CHAPTER III

THE EMERGENCE OF FORMAL TRIBES
CHAPTER III

THE EMERGENCE OF FORMAL TRIBES

The state of inter-tribal relations in the Naga society, as we shall see, is founded on the present "tribewise" political groupings of the Nagas, which have become distinct socio-political categories, acquiring group consciousness from well-defined and specific community of people. It is etched into the social system in the form of formal recognition and policy application. In chapter I of this work, we have already seen that this "tribe" or "socio-political unit" has its roots in colonialism. In Chapter II we have shown that these "tribes" as distinct entities did not exist in the traditional Naga society. In the present Chapter we take up the emergence of formal tribes. We deal with the British era, its administration and those factors which led to the emergence of formal tribes.

In the pre-British period, even though the Naga villages were found to be isolated from one another, it had been said that they were in contact with their neighbours of the plains with whom they traded. This relationship is characterised by both friendliness and hostility without amounting to subjugation.\(^1\) However, the Ahom-Naga relations during the most

---

part of sixty years of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra plains, can be quite confusing without proper analysis. This is because it is most often assumed to be characterised by three co-existing features: trade, conflict and subjugation.

S. K. Bhuyan writes that the Ahom policy was not one of complete subjugation and annexation of their tribal neighbours, but that of reconciliation and friendly intercourse. This did not prevent Naga aggressions on their subjects and in order to protect them, the Ahoms even constructed embankments called Naga Ali to keep the hillmen away. The Ahoms also undertook punitive expeditions to the Naga hills. This might have led to the subjugation of some Naga countries by the Ahoms. Historians like S. K. Bhuyan pointed out that the Nagas living in the low hills south of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts, from Dikhow to the Buri-Dihing, were subjects of the Ahom government and that they paid taxes.

Whatever the Ahom-Naga relations were, since the Nagas were not a collective political entity at the time, it could only occur between the Ahoms and those Naga villages proximate to

3. Ibid., p. 43.
their country, with whom they had contact. These Nagas had been identified by the Ahoms as Tablungias, Jabaka, Banfera, Kaboongs, Paniduarias, Borduarias and Namsanggias and so on. These names were only used by the Ahoms. They are foreign to the Nagas, as such no Naga tribe is known by these names today. It is said that the Ahoms called the Nagas after the names of their villages and duars or passes through which they frequented the plains.

We need to consider the fact that at this period, the Nagas were an amorphous people and each village was a separate political unit. Most Nagas lived in inaccessible hills and forests. It could not have been possible for the Ahoms to come into contact with all the Nagas. We are given to believe that the Ahom-Naga relations was restricted to a limited territory along their contiguous areas. Also, one of the factors which undermines the importance of this relationship is the lack of Ahom influences on the social and cultural life of the Nagas. Bhuyan writes:

"The isolation of the hillmen from the formative influences of the religions of the plains accounts for the continuance of the border tribes in their own code of life brought to being by their environments and the influence of their primitive instincts. Whereas life in the plains is rapidly changing these hillmen are living as they used to do many thousand years ago."

8. Ibid., p. 33.
This is why at the time of the arrival of the British in the 17th Century, the Nagas were still living in their traditional domain, leading their own life which was mostly untouched by civilisation. The British first came into contact with the Nagas about the year 1832. But it was only in 1866-67, that the British decided to have a permanent footing at Samooguting (Chumukedima), in the foothills of the Naga Hills, with a view to check the raiding Nagas from marauding the districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar. It was in 1881 that a final decision to make the Naga Hills a British district was taken.

