. Notably, eastern Naga tribes such as the Chang received relatively less attention in early ethnography due to limited British access.



Linguistic studies by scholars such as Grierson and later Tibeto-Burman linguists placed Naga languages within the Sino-Tibetan family, offering important clues about ancient migrations. Anthropological works in the post-independence period emphasized oral traditions, clan histories, and the symbolic world of Naga societies, thereby correcting earlier external biases. Missionary literature, particularly Baptist mission records, documented social change, conversion, and the spread of literacy among the Nagas. While rich in historical detail, these writings often viewed indigenous beliefs through a moralizing lens. More recent scholarship, including works on Naga nationalism and identity politics, situates Naga history within the context of colonial disruption, decolonization, and postcolonial state formation.

Specific studies on the Chang Nagas remain comparatively limited, making oral traditions, local histories, and district gazetteers especially important sources for understanding Chang society.

IV. Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology. Data has been collected from secondary sources such as books, research articles, government reports, and missionary records. Oral histories and folk narratives documented by anthropologists and local scholars have been used to reconstruct pre-literate historical phases, especially for the Chang Nagas. Linguistic classification and comparative cultural analysis supplement historical interpretation.

The methodology involves:

- Textual analysis of historical and ethnographic literature
- Comparative study of Naga tribes with special reference to the Chang
- Contextual interpretation of oral traditions
- Critical evaluation of colonial and missionary narratives

This approach allows for a balanced reconstruction of Naga and Chang history while acknowledging limitations inherent in non-written sources.

V. Results and Discussion:

The present study set out to examine the origins and historical development of the Nagas with special reference to the Chang Naga tribe of Tuensang district, historically administered under Kohima. The discussion of results is organized thematically according to the three



objectives of the study, integrating linguistic, anthropological, historical, and political perspectives. Rather than treating Naga history as a uniform or linear narrative, the findings emphasize internal diversity, region-specific historical trajectories, and the interaction between indigenous institutions and external forces.

Origins and Historical Formation of the Nagas:

The findings of this study strongly support the scholarly consensus that the Nagas do not share a single, monolithic origin. Instead, Naga history reflects a complex process of migration, settlement, differentiation, and cultural consolidation over an extended historical timeframe. Linguistic evidence consistently places Naga languages within the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. This classification suggests that the ancestors of the Nagas were part of broader population movements from regions of East and Southeast Asia, possibly through present-day Myanmar and the Patkai hill ranges.

However, the results indicate that linguistic affiliation alone cannot explain the internal diversity among the Naga tribes. The extraordinary linguistic fragmentation where neighbouring villages may speak mutually unintelligible languages points to long periods of geographical isolation and village autonomy. This fragmentation challenges simplistic migration models and instead supports a theory of multiple waves of movement followed by localized cultural evolution. The Naga Hills, characterized by rugged terrain and ecological segmentation, functioned as a natural environment for the development of distinct micro-societies.

Oral traditions across Naga tribes further reinforce this interpretation. Rather than presenting a single origin myth, Naga oral narratives speak of dispersal from ancestral locations, emergence from caves or stones, and gradual settlement across hilltops and valleys. These narratives, though symbolic, preserve collective memories of migration and differentiation. The study finds that oral traditions should be treated as historical consciousness rather than literal chronology. In the case of the Chang Nagas, oral accounts emphasize clan dispersal, village founding, and territorial occupation, underscoring a historical awareness rooted in land and kinship.



The study also reveals that pre-colonial Naga identity was not pan-ethnic. Identity was primarily village-centric and clan-based, with allegiance defined by immediate political and ritual units. The term “Naga” itself appears to be an external designation that gained wider acceptance only during the colonial period. Thus, the emergence of a collective Naga identity is historically recent, shaped by interaction with colonial administration, missionary institutions, and modern political movements.

These findings challenge earlier colonial representations that portrayed the Nagas as a culturally static or isolated group. Instead, the evidence points to a dynamic history marked by adaptation, negotiation, and internal differentiation. The origins of the Nagas must therefore be understood as a process rather than an event an ongoing formation shaped by migration, environment, and social organization.

Socio-Historical Development of the Chang Naga of Tuensang

The second objective of the study focused on the socio-historical development of the Chang Nagas, and the findings clearly demonstrate that the Chang experience represents a distinct trajectory within the broader Naga historical framework. Geographically located in eastern Nagaland, primarily in Tuensang district, the Chang area remained relatively insulated from early colonial penetration. This geographical positioning profoundly shaped Chang history, allowing indigenous institutions to persist longer than in many western Naga regions.

Chang society was traditionally organized around large, well-structured villages with clearly defined clan systems. Political authority rested with councils of elders, ritual specialists, and clan heads, rather than centralized chieftainship. The village functioned as a self-sufficient political and ritual unit, exercising control over land, resources, and social norms. Unlike generalized portrayals of Naga society as dominated by shifting cultivation, the Chang Nagas practiced a mixed agricultural system with a significant emphasis on wet rice cultivation. This agricultural stability supported population concentration and elaborate ritual calendars.

