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Human Trafficking in Nagaland: A Socio-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract:

Human trafficking, only until recently, was an unheard of phenomenon in the state of Nagaland. As such, though this menace is steadily taking root and increasing in its network and operations in the state, many a time the people fail to comprehend the immensity and gravity of the problem. The evils, indignities, exploitation and violence associated with human trafficking are yet to be addressed effectively. We often argue and are of the opinion that literacy and globalization pave the way and open doors to more opportunities for its citizens in terms of livelihood and better standards of living. However at the same time, we as human beings often tend to overlook the dangers and consequences that exposing ourselves to these social changes, usually bring about. Therefore in this paper we review the social and cultural aspects and implications in understanding why the state of Nagaland is becoming prone to the evils of this social problem. This paper brings out instances and arguments of why human trafficking is increasing at the backdrop of a society that has a very rigid socio-cultural set up, where children and women, particularly women, are regarded as subordinate beings in the society and also the utter failure of the state machinery to provide sufficient livelihood opportunities to its citizens.

1. Introduction

Human trafficking has a history synonymous with that of human society and has existed in various forms in almost all civilizations and cultures throughout the world. The Oxford English Dictionary defines traffic as 'trade, especially illegal (as in drugs)'. It has also been described as 'the transportation of goods, the coming and going of people or goods by road, rail, air, sea, etc'. So when we add the word 'human' to this concept, it becomes, in simple words, the inhumane and criminal practice of exploiting human beings by treating them like commodities for profit.

If we delve deeper into human trafficking as a concept, it can be said to be an organized crime which violates all tenets of human dignity and rights. It is a violation of several human rights, including the very fundamental right to life, the right to liberty, human dignity and security of person, the right to freedom from torture or cruelty, inhumane or degrading treatment, the right to a home and a family, the right to education and proper employment, the right to healthcare and everything that makes for a life with dignity. When we look into the history of the problem of human trafficking, we come to understand that it has been an area of concern since the early 20th century. However it is only recently that the international community has opened its eyes and deemed human trafficking to be an organized crime and consequently, a widening focus on the issue has followed. The steady rise in human trafficking worldwide is a direct result of a very lucrative industry and this menace dishearteningly, affects women and children the most.

Human trafficking is not an overnight phenomenon that has appeared out of thin air. There are many factors and causes which have contributed to its existence, the chain of events leading to it, and its dramatic and steady rise in various societies and communities. These primarily are due to poverty, gender discrimination, lack of social and economic stability, lack of access to education and information, domestic violence, disintegration of family structure, etc. Other major factors may include increasing demand for cheap and exploitable domestic labourers, a rise in the demand for sex workers in a highly lucrative and globalized sex industry and lack of public awareness on the dangers and negative consequences of human trafficking.²

The problem of human trafficking and child labour in Nagaland may not be very visible on the surface, but a deeper analysis, reveals that these two social menaces have already crept into the Naga social setup. The recent cases of trafficked young boys and girls, who were lured by agents promising them job opportunities and who were eventually rescued from different parts of the country, speaks volumes about how fast and wide the tentacles of the trafficking racket has spread in the state. Also, the rising employment of minor boys and girls in Naga homes for doing domestic chores amounts to trafficking and child labour to some extent, as per law. In Nagaland, one person goes missing every 3 ½ days and according to a study conducted by a local NGO called Prodigal Home, 68% of them are children, 35% of whom will never be found again.³

2. Nagaland and Human Trafficking

Nagaland, the 16th state of the Union of India was carved out of the erstwhile Naga Hills districts of Assam and the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) province on the 1st of December 1963. With a population of just about 2 million people (2011 census) scattered over 11 districts, the state has 1317 villages inhabited by 16 major tribes, each with its own unique customs, traditions and colorful attires. The Naga social organisation is based Patrilineal, Patrilocal and Patriarchal in nature. Out of the total population, 71.03% inhabit the rural areas of the state while the remaining 28.97% live in urban areas. While the educated urban population is mainly employed by the government in various capacities, agriculture remains the mainstay of the people of Nagaland with about 65% of the population dependent on agriculture for their sustenance.

