Notice: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

Not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.

9

THE CHRONICLES OF CHIZAMI

How Women from a Small Naga Village Built the Road to Resilience

Monisha Behal

The Road to Chizami

The year was 1994. It was my first visit to Nagaland, a state in the Northeastern frontier of India. Over five days, I visited a few districts in the state to assess women's role in environmental activities on behalf of CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency, which has now become Global Affairs Canada). Being originally from Assam, a neighbouring state, I was aware of the political unrest in the region and people's call for self-determination against the country's central government. Yet, this initial trip to the state incited a curiosity within me.

I began to find ways to go back. The opportunity arose the following year, in 1995, through the MacArthur Fellowship. This time I visited as an individual researcher to study the health status of women in different Naga communities – there are 16 major Naga tribes and many sub-tribes across the state. As someone involved in the wider debate on women's development and rights, I was interested in understanding women's lives in these remote areas, their health issues and the mechanisms they used to respond to challenges, alone or together.

Nagaland was under-studied compared to other regions of India primarily because of its geographic and cultural isolation from the rest of the country. In addition, situations of conflict led to continuation of restrictions on entry into the region. The Northeast region is connected to the rest of India through a narrow strip of land, making communication and access weak. The distance between mainland India and the Northeast is not just cultural and psychological but also physical. I remember when Gunjan, one of the co-editors of this volume, told me about a survey she had conducted in the year 2000 among the educated, middle-class, mostly college going population in New Delhi, India's capital. Most respondents were unable to name the seven states of the Northeast region and many did not

DOI: 10.4324/9781003377917-13

know Nagaland was a part of India. This was not an uncommon occurrence in India of the 1990s and 2000s. The history and culture of this very distinct region still do not form any part of the school curricula in the country.

Along with the lack of information and development, access into the region was also restricted for researchers and tourists. The lack of records, archival material, libraries and institutions made it difficult for scholars to study the region. Language was also a barrier, particularly as many communities depended heavily on oral traditions. Documentation was therefore limited to ethnographic work of colonial-era government officers and 20th-century anthropologists writing about Naga life and customs (von Furer Haimendorf 1939; Elwin, 1959, 1964). This has changed somewhat in the last decade with works like *A Terrible Matriarchy* (Easterine 2007), *Highway 39* (Chakravarti 2012) and *Christianity and Politics of Tribal India* (Chophy 2021).

I was convinced we had much to learn from and about this neighbouring society. So one September morning, I boarded a bus that would take me from the plains of Assam to the hills of Nagaland.

I clearly remember the journey of uncanny silence as we wound our way upwards through the forested highways. Instead of birds, there were soldiers perched on top of trees along the highway to check on the insurgents, as well as every vehicle passing by. We were stopped by the army who checked our luggage and found nothing, allowing us to continue. This was normal for 1995. What irked the Nagas was the aggression demonstrated by the armed forces against the local Nagas, majority of whom were rural. House searches, rape and murder of villagers by armed forces had churned out stories of annihilation and torture, some of which became a part of oral narratives. Language was the biggest barrier between the people and the security forces who came mostly from mainland India. This exacerbated the fear and the distance between the Nagas and the army. All that persisted were memories of conflict, domestic turmoil and vulnerability, felt by the people of Nagaland. Women, as is typically the case in conflict, felt such vulnerabilities most.

This chapter is an autoethnographic account of my work in Nagaland over 30 years, independently and then through the North East Network (NEN), a small non-profit I co-founded. Here, I have reflected on my own experiences, corroborated, at times, by secondary sources. My entry point into the state was through a research project on the status of women's health in Nagaland which I started in Chizami village of Phek district.

Chizami is a small village of about 600 households and a population of 2592 (Census of India, 2011), over 3 hours by car from Kohima and 6 hours from Dimapur, the closest air and rail line. Today, government officials and staff from local and international development organisations regard Chizami as a model village for Nagaland. People from Nagaland and neighbouring states visit it to understand how a community and its women can bring about transformational change. It is this story that I tell in this chapter through six sections: Section one

provides a background of Nagaland and its historical context, which has a strong bearing on its present realities. Section two discusses community entry through my experience in Chizami. In Section three, I lay out how we sought to build and strengthen women's position in a highly patriarchal society. Section four outlines the partnership between NEN and the community. Section five specifically unpacks the "how" of participation and voice. The concluding section includes reflections on the "secret sauce" needed for something as complex and intense as participation.

Nagaland over Time: A Quick Overview

Nagaland is a small hilly state, approximately 16,600 square kilometres in area, in the Northeast of India, bordering Myanmar. During the 1990s, it had a population of just 1.2 million (Census of India 1991).

The Naga people are a group of heterogeneous tribes of Mongoloid and Indo-Burman origin and significantly differ from people from other parts of mainland India in appearance, language, customs and religion. On December 1, 1963, Nagaland became the 16th state of India to provide to the Naga people what the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru termed "the fullest opportunity for self-expression" (Elwin 1959). This was way less than the calls for independence issued by the people of the state. But alongside Article 371A of the Indian constitution, adopted in 1962, this guaranteed a high degree of autonomy and self-governance to the Naga people, including the right to preserve their own customs, culture, values and administrative systems.