In 1882, British control covered only Kohima and Wokha along with their immediate neighbourhood. It took sixty long intervening years for the British to become responsible for an administered area that constituted the Naga Hills district. It was the policy of the Government of British India not to interfere in inter-tribal feuds committed outside the Naga Hills district, unless British subjects were involved. The British interest in the Naga Hills at this period did not seem to go beyond the need to contain Naga raids on their subjects and they

12. Ibid., p. 99.
were quite unwilling to spend unnecessarily in order to extend their area of control.\footnote{15}

The British made no secrets of their unwillingness to extend control over independent Naga villages unless there were some special reasons for it.\footnote{16} Because of this firm policy of non-interference even those villages like Yatsimi, Melomi and Lapvomi, which sought British protection had to be rejected.\footnote{17} The village by village process of bringing the Nagas under the British control and the time it took best explain the independent and isolated nature of the traditional Naga villages. Even at the time of British departure this process was not completed. A sizable number of Naga villages bordering Burma and Tibet were left unadministered.\footnote{18}

When the British first arrived, they did not want to interfere in the affairs of the Nagas. Their policy was to use the Cachar and the Manipuri kingdoms to subdue the Nagas. They were of the view that this would suffice in curbing Naga raids on their subjects, but it was unsuccessful.\footnote{19} This was why the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 106 - 107.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 129.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 132 - 134.
\item M. Aliemchiba, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 44.
\end{itemize}
British themselves had to lead the expeditions and confront the Nagas. The British invasion started a unity among some Naga villages which joined forces to counter them. But these alliances turned out to be purely military and they lasted only as long as the dangers persisted. It did not lead to the formation of any supra-village organisation of the Nagas.

The coming of the British brought tremendous influence and change into the Naga society. The Nagas emerged from the cocoons of their isolated villages which became part and parcel of various political units of administration. With the expansion of British administration over a major portion of Naga inhabited areas and the establishment of Naga Hills District in 1881 with headquarters at Kohima, the amorphous Nagas were brought under a single political roof for the first time. The general boundaries of the district within which effective British administration came into being as outlined by W. W. Hunter were:

"On the north the district of Nowgong; on the east the district of Sibsagar, the Doyang river and the Sinpho and the Abor country; on the south the semi-independent state of Manipur and the district of Cachar; and on the west the district of Nowgong and Khasi and the Jaintia Hills."

If the isolated nature of the Naga villages had been

advantageous in the past to the extent that they prevented the en masse subjugation of the people, it was undoubtedly this factor which became responsible for the division of Nagas into separate administrative units. In 1842, the Mao, Tangkhul and Tamenlong Naga areas were incorporated into Manipur. The separation of Burma from India in 1937 excluded a number Naga villages from British India. Large tracts of Naga areas were also transferred to the adjoining districts of Assam for the purpose of what had been purported as administrative expediency. As such, though the Nagas were brought under a common sovereign, they were distributed into different political compartments. From here we can deduce that the British did not encourage Naga unity.

With the incorporation of the Nagas into Western rule, they began to experience an exposure to the new culture. Nagas received Western education from Christian missionaries under the aegis of the British; many adopted Christianity. The Naga society was introduced to a new economic and political system. We shall now discuss the transformation of the Naga society that took place as a result of these changes.

The British administrative set-up had its headquarters

at Kohima, with a sub-centre at Wokha and another sub-center which opened at Mokokchung in 1888. The chief function of its officials was to act as arbiters in the inter-village feuds; a house tax of two rupees was collected and a police force was planted in the interior. The policy of the British was to run the administration through village Chiefs and Headmen, a method which is aptly described as non-regulated administration. The people were left to their own customary laws without any British interference. The singular real concern of the British was the stoppage of headhunting, the curbing of inter-village feuds and the prevention of Naga raids on the plains. It appears that at this they were quite successful. Verrier Elwin comments that due to British administration, the Nagas were able to settle down "to a peaceful life of cultivation and trade." B. B. Ghosh agrees, but he also points out that the non-interference policy of the British kept the Naga people outside "the influence of modern civilisation for long."

Even after the creation of Naga Hills District, the

Nagas were left to determine their own life. Administrative provisions were made to protect them from exploitation by the people from the plains. Maxwell writes:

"The British had by regulation and practice kept their (Naga) lands out of the hands of speculators or squatters from the plains, and strictly limited the number of plains people allowed into the hills for any purpose."31

The British did not encourage free interaction between the Nagas and the people of the plains.32 Misra points out that although geographically Nagas were in the Indian sub-continent, they maintained their separate way of life and the changes that the British rule brought about in the other parts of India did not affect the Nagas.33 Furthermore, the Inner-line Regulation of 1873, which restricted British subjects from freely going into the hills,34 also served to isolate the Nagas from others.