At a brief glance into the history of Nagaland finds that because of the tribal resistance to the British colonial incursions into the Naga Hills, the British government enacted special policies to allow the customary system of village administration and respected the traditional system of governance that was in place. The unwritten customs, cultural patterns, conventions, social norms and values had been established by old-age usages and practices by the member of the Naga society. It has survived through centuries and has been handed down through oral traditions by the members of the society as a means of control for the harmony and good relationship among the members. Customary law is an established thought and habit which had gained social recognition in uniform values, supported by common consent of the community. It is the regulating principle of social life and is considered to be binding on all the members of the community.

In the post independence period, the Indian Constitution gave due recognition to the special rights of the indigenous communities and Nagaland was given a special status under Article 371 (A) of the constitution of India. This constitutional provision gives the people ownership over their lands and resources. And when we talk about human trafficking in the Naga society we have to first understand its socio-cultural setup to get a clearer picture as to why its women and children are the most susceptible to trafficking. Historically, Naga villages were organized as small independent states or republics with strong single tier Traditional Village Institutions (TVI) having absolute Legislative, Judicial and Executive powers. Therefore, A.W. Davis in 1891 remarked clearly, "it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communities".⁴

There have been two major forms of village governments in Naga society, viz. democratic and autocratic. For instance, the Angamis, and the Konyaks practiced autocratic type of village government. However, the Traditional Village Institutions (TVI) and women (women and children in popular parlance) are totally and mutually exclusive, traditionally and even today the fact that women are still not allowed to participate in the Citizens Conference where all adult male citizens of the village assemble to frame policies for better governance and development of the village speaks for itself. This may have been justified in the ancient head hunting days when the adult males assembled to mainly formulate strategies for war and village protection and the women and children were kept out for fear that they might divulge the details.

In the absence of any major industries and other income generating enterprises, the powers of the Traditional Village Institution (TVI) mainly revolves around the development and management of land and its resources. However, the right to inheritance and ownership of land and property is out of reach for women in most villages of Nagaland. The Traditional Village Institutions (TVI) were run without written laws but the customary laws and usages were strictly adhered to. Even today customary laws are considered as the guiding principles of life in society and the Traditional Village Institutions (TVI) still enjoy the respect of the communities and retains the rights to village development and governance as well as the administration of justice. As a result, in such a male dominated and patrilineal society and though its womenfolk are treated with respect and have equal opportunities to education, they are treated as subordinate beings with no say in issues of inheritance, family businesses when there are male siblings, and policy making in traditional institutional setups. Consequently, because of all these dogmas, it becomes inevitable that they become easier and more viable targets for traffickers to hone in on. This being the crux of the problem and with the evil impact of globalization, the scope and the nature of violence against women have dramatically increased.

Another major group that trafficker's target are children. Trafficking in children is a very veiled and misconstrued process in Nagaland. In a working paper titled '*Migrant and Trafficked Children in Hazardous Employment: The Case of Nagaland*', T.Chubayanger stated that in the case of trafficking of children for child labour, initially traffickers start the business of placement of children due to the demand of the employers. Some of these traffickers were not even aware that they are involved in an illegal activity as they were surprised when named as *Child Traffickers*. The employers develop rapport with such persons, especially from backward areas like Mon district, who are frequent visitors to these places. The requirement for an extra hand at such homes is discussed with such persons. The employers then promise these persons some payment which ranges from Rs.2,500/- to Rs.5,000/- for placement of each child. The payment depends on the bargaining capacity of the person involved in placement of the child. This ultimately takes the form of regular practice of the persons involved and converted into a lucrative business by placing more children in the cities or urban areas. Eventually, they start bringing more children in each trip, thus unconsciously making themselves organized child traffickers. False promises such as education, good living conditions etc, are made by the employers during the deal in order to attract the traffickers as well as the children. Interestingly, good living condition for the children is the primary concern of the trafficker rather than education. This is indicative of the traffickers to place the children with well-off families in order to have a better deal with the employer. These children are then more often than not in most cases mercilessly employed in household chores for even more than 10 hours a day.