The calls for autonomy for the Naga people can be traced back to the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 and were deeply rooted in the British administration system for the region (Misra 1978; Chasie and Hazarika 2009). Two significant shifts occurred in the Naga Hills between the late 19th and 20th centuries. In 1872, Christianity arrived in Mokokchung district, a region inhabited by the Ao tribe. This led to a spread of education but also the loss of many traditional beliefs and institutions (Horam 1977; Eaton 1984; Imtimangyang 2017). Second, in 1881, after fierce resistance from the Nagas, the British occupied the Naga Hills. On these densely forested Hills, they initiated a new model of administration, which soon spread to other areas in the region.

Those were difficult years with multiple rebellions. The bureaucracy experienced much hostility. So, the British left the Naga tribes to govern themselves per their traditional systems, which ranged from democratic village councils (VCs) in some communities to autocratic chieftains in others (Devi, 2015). They introduced an inner line permit (ILP) system in the Naga Hills region regulating the entry of people who were not inhabitants of Nagaland. This kept the people in the state isolated and disconnected from the rest of India (Misra 1978; Chasie and Hazarika 2009). The ILP system continues to date. Even I, as a native of a neighbouring state, required a permit to enter Nagaland and conduct research.

In 1946, the Naga National Conference (NNC) was created and on August 14, 1947, the eve of Indian Independence, it declared independence. In 1951, the NNC conducted a "referendum" in which over 99% of the Naga supported an independent Nagaland. The Government of India never recognised this referendum and thus began a period of protracted armed conflict with the NNC creating an underground government and an army. Nagaland thereby earned the "dubious distinction of being home to Asia's longest-running insurgency" (Loitongbam in Chasie and Hazarika 2009, p.viii).

The Indian government retaliated by sending paramilitary forces, colloquially called the army, to combat underground activities of the young rebels, commonly named the UG, an abbreviation of "underground boys." Violence between the two was unabated. In 1958, the government enacted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). This Act not just transferred "civil power to deal with a political challenge" to the army and paramilitary forces (Chasie and Hazarika 2009, p. 11), it also allowed the armed forces to search, arrest or even kill someone on mere suspicion without fear of prosecution, except by the central government. The Act led to intense militarisation of the region. There is a record of sexual violence, torture and rape against women in the region by the security forces shielded by the AFSPA. Protests have been expressed through poetry, music, confrontation by human rights groups, particularly women, all over the Northeast region (Veda 2001).

The activism of the UGs in Nagaland was intense, characterised by holdups, roadblocks, extortion, siphoning of public funds and "taxing" public servants. This led to disruption of the governance systems and people lived in fear of attacks and cross-firings. Yet, there was another side to rural Nagaland, one that was seldom noted in the rare mentions of the state – pristine hills, strikingly green terraced fields of rice and maize with verdant forests and people hard at work. The forest-based economy was gradually giving way to an agro-based one. Members of each community lived together by carrying out agricultural work, reeling and twining their own yarn, weaving their own clothes, storing indigenous seeds and hunting birds and animals for their food. But the Naga Hills were bereft of support. Characterised by the absence of cash income and food security, low productivity, absence of technical, institutional and infrastructure development, they "lagged behind" with poor access to electricity, safe drinking water, roads and health services (NFHS 2 1999).

This was the state I was travelling to on that September morning in 1995, when I boarded the bus to Kohima. When I first arrived in Chizami in 1995, it was like the rest of Nagaland (and indeed much of India), highly patriarchal. Given the conflict and political situation in the state, I adopted the "health" approach; it would keep away from identity and related political discussions. Indeed, my being in Nagaland showed me what rural inhabitants experienced daily – fear and mental turmoil. I also studied the contemporary situation of governance regarding women, the changing policies towards women's "welfare"[1] at the national level and whether they influenced the state. My question, as someone involved in the wider debate on

women's development and their voices in a strong patriarchal society, was where do women stand in this domain of rural governance?

Community Entry: From Consent to Confidence

My first entry into Chizami was with Keweii Y Kenye, a District Social Welfare Officer who I had met earlier in 1994, at Zunheboto, a district in the centre of Nagaland. Stimulated by our conversations on women's development, she had urged me to start work in her village – Chizami in Phek district. She arranged a meeting between me and members of the VC in Chizami, headed by its Chairman, Mr. K.Z Mero.

Traditional village governance systems have long been present in all the Naga communities – for example, the Hangvanao among the Tangkhul (Ukhrul, Manipur), Putu Menden among the Ao. These structures preceded and also continued throughout the colonial period and then were formalised as VCs and given statutory recognition under the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1978 (Devi, 2015). These Councils comprise members of a village who take care of law and order, development, natural resources management and the administration of justice per their own customs. Historically, women were debarred from these Councils and members were required to be married, preventing the youth from participating (Devi, 2015). Since the Act sought to preserve the traditional structures, no modifications were made to challenge these exclusionary practices.