Under the Government of India Act 1919, The Naga area became a 'backward tract', which was by a subsequent Government of India Act 1935, changed to Excluded Area. By this Act the Nagas were put along with those who were excluded from the competence of the Provincial and Federal Legislatures.35 This administrative legislations came to play a vital role in the

32. See Ibid., p. 4.
political bifurcation of Naga identity from that of India. In doing so, it helped the Naga society to develop a character of its own on the line of its peculiar tribal social system.

The British did very little to develop the economic life of the Nagas. There was only a single cart road in the district, going from Dimapur to Imphal through Kohima. Apart from this there were two bridle paths connecting the interior areas with Kohima. In 1904, there was a combined post and telegraph office at Impur, Mokokchung, Nichugard and Wokha. There was not much trade, but with the introduction of money very little barter existed by then. A few shops run by Marwaris were opened at Kohima. The 1905 Census shows that 93.8% of the population were engaged in pasture and agriculture. A very small percentage of the Nagas worked as traders, officials and labourers.

In 1901, only a single nominal town existed in the district. It was said that the occupation of Chumukedima was followed by the opening of communication, schools dispensaries and the introduction of money as the medium of exchange. But

37. B. C. Allen, Naga Hills and Manipur, (Delhi, 1905), pp. 56 - 58.
38. Ibid., p. 58.
39. Ibid., p. 59.
40. Ibid., p. 41.
41. Ibid., p. 31.
these developments remained negligible as they were made only to meet the bare necessities of British administration. They did not bring about any noticeable change in the economic position of the Nagas. Imnatensu Ao writes:

"Despite the inroads made by modern influences, the Naga village life and social institutions still retained their unique character. The original village organisation continues to remain as before and the impact of industrial civilisation and culture and modern polity is only superficially felt." 43

We can see that British rule did not bring any radical structural changes in the village organisation of the Nagas. But the Naga philosophy of life as well as their socio-economic and political attitudes were due for change. The influences of modern education and Christianity inculcated in them a new interpretation of the social system they lived in, which they now perceived in the Western outlook.

British administration in the Naga Hills merely looked after the maintenance of law and order. Because of this education was left in the hands of Christian missionaries. 44 At the initial stage, the response to Christianity and education was poor. In 1901, there were only 563 Christians, 153 literate persons in English and 210 literate persons in Bengali. 45

the growth rate in Christianity acquired gigantic proportions and
in 1932 there were already 14,392 Christians, which was almost
four times that of 1922; and in 1942 it grew to 31,678. In 1950,
the total number of Christians reached 50,500.46 The British
government started their own schools in the footsteps of the
missionaries, but they were negligibly few compared to the
Mission schools.47

In 1931, Kohima and Mokokchung sub-divisions had 42 and
52 schools respectively, but higher education facilities of
matric standard were still lacking. Only in 1938, the school at
Kohima was elevated to High School standard.48 Therefore,
predictably the literacy rate in the Naga Hills as late as 1941
was only 5.09%.49 Considering the immense changes in the Naga
life, the rapid spread of Christianity on the one hand, and the
slow progress of education on the other, we may postulate that
between the two, the influence of Christian principles had a
greater bearing in the changing social outlook of the Nagas than
education which only a few experienced.

The success of Christianity not only depended on the

46. Vihuli Sema, "The Work of the American Mission in the Naga
Hills", (Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation, Submitted to
49. M. Alernchiba, "Problems of Re-adjustment to New Situation",
in K. Suresh Singh (ed.), Tribal Situation in India, (Simla,
superimposition of Western theology and religion on what Imchayanger called the Naga religion, but also the condemnation of the Naga way of life. Vihuli Sema writes:

"Christianity had struck the very deep roots among the remote self-contained and isolated Nagas and effected them in positive as well as negative ways. It shook the very foundation of their long held traditional assumptions upon which the early stages of their civilisation was based, and eventually changed altogether to new institutions and cultural forms. It provided a break with their past religion and the blending of the old and the new culture was brought by the new religion and Western civilisation."

