

Angami Warriors of Khonoma

- ***Jagdamba Mall***

Nagas, with their practice of head hunting, often raided the plains of Assam, Cachar and Manipur. They were also afraid of the British rules which may enter in to Naga Hills. The British officials of this region appealed officially to the British Govt. in Britain for protection from Nagas' incursion in 1830. In 1832, led by Jenkins and Pemperton, hundreds of Sepoy set out towards Angami and *Kuchcha Nagas' (Zeliangrong)* area to look for more direct route to Manipur from Assam. They were resisted in almost every Naga villages. In the subsequent year, another expedition led by Lieutenant George Gordon accompanied by the Raja of Manipur Gambhir Singh set out to Naga areas, patrolling and threatening with serious consequence if they continue the raids. It was the empires display of power and control.

The British Govt. was interested for the huge revenue from tea plantation and therefore could not afford to lose any more labourers to the running shortage. They were exploring and seizing Naga Hills to provide potential labourers to the plantation. The British threat could not earn expected results and Nagas continued the raids. As a result a police outpost was established at Samaguting (Chumukedima) in 1846.

In 1849 Sepoy led by Bhogchand, travelled off to the far Angami area at Mezoma. On their way, however, most of them were killed in Piphima. British retaliated by burning Mezoma and setting up an outpost there. But within a few months the outpost was affected and burnt by the Mezoma and Khonoma alliance. A few were killed while the remaining sepoy escaped to Samguting. In 1850 the British made their 10th expedition to the Naga Hills. They started from Mezoma. On 10th December 1850, Khonomas were attacked under the command of Lieutenant Col. Foquet along with a troupe of 500 sepoy drawn from the first and second Assam light infantry battalion which includes 200 from the Nagaon police having 23 guns with them. The battle lasted for 16 hours. The warriors of Khonoma stood bravely protecting their villages. The next day when there was no retaliation from the villagers, the British sepoy sneaked in to the village to evacuate the villages. So they burnt the empty houses of Khonoma and went on to burn more villages until they reached Kikruma. Kikruma retaliated strongly. More than 100 Kikruma warriors lost their lives. Even Kohima village was not spared. Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General, accepted the proposal of Major Butler to withdraw from the Naga Hills. Besides the loss of their own lives, the British also realized that it resulted a capital loss to incur the expenditure on Naga expeditions with no foreseen prospect of revenue and Naga coolies. So in 1851 British sepoy vacated the out post of Samaguting (Chumukedima)

But the Angamis particularly of Khonoma and Mezoma villages continued the incursion in plains. During that period about 40 police outposts and villages were attacked. More than 300 people (both- common men and the police personals) lost their lives; another 100 of them were made captives and taken to the Hills, prompting the British to return to Naga areas.

In 1866, Naga Hills district was formed within the state of Assam. It is said that till then Nagas referred the British as 'Company Man'. So news spread all around

Naga Hills that the Company men were coming to kill all the Nagas and seize each and every Naga Village and make it theirs. The responsibility to spread this apocalypse to all the people of Naga Hills fell on the shoulder of Angamis. They faithfully and dutifully accomplished the task. Almost every village in Naga Hills prepared for this apocalypse. They knew that the British were brutal, armed with superior arms and are having military organization.

Another example from Lohta area was that Capt. Butler (son of Major John Butler) succumbed of spear wounds when he was surveying Pangti for annexation. Pangti, therefore, was also fell under the wrath of British fire in 1876.

One battle of incredible significance was the Anglo-Khonoma battle of 1879-1880. during this period, Mr. Damant was the Political Officer of Naga Hills District having its base in Kohima. Nagas, especially Angamis, persistence and defiance of the English civilization and conversion to Christianity. Among the Angamis, Khonoma people were the fieriest or 'the principal offender', as the British refer them in their letters. So, Damant accompanied by an escort of the Frontier police and the 43rd Bengal Infantry, set out to Khonoma via Jotsoma on 13th October 1879, termed it a friendly visit while the intention was to stamp upon them for submission and make the Nagas agreed for a presence of the British army in Angami area. The warriors of Khonoma, however killed Damant alongwith 33 of his escorts, 19 were wounded and the Naga warriors took with the fire arms of this British troop. The remaining escorts were taken to jungle.