The gradual formalisation of VCs and empowering village elders with roles and responsibilities gave them a sense of authority. The Act also authorised every VC to create a Village Development Board (VDB), which would formulate development priorities for the village and prepare and execute action plans for development, notably communications and transportation with administrative and community resources.

At that first meeting with the Chizami VC, I explained the purpose of my visit, and the Council members approved my long-term plan of working with the women of Nagaland. The meeting was attended by members of the VC, the VDB and the Chizami Women's Society (CWS). The attendance of the CWS pleased me immensely. They were the women who would be my entry point, whom I would talk to and depend on for organising meetings and activities. At the meeting, I volunteered to talk to a wider audience so that every individual in that village would know the purpose of my work. I knew this would be the first step towards not just overcoming suspicion but also getting the community's consent for my work.

The meeting to gain community buy-in was organised at the local church the next day. Close to 150 people attended. "Nagamese," a colloquial mix of Assamese and Hindi, is used popularly across the state, because there are over 60 dialects spoken among the 16 major tribes of Nagaland. The Phek district is inhabited primarily by the Chakhesang community who speak four dialects: Khezha, Chokri, Poula and Sumi. The village of Chizami speaks Khezha. That morning, the man

who served as my interpreter noted, "This woman is from India and has come to our village to work with women." His remarks were not meant to be derogatory – people from the plains are termed Indians in Nagaland! I, of course, replied that I am from Assam and know Nagamese. "Borderline case!" he gleefully exclaimed. During my first three years of travel in Nagaland, I witnessed this sense of humour among many of my colleagues, new acquaintances and even district-level officers. I also experienced a code of conduct towards visitors – people were civil, but the interaction was socially controlled and formal.

Once I had shared my plans with the gathering, I requested for two young women volunteers. The village elders asked the CWS to select the two women. That was perhaps the beginning of legitimacy given to the CWS. Neizokou Thopi and Kezuteu Wetsah joined my team. I gave them a short orientation on the importance of "correct" data and how this data would help keep the entire village informed about its health status and support self-assessment of one's own health. We started our survey in October 1995. The first day was long – we took time interacting with one woman per household. We not only asked questions but also sought to build relationships, to understand the lives of the Chakhesang community. We covered only three houses that day.

During these house visits, I approached the subject of health in ways that would not alarm my hosts. I knew that my visit and the nature of questions would assure the community that I was not a central government spy. Through the months, the UGs tracked my work. Fortunately, no questions were asked, though three "encounters" assured them that I am "okay," my work was "women's stuff" and not a threat.

Every trip I made to Nagaland, I had to ask different questions, especially in areas where there was anxiety because of the drug use by the youth or where the militants had a substantial presence. Gradually I began to understand that the methodology had to be flexible, free from an academic research framework. Instead of relying on theoretical paradigms, I used simple language and focused on building community consensus. But before that, I had to gain social acceptance and trust.

As my objective was to study the health status of women, the first intervention was in the form of household surveys, which I conducted alongside local women who knew the people, customs and local issues. In Chizami, in sharp contrast to the rest of India, husbands helped their spouse during childbirth either by using a fine thread of bamboo to cut the umbilical cord or supporting their wives while being in labour. Some, however, admitted that they preferred preparing food for the new mother, while the women of the household performed a home delivery. This caregiving by the husband is no longer the norm in Chizami because of the Primary Health Centre which has been upgraded to a Community Health Centre since August 2021. At the time of my research, women bore six children on average. Infant mortality was low and Chizami village, like many others in the state, had large families with 10–13 children, most of whom accompanied the parents to the field.

After the surveys in Chizami, I met with groups of women to conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) about women's role in society, the rights they enjoy or the limitations they face. I had noticed the general "meekness" of women, the quiet atmosphere and their polite nods of acknowledgement to me. Meetings with women's groups from different *khels* (homesteads), as well as the women's wing of the Church, showed me how much I had to learn not just about them but from them.

I can never forget their gestures of welcome, accompanied by a short prayer to bless the meeting, the meal or even a traveller. The time spent in conversations and leisure activities during my visits gradually created openness and trust between us. Such activities are usually deemed unproductive in research but are the basis of community-led work. Between peals of laughter, remarks and curiosity, a bond was forged between us. That bond was what I cherished most. My intention had not been to just get data. I sought to undertake participatory, action-oriented research leading to informed community development. Therefore, the community's support, trust and goodwill were of primary importance.

Strengthening Women's Participation and Voice

My time with the communities in different parts of Nagaland helped me to understand that the women of rural Naga society were essentially homemakers in a patriarchal set-up. They were also household managers, caregivers, weavers and indigenous farmers (North East Network 2016). Women carried out all farming-related activities from ploughing, sowing, weeding, binding, and transplanting to harvesting and husking in the terraced rice fields. Men did the ploughing too, but they focused on the *jhum* fields (slash and burn agriculture).