There is no denying the fact that Christianity apart from being a religion was also the embodiment of Western culture. Moreover, we need to consider the fact that its promulgators were Westerners. It was brought to the Nagas by American missionaries. The acceptance of Christianity was also the acceptance of Christian principles which cannot be separated from the culture it represents. Christianity might have acted as a catalyst, therefore, by which Naga attitudes were conditioned to accept the hegemonic rule of the Western empire, and thereby inducing all that accrue from the new dominant culture. The transition from being mere tribals to becoming participants at different levels

of political organisations such as tribal and national politics may be attributed to this change of attitudes.

It may be said that though the imparted education fell upon only a handful of Nagas, its impact is to be in no way undermined. According to Vihuli Sema, the teaching of English language broke down the linguistic barriers that existed among the Nagas and brought about a sense of solidarity among the different Naga tribes. The spread of Christianity and education started a gradual migration of the people to the urbanised centres to seek better economic opportunities. There is no denying the fact that Naga tribals came to mingle and interact in these centres. Imnatemsu Ao sums up the impact of British rule thus:

"Along with the work done by the Christian missionaries in educational, social and medical fields, the British established communication and administrative unity among the different parts of Nagaland. All these led to the emergence of a new political consciousness and aspiration among the Nagas."

Though British rule could not bring about a major upheaval in the economic life of the Naga people, the introduction of Christianity, education and market economy had far reaching effects on the Nagas. We do not claim that there was

a radical change in the social structure. But we can say that there was a marked difference in the traditional society in which the attitudes and beliefs were universal, and there was uniformity in the means of livelihood. With the coming of market economy, monetary wealth began to influence society. Because of education there was a change in the occupation of the people. The educated took to white-collar jobs. They were in a position more accessible to money and hence more respectable in the new society. The church also brought about a similar division among the Nagas because the educated Nagas took over its leadership, as they were the ones who were first exposed to Christianity in their Mission schools. Therefore, the social composition of the Naga society was no longer homogeneous. There emerged an obvious difference in outlook, beliefs and attitudes among the people. We shall elaborate on this in the next chapter.

All these changes caused the very roots of the Naga traditional cultural system to be shaken and Imcahynager laments that this has resulted in political turmoil, economic instability, social disintegration and loss of identity.\(^{54}\) In many ways he is right. Under British administration the Nagas had to adapt themselves to an alien political system which they do not understand; the economic aspiration of the common man extended

beyond daily sustenance in the midst of the growth in economic disparity. As a result, there arose a situation where the Naga needed to redefine his identity within a larger political environment. As we shall see below, this formed the background to the emergence of formal tribes.

II

We have already seen in the preceding Chapter that most of the tribals names, originally existing in the pre-British times were not adopted by the British. One simple reason for this can be that they took their names from outsiders. The use of Naga names was difficult because each group had its own name for the other. A group may be called different names by different villages. The original local names that British writers adopted were also found to be corrupted in use. The tribal appellation 'Ao' for example, is said to be 'Aor' in its original form. In case of of Aos, the Assamese name Hatiguria was not used. But the tribe which came to be known by the Assamese name Lotha, were known to themselves as 'Kyou'.