Another reason for the rise in human trafficking cases in the state of Nagaland is because of its geographical positioning. Geographically, Nagaland is isolated from mainland India; the region shares its international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. Many view and are of the opinion that the land of the Nagas is an impenetrable landlocked region; but still Nagaland is slowly becoming a hub for human trafficking. If one looks into the history of Nagaland, one cannot ignore the fact the transition from an agrarian and headhunting stage to a modern one, was due to Christian missionaries who reached the Naga soil by the end of 1872. The old traditional life of every Naga was bound by a strict animistic religious order, and hence, secularism

was dichotomy in all aspects of life. As a result, every action was sanctioned and governed by a religious order and belief within this cultural ethos was unquestionable. The head hunting practice of the people was enshrined in their religion, so this was regarded as a sacrifice to the highest god.⁵ But Christianity changed the entire culture of the people, from head hunting to a civilized life. This shows the socio-cultural change brought on by a new religion and which in turn became an institution that facilitated socio-cultural life of the Naga people. A further few decades down the line and the region has been suffering from a long history of ethnic and armed conflict, coupled with a lack of economic development, the region is impecunious and struggles with its stagnant economy. An insurgency ravaged and economically backward land is bound to be an area where the industry of human trafficking thrives in.

3. Human Trafficking: A New Dimension of Slavery

The word "Slavery" is not new to the inhabitants of Nagaland. Likewise, in the case of the Ao Nagas 'Slavery' or 'Alar', in the Ao dialect, was common place throughout their tribe at one time, but slaves were well treated and considered as part of or members of the family.⁶ However, modern day slavery or human trafficking was a phenomenon unheard of. Globalization associated with long unresolved political issues, corruption of the present political machinery and failure of the state to provide employment and livelihood opportunities to its citizens, are some of the key factors that are contributing to the problem of human trafficking in the state. Globalization has changed the face of India from a very conservative, closed and traditional society, into one of the competing economic powers of the world. But Nagaland and other north east regions of the country remain decades behind mainstream India, specifically in areas of major economic activity, employment opportunities and the like. After more than 66 years of India's independence, no major feasible development process can be seen to have taken place in Nagaland but one cannot deny the fact that with globalization the boundaries between entrapment and slavery have become more blurred. Anywhere in the world where there is development in transport and communication, it can be seen that there is also a growth in its tourism. The sale of women and children into sexual slavery and other forms of exploitation has been made easier by advancement in information technology and the shrinking of space and time with globalization.⁷

It is sensible to say that globalization has penetrated the state and created a space for buying and selling of human beings like commodities. As might have been the case, in an article that came out in Nagaland post (23/04/2014), a police sting operation led to the arrest of six people who were using a spa and massage parlour as a front for its sex racket. Some of the girls that were arrested were identified to have been from Nagaland. It may have been that these girls got into the profession voluntarily or otherwise. But something that cannot be ignored is that not everyone is given the power of choice when it comes to trafficking. In another article that came up in the same paper Nagaland Post dated the 1st of April 2014, a trafficker in the guise of Christian pastor had even a children's home which acted as a front for his trafficking activities. One of his trafficking victims who was 17 yrs of age at the time when she was rescued, disclosed that the accused had been assaulting and raping her repeatedly ever since she was 11 years old.

The American Baptist missionaries were the first missionaries to foray into Nagaland and it was them that first introduced modern and formal education in Nagaland in the late nineteen century followed by the British. Owing to their diligent work, today we have a literacy rate of 80.11%. If we analyze the trafficking cases as reported, a good percentage of trafficking victims are educated or those that have received some formal degree of education as many of them are lured by fake agents promising to provide better jobs and better education.