As early as 1995, I noticed the absence of men in several Naga households. With militancy raging high in the state, most men would seek opportunities in the plain areas of Dimapur (the economic hub of Nagaland) as church workers, construction workers, sharecroppers or as labourers. Male cultivators were rare as they feared being apprehended by the army and, for the same reason, both men and women farmers had to hurry back home from their fields after completing their day's work. If they were from different nearby villages or *Khels*, women preferred to go in groups for fear of assault from the security forces. Fewer hours in the field had a direct impact on their productivity leading to serious food security issues. With the men engaged elsewhere, the onus of managing the home and outside work fell squarely on women.

Women, especially those in their 60s and above, carried out agricultural work out of compulsion – a majority of rural Nagas live in a subsistence economy. The health status of women was determined by the hours of work, their intake of food and the mental load that goes into adjusting between the household and the field. Women grew and continue to grow local and seasonal crops; their seed saving processes protected the biodiversity and sustained yield of maize, millets and grains.

Though women carried out a bulk of the agricultural labour, their contribution to household food security went unrecognised (North East Network 2016). Moreover, the inability of rural Nagas to communicate with people outside their villages, due to language barriers, could be terribly isolating and eventually affect people's voice and agency. During my time in Nagaland, I was struck by the absence of discussion and debate in the villages. While interviewing an elder, I remarked that nobody asked me questions during a training I had conducted or at a talk. She explained that not questioning a village elder or a Chief was tradition. Nobody could speak up or pose a question during a meeting. People not asking anything was a mark of respect. I also believe that the relationship with the church in Naga society may have contributed to the culture of silence. People were accustomed to sermonised preaching, being told what to do and how.

Having spent time with the women and men in Chizami, I understood that it was important for the men to comprehend the worth of women's participation in rural governance. Community-led development would require long months of engagement with women alongside the men. And it had to be based on a participatory approach, which gives people an incentive to make decisions collectively once a problem is identified. I gradually introduced participatory exercises and tools from Robert Chambers' Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach. These included Chapati or Venn diagramming, where community members would identify the institutions and individuals important in and for their community, and their relationships (Chambers 2002). These methods that used local materials and resources caught the attention of respondents and sessions were often filled with smart quips and laughter! They strengthened the confidence between the grassroots women and me.

I realised that investing time and attention with men and women in Chizami would not just strengthen their community consciousness, it could also lead to women voicing their needs. I identified six key steps for this process: (a) goodwill; (b) organisational work; (c) training for women so that they could realise and demand their rights; (d) documentation, building networks for learning, (e) accountability and transparency; and (f) exposure trips for Chizami women to meet with groups outside Nagaland. This last action, engaging with women's groups from other cultures, was critical for encouraging interaction between the rest of India and the state, and developing a common understanding around issues of food security and domestic violence. This would enable women to learn from each other even as they retained their own indigenous farming methods and knowledge. It would also encourage them to question existing traditional norms.

Institutional Support to Enable Community-Led Development

The 1980s were a time of intense activism on women's rights in India. The United Nations' Decade for Women in 1976 influenced many governments, including that of India, to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. The academic and intellectual interest in feminism instilled widespread consciousness over women's

rights and their subordination in a patriarchal society. Numerous studies and micro-analysis opened the path towards activism. Research organisations like the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, of which I was a part, taught me to decipher the inherent patriarchal culture that shaped and controlled the lives of women in India.

Pursuing various action-research projects in Assam and Northern India, I learnt why and how we should work with women in India. I began to understand the need for grassroots activism by and for women to enable them to take advantage of the government's efforts that for the first time sought to integrate women's perspective into the socio-economic development of the country. All this led me towards community-led development.

My work on the health of women in Nagaland led to the setting up of a Women's Health Centre in Chizami, with support from the Chizami Women's Society. Yet, more was needed – we had to dig deeper to transform the mindsets of men and women on gender. Women had to be sensitised about their selfhood, recognise their collective voice on rural governance and seek equity in all domains. And this work had to be inclusive of women across religions, age groups, economic backgrounds and ethnicities. This was not easy. Particularly, as it required not just working across differences among women but also the tacit approval of the men of the village. The different levels of intervention required concerted action through broad-based organisational support. Thus, in 1995, I along with Roshmi Goswami, another activist from the Northeast region, established the North East Network (NEN), a women's organisation that sought to address inequalities that women experienced. We believed that women had the right to participate in local governance, at par with men, and sought to shift their perspective from a "needs to a rights" approach. To begin with, we focused on the states of Meghalaya, Assam and Nagaland. The year 1995 was also the year of the landmark Beijing Women's Conference. NEN, through Assam's Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, utilised the opportunity presented by the consultations to the Beijing platform, to train rural women from the Northeast on feminist thinking and involve them through local languages and participatory methods in the broader regional and national conversations.

The Process of Participation: How to Do It

Through NEN, we began to take concerted steps towards the inclusion of all women in our work, be they farmers, weavers, homemakers, street vendors, single or married. Our meetings, open discussions and interactive methods engaged women. Our workshops used participatory tools that enabled women to recognise the discrimination and the continuous vulnerabilities they faced. Instead of giving lectures on patriarchy, we asked women to map out the work done by men and women in their community and the time spent on it.