Angamis as Dawansa.\textsuperscript{57} This group was known to themselves as Tenyimia. It is believed that the name Angami came from 'Gnamei', a term used by the people of Manipur to describe them as raiders\textsuperscript{58}

R. G. Woodthorpe mentions that the Nagas have no generic name for themselves or for the various tribes constituting their race. He says "a Naga when asked who he is, generally replies that he is from such and such village, though sometimes a specific name is given to a group of villages."\textsuperscript{59} We know that it was the British who started using names to distinguish between tribes. They first came into contact with the Angami group and knew no other tribes beyond this region.\textsuperscript{60} But later on, they began to identify more tribes and put them on record.\textsuperscript{61}

It may be pointed out that at this time many writers started to describe the Naga tribes in terms of their attributed

\begin{enumerate}
\end{enumerate}
names and cultural traits. This is best explained by Robert Reid when he says that ethnologists such as Hutton and Mills have the nomenclature on the Nagas put on a scientific footing. He cites the Angamis, Semas, Aos, Rengmas and Lothas as examples.\(^{62}\) In the work of A. W. Davis, Census of India, 1891, we find these tribes being categorically described with respect to their territories, customs and traditions, by way of distinguishing one from another as separate tribes.\(^{63}\)

Language was a major criterion in the classification of tribes by Davis. On the basis of the difference of language in Chongli and Mongsen, he spoke of the Aos as two tribes.\(^{64}\) On the same ground, he says that the three groups of Chakrima, Chakroma and Tengima to which the Angami tribe can be divided, are the same tribe because of similarity in language.\(^{65}\) Davis is not alone in this; John Butler refused to accept the two neighbouring Angami and Mao as the same tribe, though they share a lot of common features because of their dissimilarity in language.\(^{66}\)

It is seen that the general perception of the Nagas by the British was in terms of a people divided into different tribes on the basis of language, customs and habits. Of these, language seems to be the most important determinant of tribal segregation. The British administration incorporated into its system the linguistic basis of tribal identification in appointing official interpreters called Dobashis. They were appointed as representatives of various tribes grouped on the basis of language. This was done at a ratio proportionate to the population of each tribe. In 1930, the tribal distribution of Dobashis in Mokokchung stood as follows: 67

- Aos - 10;
- Lothas - 4;
- Semas - 4;
- Changs - 3; and
- Konyaks - 1

The role of Christianity and its corollary, education, with regard to the emergence of formal tribes, consequential to the linguistic basis of classification of the Nagas, is a major factor which requires elucidation. This may be considered as the first step towards the concretisation of what had been till then assumed as tribes. The first school in the Naga Hills was opened

at Namsang, through the affords of Rev. Miles Bronson.68 The Naga village of Molungyimsen was the first to house a Christian centre which was started in March 1876.69 Initially, the missionaries chose Assamese as the medium of instruction.70 In 1885, the Rivenbergs came and they began to study the Ao language.71 Very soon the scriptless Naga dialects were put into writing by using Roman script. The first written works in Naga vernacular were undoubtedly Christian oriented. They were translations of Bible, Christian Hymns and other literary works.72 By the end of 1884, there appeared a dictionary, an Ao primer, a catechism, a life of Joseph, a Hymn book, and a translation of the Gospels of Mathew and John, all in the Ao dialect.73 In 1904, various books in Naga dialects started emerging with the approval of the Naga Hills Government Officials.74

The introduction of an educational system in which each linguistic group is unified was significant in the development of the idea of the tribe within such a group. This helped in bringing down the language barrier between villages, and even of Thinuos, as the major dialect which represented the written form,

68. Vihuli Sema, op.cit., p. 83.
69. Ibid., p. 49.
70. Ibid., p. 85.
72. Ibid., p. 92.
73. Ibid., p 93.
74. Ibid., p. 94.
within a circumscribed tribal confine, became central to all. In the case of the Ao tribe, the written dialect which became common to the tribe was mainly adopted from the Molung and Merankong villages. This was so because Rev. Rivenberg, the missionary who first scripted the Ao language settled in these parts. The common use of this dialect by the three lingual groups - Mongsen, Chongli and Changki, must have had a unifying influence on them.

The rapid growth of Christianity as seen earlier in the same Chapter, made the Church an important social institution which gathered much influence. Since education came from the missionaries, they played an important role in the formation of tribes. They helped in defining tribal boundaries by introducing the use of a common dialect in their schools and churches. The use of the same translations within a particular area, for a particular group of people became an important criterion for the formation of tribal identity. It gave the group a cohesiveness which later showed in the formation of tribal church associations. We shall discuss this further in Chapter V.