The study finds that Chang socio-cultural life was deeply embedded in ritual practice. Agricultural festivals, fertility rites, and communal feasts served not only religious functions but



also reinforced social hierarchy, gender roles, and inter-clan relationships. Oral literature, songs, and ceremonial performances played a crucial role in transmitting historical memory and ethical values across generations. These cultural forms functioned as repositories of Chang historical consciousness in the absence of written records.

Another significant finding is that Chang society exhibited a strong ethic of communal cooperation. Institutions similar to the *morung* system elsewhere among the Nagas facilitated socialization, defense, and cultural education. Youth were trained in customary law, agricultural skills, and oral traditions, ensuring continuity of social norms. This system contributed to the resilience of Chang culture even in the face of later external interventions.

Comparatively, the Chang case highlights the internal diversity of Naga societies. While sharing broad cultural patterns with other Naga tribes, the Chang developed distinct economic practices, ritual forms, and social structures. The study therefore confirms that Naga history cannot be adequately understood through generalized models but requires tribe-specific analysis grounded in local contexts.

Colonial Administration and Its Differential Impact

The results further indicate that colonial intervention in Chang areas followed a markedly different timeline compared to western Naga regions. British administrative presence in Tuensang remained minimal for much of the colonial period, reflecting the policy of indirect control over so-called “Excluded Areas.” This delayed administrative incorporation allowed Chang society to retain its indigenous political and ritual systems well into the twentieth century. When colonial administration eventually expanded eastward, it introduced new forms of governance that gradually altered traditional authority. Village councils were incorporated into administrative frameworks, customary practices were selectively codified, and new boundaries were imposed. While these changes disrupted certain aspects of traditional autonomy, they also created new avenues for inter village and inter-tribal interaction.

The study finds that colonial knowledge production through ethnography, mapping, and classification played a crucial role in redefining Naga identity. The categorization of diverse tribes under the collective label “Naga” facilitated the emergence of a shared political



consciousness, even as it obscured internal differences. For the Chang Nagas, colonial contact functioned as a catalyst rather than a complete rupture, initiating gradual transformation rather than immediate cultural disintegration.

Missionary Activity and Cultural Transformation

Missionary activity among the Chang Nagas began significantly later than in western Nagaland, and its impact was correspondingly distinctive. The introduction of Christianity marked a major turning point in Chang history, reshaping religious belief systems, social institutions, and educational practices. Conversion led to the decline of indigenous ritual authority and the abandonment of certain ceremonial practices associated with animistic belief systems.

However, the study reveals that this transformation was neither uniform nor wholly destructive. Chang society engaged in a selective process of adaptation, integrating Christian beliefs with existing cultural values. Communal ethics, respect for elders, and collective labour practices continued under new institutional frameworks such as churches and schools. Rather than erasing Chang identity, Christianity became a new medium through which identity was expressed and negotiated.

The spread of literacy through missionary education had far-reaching consequences. Literacy enabled the documentation of oral traditions, the emergence of Chang intellectuals, and participation in wider Naga political discourse. Education also facilitated socio-economic mobility and reoriented Chang society toward modern state structures. These findings highlight the ambivalent nature of missionary influence simultaneously transformative and enabling.

Chang Nagas and Modern Political Processes

The final major area of discussion concerns the integration of the Chang Nagas into modern political processes. The study finds that Chang participation in Naga political movements was shaped by both regional concerns and broader aspirations for autonomy. The formation of the Naga Hills Tuensang Area after Indian independence provided a unique



administrative arrangement that acknowledged the distinct historical experience of eastern Nagas.

Chang leaders played important roles in negotiations and governance during this transitional period. However, the study also reveals tensions between traditional authority and modern political institutions. The introduction of electoral politics, bureaucratic governance, and development planning created new social hierarchies and power dynamics.

VI. Conclusion:

Despite these challenges, the Chang Nagas demonstrated considerable agency in navigating political change. Community institutions adapted to new realities, and cultural identity continued to serve as a source of cohesion. The Chang experience thus illustrates the broader Naga struggle to reconcile indigenous autonomy with participation in the modern nation-state. Taken together, the results demonstrate that Naga history and Chang history in particular is best understood as a layered and regionally differentiated process. Migration, environmental adaptation, village autonomy, colonial intervention, missionary influence, and political mobilization interacted in complex ways to shape contemporary identities. The Chang Nagas of Tuensang exemplify how delayed colonial contact allowed for the prolonged survival of indigenous institutions, even as later engagement with modern forces produced selective transformation. Their history challenges homogenizing narratives of Naga society and underscores the importance of micro-historical approaches in indigenous historiography.

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