We also collectively looked at schemes being offered by the State government and examined whether basic amenities like water supply and medicines were

reaching the villages. In the workshops, we encouraged women to work in groups and discuss one topic at a time. This enabled them not just to recognise their rights but also to collectively think about what was missing and what needed to be done. We used advocacy tools to provoke ideas to influence the group of men or the VC. This, however, can happen only if people in the seat of power are democratic and have the empathy to share information, listen to others and decide that the end output will be an enriching one. At the same time, it was important to understand how familiar women were with local issues to address their collective concerns. We involved both women and men in several of our workshops, knowing that our method of participatory discussion would be strange to them. Yet the men were surprisingly receptive to what was being said and empathetic to the issues highlighted. Collective thinking contributed to self-esteem and hope among women. Moreover, if women addressed a local issue, the community was most likely to agree to their participation and also start interacting with them on the subject. Meanwhile the women would gain confidence and understand the power of their collective. Remembering those early days, Akhale, a woman from Chizami Village, recently told me, "I experienced something unique when you first exposed us to things like healthcare and hygiene… It made a difference…."

Workshops and exposure tours encouraged fresh thoughts, new perspectives and initiatives among people who, until then, had limited exposure and had been taught not to exercise their own wisdom. A co-fellow of the MacArthur Foundation, Abhijit Das, sensitised communities in Zunheboto and Phek districts about reproductive and sexual health. This was a great eye opener for the men. Feminists like Nalini Nayak and Gabriele Deitrich shared ideas about sustainable development and unionisation of the unorganised sector women workers using biblical references and social analysis tools. This ensured that the diverse group of participants – village leaders, youth, church leaders, women's groups and unorganised sector workers – could instantly connect with the messages. Akole, (formally called Wekoweu Tsuhah) a member of NEN, was the link between Nayak and informal sector women workers, i.e. farmers, home-based workers, vendors, and ultimately formed SEWA Nagaland[2] to secure full employment and self-reliance for all its members in 2013. Through sheer persistence of the NEN team, the SEWA initiative took off with vendors and home-based workers; today SEWA Nagaland has over 3,000 members from six districts (Chümoukedima, Dimapur, Kohima, Phek, Shamator, Tuensang).

Gradually women began to speak out against discrimination, violence, subordination and patriarchy. Their interaction with women from other parts of the Northeast and India, through exposure visits to Tezpur and Guwahati in Assam, Shillong in Meghalaya and New Delhi, also strengthened their understanding of the feminist ideology and gave them a network of friends and peers to consult, confide in and collaborate with.

As noted earlier, even in the 1990s, women were excluded from governance structures in Nagaland. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments which

reserved one-third of the seats in all local bodies for women did not apply in the state due to the protection offered by Article 371A to customary laws. The adoption of the 73rd and 74th Amendments could only happen through a resolution of the Legislative Assembly, which was men's domain. And the men of Nagaland would not hear of women being a part of the governance structure or in the electoral rolls, be it the local Municipal elections, or any Assembly seat.[3] Because our work was in the rural areas, we knew that participants in our workshops were not going to immediately question the ban on women's participation in the VCs and the VDBs. Instead, the issue was discussed gradually and subtly in our workshops and in discussions with the VC. We never confronted the VC members – we knew that we could work in the community only as long as we had their consent. Instead, we focused on continuously sharing the possibility of women's participation and examples of the changes this could bring.

Over time and after years of continued engagement, attitudes began to change in the male-dominated VDC in Chizami. In 2002, for the first time, it nominated two rural women into the Council. K.Z Mero, the first person I met in Chizami in 1995 and the Chair of the Council, explained the reason behind this change: "This space was allocated so that women can raise their concerns and views and also take equal part in contributing toward community development…" (Report of the Chizami Women Society 2009).

At that time, many felt that the admittance of women was simply tokenism. Yet slowly and steadily these women claimed their place, bringing in oft-neglected yet necessary issues to the VDB. They raised the issue of harnessing the water flow for equitable distribution across the village. However, it took another 20 years for the number of women in the Chizami VDB to increase to four. In September 2020, the Chizami Village Development Board inducted 6 women out of a total of 23 members, ensuring that 25% of its members were women. The tokenism from earlier has also given way to parity.

> The process of mindset transformation in a community, particularly on entrenched issues like gender, is gradual. Organisationally we continuously engaged with people and managed to take a few steps forward, but each small win was accompanied by a backlash. The back and forth continued. The important thing is to keep the engagement going; to not give up,

explains Seno Tsuhah, who was among the first women from Chizami to join NEN.

As women from Chizami began to attend trainings and meetings and join NEN, they began to understand their rights and carried forward the baton for change. Despite women doing most of the work in Nagaland, they were seldom paid and never at par with men.

> After joining NEN and understanding the importance of equal wages, in 1998 I began trying to convince the village elders on the need for equal wages.