The first tribal church Association was formed by the Aos. Following the Ao Baptist Association, different other tribes formed their own Associations. This marked the first

instance of formal organisations of the Nagas into different tribes, and also the institutionalisation of tribal divisions. This tribe-wise church Associations are formed on the basis of the language groups identified by the missionaries. They played an important role in the development of a strong bond of group consciousness. The Konyaks who claimed to be a single tribe, inhabit Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and even Myanmar (Burma), but these State and international boundaries do not seem to deter them from coming together under a single church Association. This implies that with the formation of Christian Associations, tribe consciousness was beginning to crystallise.

The British did not interfere with the native political system. The Naga traditions and customs prevailed. British rule did not amount to imposition of European model of administration on the Nagas. In terms of politico-administrative policy, the British wanted the traditional social system to flourish, hence the Naga society remained intact to a certain extent, in character and content. Though the Naga Hills was a district within Assam, it was never integrated into the administrative set-up of Assam. It continued to enjoy an isolated treatment as an exclusive socio-political entity.

80. Ibid., p. 56.
In spite of the apparent British efforts to preserve and retain the Naga way of life, we find that changes have become inevitable. Though not much development has taken place, the enforcement of law and order has ushered in a peaceful life among the Nagas. The new political unity brought in by British rule opened up inter-societal communication between the previously isolated villages. Christianity and education have done their part in rendering the traditional system of life incompetent. Thus, a conducive atmosphere was created for the formation of a new social order and this turned out to be no other than the emergence of distinct tribal identities. In this context, we find much relevance in what B. Pakem has to say:

"In the pre-colonial period most of the communities of North-East India were not conscious about their ethnic identities and their world was confined to their family, clans, and villages. The first sociological process has been to develop an ethno-tribal identity which was acquired in the phase of colonial administration."

We can trace the beginning of this 'sociological process' to the coming of the British. The new administration and Western cultural influences, the main vehicles of which have been education and Christianity, broke open the traditional society which was a closed one. There was a change in the

attitudes of the people. Western ideas and influences began to replace the old values. The adoption of the idea of a tribe came as result of the same process.

Prior to the coming of the British, the highest social organisation of the Nagas was only the village. But when the British came, they began to interpret the traditional Naga society in terms of tribes. The general Western concept of tribe is that of a primitive society of people, sharing common ancestry, language and culture. British administrators and writers began to identify Naga tribes on the basis of these features. In doing so they began to borrow names from those used by both the Nagas and their neighbours. Therefore, the Naga society was not originally divided into tribes; the tribal identities of today have been formed on an ascriptive basis.

So far we have seen that tribes in the Naga society are social groupings founded on language, costumes and habits which came to acquire a common nomenclature. But the process of tribe formation does not end here. Tribes gain formal recognition in the different institutions of society and goes on to acquire new characteristics. Three main social institutions within which the crystallisation of tribal identities takes place can be identified as follows:
1. The Church which began to organise itself on the basis of tribes;
2. the educational system which began to impart knowledge about these tribals divisions; and
3. the Government which set-up an administrative system that incorporates the tribe as a socio-economic and political entity.

Within these institutions, tribal boundaries have been defined and tribal identity has been organised. Therefore, now we can say that tribes have become formal societal entities, and also assume that tribe consciousness has emerged to a certain extent.

The emergence of tribe consciousness can be linked to the break-up of the traditional society. The educated Nagas first came to accept these groupings. They were educated in Christian mission schools. Not only they learn about Western administration, but also they got directly involved in it by way of their employment in white-color jobs. This group began to have a higher status and a more influential position because they have better access to money and the seats of power in the new society of market economy and modern administration. With the rise in the aspirations of these people, they began to mobilise tribal
sentiments for their own good and this is largely responsible for
the spread of tribe consciousness. In the next chapter, we shall
examine how as a result of a series of socio-economic and
political changes, these processes took place and led to the
politicisation of tribes.