Registrations and placements made in the employment exchange of 2012, indicates that out of 16571 fresh registrations, job placements were given only to 166 people while the number of applicants remaining on the live registers of the employment exchange as on 31st December 2012, is 68874. As mentioned earlier, Nagaland economy is based mainly on agriculture and on salaries and allowances provided by the government. Only a small negligible ratio of the economy thrive in the private sector and when such huge numbers of educated and qualified citizens are left unemployed, more problems in the social setup is bound to find its way in.

Since there is a dearth of employment opportunities in the region, traffickers exploit this farce with false promises of employment guarantees. A report in a local daily in Nagaland- the 'Nagaland Post' (dated 24/08/12) stated that in August 2012, 14 Naga boys were taken to Goa by fake agents with the promise of lucrative jobs in the hospitality sector but later were rescued from a mining area in the state. They were forced to work in iron ore mines and confined to tents and port-cabins with not even basic amenities. Therefore the question that arises here is, whether it is the failure of the present political machinery in the state to provide employment and livelihood opportunities to its citizens that this social menace is creeping into the state?

Though Nagaland shares international borders with four countries, there is no stringent manning of those international borders therefore it becomes an easy route for the traffickers to traffic people from this region. It has been reported that Pangsa and Dimapur in Nagaland are major transit and demand centers. Women and children from Assam and Bangladesh are trafficked to Moreh and from there, they are moved out to Myanmar and other countries in South East Asia through the Golden triangle. Similarly, women and children from Assam, Nagaland and Bangladesh are trafficked through the Pangsa International Treaty tower and then moved to the golden triangle.

4. Conclusion

Naga once known for their simple, honest, hard working and peace loving people seems to be replaced by arrogance, jealousy, dishonest and selfishness where today majority prefer for easy wealth through fraud and force. The study clearly shows that human trafficking is on the rise in the state of Nagaland. However, people feels that such social menace occurs only periodically when one sees newspaper articles or the like, but fail to comprehend the immensity of the issue. But the overwhelming truth is that there is a bigger and much more sinister underworld racket which we seem not to be aware of. It may be said that human

trafficking has become a growing threat to humanity in the state of Nagaland. It is not enough to say don't do it, it is sin, it is wrong but must come out with the implication and the hazards anchored to it. It is the need of the hour to study why things happens the way it is and find solution to it. The multidimensional problem of human trafficking has no single solution in Nagaland which has to deal it from different angles such as education and awareness programmes in order to combat against such social menace as the study shows that many of the Naga people are ignorant about human trafficking which has been taking place in their own state. Prevention, treatment and rehabilitation all require a positive and life affirming campaign. Families, NGO's, Civil Societies, Churches and the Government need to play an important and holistic role in curbing human trafficking and also to bring back those victims (psychologically and mentally disturbed) into mainstream of social life. Therefore, to totally eradicate such problem may not be possible however, if the state machinery formulates proper policies and programmes to address the problem of trafficking in the state and also if the traditional and cultural institutions adopt and change according to the times, the growth of such global menace can be checked to a large extent.

5. Foot Note

1. Sankar Sen and PM Nair (2005) Trafficking in Women and Children in India. Orient Longman Publication. p.27.
2. <http://www.northeasttoday.in/net-stories/rising-dilemma-of-human-trafficking-in-india/> (accessed on 02/06/12)
3. <http://traffickingnews.wordpress.com/tag/assam/> (accessed on 16/10/12)
4. Mar Atsongchanger (1995) The Historical Memoranda of the Nagas and their neighbours. Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights; Guwahati cell publication. Page 13
5. Mar Atsongchanger et al. p. 27
6. Ibid
7. Lorraine Radford and Kaname Tsutsumi (2004) Globalization and violence against women- inequalities in risks, responsibilities and blame in the UK and Japan. Published by Pergamon. P. 3

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