> I would weave it into different conversations with them and yet, year after year my efforts were met with jokes about the strength of men. The village elders would point out how men being on top was the natural order of things. Even for procreation men have to be at the top, they would guffaw,

recalls Seno. But Seno understood that any change requires tenacity, and finally on January 4, 2014, the Chief of Chizami announced equal wages for men and women. This proclamation, like the induction of the two women into the council, bore testimony to the strength of women once they decided to claim their agency. It also served as an example to the community, particularly the youth. They saw women participating in our training workshops alongside village men and church leaders and bringing about change. This created an inspiring and self-reinforcing cycle of change and growth.

Two stories illustrate just how impactful this change was. The first is the story of how NEN began agroecology projects in Chizami and its impact on the community. The second, of Chizami Weaves.

NEN and Agroecology

During one of NEN's exchange visits, Seno met representatives from the Deccan Development Society, an organisation based out of Hyderabad in Southern India, that dealt with millets, among other crops. She was immediately hooked, and the NEN team from Chizami started meaningful dialogue with the Deccan Development Society in 2009. They undertook a study on the climate crisis using PRA exercises in six villages to understand the kind of climate change that people were experiencing. Being a part of this study enabled NEN to become a member of the Millet Network of India in 2010. Thereafter the team engaged in raising awareness on millets to link it with local foods of the past, present and future.

Why did we engage so deeply with the community on millets? Because a community leader like Seno, belonging to Chizami, saw an opportunity and recognised how it could revive sustainable traditional practices in her community, even as it facilitated an inter-generational transfer of knowledge. She and Akole, along with their team, produced booklets with stories and recipes and developed audio-visual material to create awareness.

Seno also attended the Conference on Climate Change (CoP 15) in 2015 in Copenhagen. This reinforced her belief that local networks and grassroots organising could be used to promote indigenous ways of sustaining biodiversity, which also has direct interface with the global concerns of climate change. Our underlying emphasis was on creating local farmers to cater to local markets with local distribution and sales. Because of its high nutritional value, we hoped that millets would be brought in under the public distribution system[4] run by the government. That never happened, but facilitating farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing, providing on-farm support to revive millets, training on

value addition, and marketing opportunities have led to increased production and consumption among several communities of Nagaland. Millet farmers were able to increase their income through the NEN farmer market. The *Millet Festivals and Biodiversity Festivals* initiated by NEN in 2010 brought together diverse communities from within and outside Nagaland. This facilitated the sharing and exchange of knowledge on local seeds and food, including uncultivated and cultivated diversity. It fostered solidarity amongst diverse communities practising ecological farming. For example, in Pathso Nokeng village of Noklak district, the local community which participated in one of NEN's biodiversity festivals returned to their village and established a Community Seed Bank to protect their traditional seeds.

Community Seed Banks were initiated by NEN with the local women groups in ten villages to revive and enhance traditional social seed networks in rural Nagaland, which include seed saving, seed exchanges, seed sharing, etc., to enhance the traditional knowledge on seed management, secure food and seed sovereignty for local communities. As of 2023, they are operational in Kohima, Noklak and Phek districts. The Community Seed Banks have generated awareness and understanding of the importance of indigenous food systems amongst local communities. They are also reviving lost seeds and community-led documentation of indigenous seed varieties in the region.

In order to encourage young people, we initiated short courses called Chizami Farm schools in the village. The NEN farm school began in 2016 to tackle the dwindling interest in agriculture among young urban-based students, both boys and girls. Seno and her team of young activists initiated the programme to create awareness on food, nutrition and ecological security issues. Young Naga students often travel to metropolises to earn money to send home. The initiative tried to reconnect these young people to their local culture, and sustainable and indigenous farming systems so that they become responsible consumers and citizens. Each of these agroecology initiatives, that attract visitors from all over to Nagaland, began with the efforts of the women of Chizami and their vision for their community. That is what makes them successful.

Weaving Empowerment

The second initiative that transformed Chizami also built on local cultural practices. In 2008, we began to think about generating income for women through their traditional weaving, which is a non-commercial household activity. I requested a young designer from the National Institute of Design to come to Chizami to understand the patterns and weaving techniques of the Chakhesang community, and to assist seven women weavers in designing household products. This initiative pooled the weaving expertise of the women with the market savviness of the designer to create livelihood opportunities for over 900 weavers from Phek, Kohima and Tuensang Districts. Today Chizami Weaves is a brand of NENterprise,

an entrepreneurial venture, starting initially as the economic wing of NEN. In 2017, NENterprise became a separate entity.

It is a decentralised economic model where women weave at home alongside farming and other economic activities. It promotes livelihoods whilst preserving the art of traditional waist loom weaving and economic empowerment of rural women. Women and girls are trained in product design, development and diversification. Currently there is an effort to revive natural fibres such as stinging nettle fibre and traditional cotton. This has led to the revival of cotton cultivation among women artisans in Meluri, Khumiasu and Chizami. It has also facilitated inter-generational skill transfer through workshops on cotton processing and weaving.