This led to Khonoma revolt in October 1879. Angami warriors of around 6000 from various villages surrounded the English Garrison in Kohima. With Damant dead, Mr. Cawley, his assistant, took responsibility for fortification. The closest safe contact for British was Mr. Hinde in Wokha, who reported to Kohima on 14th October and to Colonel (Later Major General) James Johnstone in Manipur. The desperation of Kohima situation was obvious in these lines :

"Surrounded by Nagas, cut off from water, must be relieved at once. Send flying column to bring away garrison at once. Relief must be immediate to be of any use." HM Hinde, A.P.A. Kohima, 25.10.79 and *"We are in extremity, come on sharp. Kohima not abandoned."* HM Hinde, A.P.A. Kohima, 25.10.70 (quoted in White head)

These messages were delivered to Johnstone by two local persons (Johnstone and Whitehead used the term Coolie). The slips of papers were clipped and hidden in the hair of these two persons who were Christian converts and worked as spy against their own Hindu Angami brothers. Johnstone even promised to award his Angami helper Rs.200 if the letter to Mr.Cawley begging to hold out since 'they were marching to assistance' (Johnstone:1896) could be delivered before the place fell. Johnstone, then only 38, later in his chronicle so expressively capture his sadness to leave his fragile wife and two young children. His son, little Arthur died before he returned from Kohima campaign. Johnstone recalls how he could not refuse the calling to serve his country that was capturing and colonizing. However, in Kohima without completely attacking the garrison, the Nagas at around 11.00AM on 24th October, stopped firing and the battle was over. As it was guessed that Johnstone's troop was approaching at the Naga Hills, some Naga elders came as intermediaries. The condition was, the English would evacuate Kohima and they would safely escort to Samaguting.

But then in November, under Brigadier General J.L. Nation, British sepoy along with superior weapons marched to capture Khonoma. British reinforcement backed through out the battle. Khonoma villagers evacuated to their steep mountains of Jafuo (Japfu) for place of safety under the cover of midnight darkness but continued their guerilla warfare. Only then could the British enter Khonoma village and burnt it down. But this could not keep Khonoma Angamis away from the struggle. Khonoma's daring act was that, from their hide out of Jafuo, their warriors emerged and attacked the Baldhan Tea Estate in Cachhar killed the manager and 16 of his labourers and burnt down villages in plains, on their way back to Jafuo. Infuriated General Nation, thereupon enforced a strict vigilance and blockade of Jafuo and starved Khonoma warriors. On 23 March 1880, Khonoma finally surrendered. They were punished with cash fines, forced to surrender their fire arms, demanded unpaid labourer and confiscated their village and terrace fields. British celebrated this occasion. A telegram was immediately sent to the Military General reporting the occasion. Williamson, Chief Commissioner of Assam, on 21st April 1880 wrote: "the Khonoma terrace fields are of vary great extent and I do not think I am over estimating their value when I put them down at 4,00,000 (four lakhs) of Rupees....."

Williamson's evaluation was premature. Khonomas resisted all pressures on them for their settlement elsewhere and as a result British could not dared to take over Khonoma paddy fields. British Raj relented at last. 'Khonoma rose again from its ashes' writes Whitehead.

The mighty British never encountered anything like this. After the battle of 1879-80, the British decided to make amends with the Angami villages by appeasement- the best way to subdue Nagas to some extent. On one hand, they employed American and British missionaries to work for rich harvest through missionary schools and win their hearts, and on the other hand, they helped converted people to cultivate and produce more to show the difference of living standards between Christian converts and Hindu Angamis. The colonial motive for such ventures are clear in these lines by Jankins to Maddock, ".....I conceive that by a proper co-operation with that gentleman (Rev. Miles Bronson) and the encouragement of the Nagas to cultivate the products of their hills and tea in particular, we may have long to see civilization (subjection and subjugation through conversion and allurement – in other words) greatly advanced among these Nagas and our supremacy gradually extended over the hills....' (quoted in Barpujari:2003)

Khonoma continued to fight against Christian missionaries and British annexation and it continued till Phizo who helped Azad Hindu Fouz under Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose to defeat British advancement during Second World War at Khonoma.

How things are changed drastically after conversion to Christianity towards opposite direction? How patriots can turn as traitors after their conversion to Christianity? The case of Nagas is a burning example. The Angami Nagas and the Phizo along with Lothas and others who fought against Christian Conversion and British expansion before 1947 turned hostile when a sizeable number of them including Phizo were converted to Christianity, a Christian solidarity was gradually established with other Christian countries. The Naga insurgency delivered through Church by British rulers is still continue which has swallowed 40,000 lives of Nagas and thousands of Army Jawans.