More importantly, Chizami Weaves has enabled women to exercise their agency. During workshops with weavers, the team would bring up discussions around gender justice. Weavers articulated their views around health, food security, environment, rights and entitlements while supporting their families. A weaver, Kotele, shared,

> This weaving project has helped us in different ways. Because we take work home, we can weave in our own homes, at our own time, without pressure, and I enjoy this freedom. My earnings are always paid on time. My public speaking and leadership skills also started from here. I became aware of women's rights and women's role in society through their meetings and training workshops.
>
> *(NEN Annual Report 2015–16)*

The impact of Chizami Weaves can be understood from this simple statement from a weaver, Neikhrolou, as early as 2014. By then, she had been part of the project for six years.

> Besides agricultural wage work that is seasonal, we have no other regular employment options available throughout the year, and NEN has provided that… Today, I have a [sic] regular income with which I am supporting my siblings' education and meeting household needs. Also, because of participating in training workshops, meetings, discussions, and interaction with people, I have become more aware of social issues such as domestic violence, biodiversity and health, and I have gained more confidence to speak in front of people.
>
> *(NEN Annual Report 2013–14)*

This agency also led to a marked improvement in gender relations between weavers and their spouses. Said Aneile Kapfo,

> We weave in order to earn our living. Agriculture requires hard labour so we prefer weaving. Earlier, my husband used to tell me not to weave, but I

> continued weaving …Later he started to help me in turning hanks of yarn into tightly bound yarn-balls. He also looks after the livestock while I weave. With the income I am earning, I have gained more respect from my family members. My children now look after the household work too.
>
> *(NEN Annual Report 2015–16)*

Even as the women continued to transform the patriarchal society in which they lived, we realised the importance of them being able to tell their own stories. InsightShare, a UK-based organisation, trained NEN staff and community volunteers in handling the camera and telling their stories. The participatory videos (PV) made by the women of Chizami have been generating awareness about the importance of indigenous cultural values and local food systems and have influenced community attitudes, decisions, and actions. They have also received several awards for their films.

Concluding Reflections

What does the Chizami story mean for civil society organisations and community-led development practitioners? Chizami shows us how the participation of women and youth paved the way towards sustainability and improved the quality of life for the community. No two places are the same, but I do believe the intentional process of building community leadership, centring community knowledge and always ensuring the inclusion of all community members (however long the process may take) that we followed offers valuable lessons.

Here are some pointers:

- Seek community consent and collaboration: Explain what you would like to do and why to not just the leaders but all the community members. Start by seeking their input, their permission, and their partnership.
- Listen: Work with and through community members. Listen to them throughout the process. They carry local knowledge, and they understand local customs. Let them guide you.
- Build mutual trust and respect: Trust and relationships are built through seemingly non-productive activities – cooking a meal together, sitting around the fire, and laughing with each other, singing together, gently teasing each other. It is in these activities that we begin to see, hear, appreciate, and respect one another
- Create opportunities for people to share knowledge: When people believe they are being heard and their knowledge is valued, they have an incentive to participate.
- Initiate new ideas around inclusion: Once people begin to trust and respect you, they will listen more. Introduce ideas of inclusion, gender equality, and the power and agency of women through participatory action. Do not preach

or confront. Instead, engage. And remember that shifting centuries-old power dynamics to encourage participation takes time. Be patient. Participation is a process.

- Take a multi-pronged approach: Participation and inclusion of marginalised groups require two parallel conditions – the participants must be willing to participate and the powerholders and community members need to recognise the value of including these marginalised groups. For the latter, you need to supplement training and sensitisation with efforts that showcase the value of inclusion by, for example, paying women equal wages, improving household standard of living of women in the governance structures, and ensuring access to water. And for the former, design specific activities that enable collective learning, engagement and action. Here one has to get to the root cause of the problem, even if it is to do with patriarchy. So we initiated advocacy, which for me literally means lobbying, persuading or convincing the power structure. We also listened to the women. Gradually sharing each other's experiences became a process-oriented approach, sowing seeds of collective expression to form a pathway to their progress.
- Let community members lead: NEN's highly successful millet programme was initiated because a woman from Chizami recognised how the crop offered an opportunity not just to strengthen livelihoods in her community, but also to protect the ecology and ensure an inter-generational transfer of knowledge. No outsider would have been able to design this. Including local community members in your team increases their self-esteem and ensures that the programmes are well-suited to the community.
- Connect the dots: Even as you initiate the process of mindset change to ensure participation and voice for historically marginalised groups like women and youth, remember connecting them to their peers from other regions not only strengthens their confidence and offers a support system, it also sparks new ideas. After all, an exposure visit sparked NEN's agroecology programme.
- Enable communities to tell their story: The best stories are told by those who have lived them. Equip the community to tell their own stories, internally and externally. Reiterating democratic values is the only pathway to empowerment. Change takes place through learning that is participatory, not top down.

As I write this chapter, a crisis is unfolding in Chizami. In 2002, the community contributed land and pooled resources to set up the NEN Resource Centre. A young terrace architect and friend, Vrinda Makwana, came in several times to Chizami, and built the NEN Resource Centre which was completed in 2005.

At this centre, the participatory discussions on agroecology, photography and training were conducted. The emphasis was on innovative learning and also showcasing what Chizami offered to its young people – wild life conservation, seed saving mechanisms including variety of indigenous seeds/grains. Along with this women's meetings were held, and Chizami Weaves was created. It was

in this attractive building, sitting on a steep hill on a piece of land donated by a community member, that the youth of Chizami acquired new skills and showcased them through plays, music, dance and their cameras. It was here that the media and others flocked to witness the power of communities.

In 2021, the government started building a two-lane highway near the centre. This caused irreparable damage to the structure, and despite multiple efforts by the community and NEN, no compensation has been provided thus far. Yet I write this chapter with hope in my heart. In the summer of 2022, I visited Chizami and asked the people what we should do. The men suggested we speak to the chief minister. A colleague stood up to suggest that we make a mini replica of our Centre in memory for all to see. The women decided that for their own safety the building had to be dismantled. And we did so, saving whatever we could of the materials. Now the people of Chizami are working together to find an alternate site for collective action and innovation. It has been 28 years since I first entered Chizami. In that time I have seen the women, the youth, and the community members come together, nudge at age-old patriarchal systems, protect their environment, improve their standard of living, and become ambassadors for community-led development. I know that together they will handle this challenge as well, with goodwill, congeniality, and their ever-present sense of humour.

Notes

1 The use of the term welfare here is intentional. That is how the government at that time looked at the issue – it was about women's welfare not rights, agency or empowerment. Those concepts and language were introduced later by feminists.
2 The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a women's trade union that was born out of the Textile Labor Association (TLA), India's oldest and largest union of textile workers. Started in 1972 by women workers in the state of Gujarat under the guidance of Ela Bhat, by 2023 it had over 2.9 million members across 18 states of India.
3 The year 2006–7 was particularly painful with public violence against women aspirants in several districts of the State.
4 The public distribution system is a food security mechanism established by the Government of India wherein food and non-food items are made available to people living in poverty at subsidised rates.

References

Agarwal, Bina. 2001. "Participatory Exclusions, Community Forestry, and Gender: An Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework." *World Development* 29, no. 10: 1623–1648.

Census of India. 1991. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. Population Census 1991. Table C-1:Age Sex And Marital Status, Nagaland.

Census of India. 2011. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. India. Web Archive www.census2011.co.in/data/village/267886-chizami-vill-nagaland.html

Chambers, Robert. 2002. *Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities*. London: Routledge.

Chasie, Charles and Sanjoy Hazarika. 2009. *The State Strikes Back: India and the Naga Insurgency*. Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington. www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/state-strikes-back-india-and-naga-insurgency

Chakravarti, Sudeep. 2012. *Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land*. Noida: Fourth Estate.

Chizami Women Society. December 9, 1999. *Silver Jubilee Report*. Nagaland: Chizami Women Society.

Devi, Jonali. 2015. "Traditional Village Government and Village Council in Nagaland." *Man in India* 95, no. 2: 261 74. Retrieved from www.serialsjournals.com/abstract/93020_10.pdf

Easterine, Kire. 2007. *A Terrible Matriarchy: A Novel*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Eaton, Richard M. 1984. "Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 21, no. 1: 1–44.

Elwin, Verrier. 1959. *The Art of the North-East Frontier of India*. Shillong: North-East Frontier Agency.

Elwin, Verrier. 1964. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin; an Autobiography*. Bombay: Indian Branch Oxford University Press.

Horam, M. 1977. *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas (the Tangkhul Nagas)*. Delhi: B. R Publishing Corporation. Retrieved from https://aptribes.ap.gov.in/pdfViewer.jsp?pdf=1052&id=digital

Imtimangyang. September 2017. "A Brief Historical Account: Christianity among the Ao Nagas of North-East India." *National Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* 2, no. 3: 77–82. https://doi.org/10.22271/njmrd

Kanato Chophy, G. 2021. *Christianity and Politics in Tribal India: Baptist Missionaries and Naga Nationalism* First SUNY Press ed. Delhi: State University of New York Press.

Mathie, Alison, Jenny Cameron, and Katherine Gibson. 2017. "Asset-Based and Citizen-Led Development: Using a Diffracted Power Lens to Analyze the Possibilities and Challenges." *Progress in Development Studies* 17, no. 1: 54–66.

Misra, Udayon. 1978. "The Naga National Question." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 618–24. www.jstor.org/stable/4366506

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2). 1999. Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ORC Macro. https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND2/FRIND2.pdf

North East Network. 2016. *Enquiry into the Status of Women in Nagaland*. Guwahati: North East Network.

von Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph. 1939. *The Naked Nagas*. London: Methuen.

Veda, Gunjan. 2001. *Tailoring Peace: The Citizens' Roundtable on Manipur and beyond.* New Delhi: North East Network.