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How Naga communities came together for each other during the pandemic

Members of Christo Naga's Club, which consists of students, farmers, government and private sector employees, pose with the paddy they harvested during the lockdown in Zhavame village, Nagaland

The close-knit society is falling back on the sense of community and kinship that has been passed down over generations in Nagaland

One evening in June, a group of young men and women gathered in Zhavame village in the foothills of the Kapamodzü peak, one of Nagaland's highest mountains. The lockdown had not yet been completely lifted, and the group mused about the abandoned paddy fields in the village. Many young people from Zhavame had moved to cities to study or work, and almost half the fields had been left fallow. At the end of the meeting, the Christo Naga's Club, whose members included students, farmers, government and private sector employees, reached a decision: they would begin cultivating the land again.

"Every member of the club comes from a farming background, but this was our first ever experience of farming independently without our parents. In the process, we learnt a lot," says 34-year old Ngapunyi Albert Krocha, a social worker who lives in Kohima but visits his village often.



Zhavame residents get together for a celebration

The lockdown had convinced the group about the importance of self-reliance. They hope to encourage other young people to grow their own food. “We can never know what the future holds, but if we are self-reliant, or have surplus cultivation, we can survive,” says Krocha.

Love your neighbour

This is just one of the ways in which communities in Nagaland have come together to support each other during the ill-planned lockdown, which pushed thousands of people into penury. The close-knit society is falling back on the sense

of community and kinship that has been passed down over generations in Nagaland.

“If your house burns down, if your family member falls sick or dies, if you are suddenly diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, if your crops fail, your neighbours, kinsmen, clansmen, come to help you build a new house, help care for the sick,” says writer Easterine Kire about the Naga sense of community.

Churches too began serving meals to the underprivileged during the lockdown. “Then there were NGOs and individuals distributing packets of food to daily wage workers who had lost their source of income. This sense of community is ingrained in us,” she says in an email interview.



Esteemed members of the Chakhesang tribe pose in Hapidasa shawls

Nagaland is a great example of how communities rise to the occasion, explains Rosemary Dzüvichü, professor at the Department of English, Nagaland University. “The commitment towards community is an integral part of Naga culture. Whether in death or celebration, we are taught to stand by each other. We have seen this in the outpouring of generosity from individuals and communities and organisations towards the less fortunate, returnees, daily wage workers who faced the brunt of the lockdown in the State,” says Dzüvichü, who is also advisor to the Naga Mothers’ Association (NMA), the apex body of women’s organisations in the State.

During the worst phase of the pandemic, NMA helped the Rotary Club identify single mothers, HIV+ people and daily wage workers to provide food and essential items, apart from helping the district administration reach out to orphanages and institutes for special needs children. The NMA also helped raise money and other resources for quarantine centres. It also collaborated with the Salesian Province of Don Bosco and reached out with thousands of rupees’ worth of essential food items to the quarantine centres at Peren and Tuensang.

“To reach out to the community, no matter how distant, especially in times of trouble, has always been a part of our culture,” says Dzüvichü. It was with this spirit that NMA helped hundreds of women and children from Rengma

families, who were forced to stay in relief camps at Bokajan and Silonijan during the 2013 conflict in Assam's Rengma Hills.

What is behind the Nagas' sense of community? In the words of Kohima-based author, former editor and journalist Charles Chasie, "Naga tribes were all head-hunters, but they were also very diverse and practised several systems such as pure democracy, different shades of republican systems, chiefships and absolute autocracy — this is why Naga society is an anthropological goldmine."

Universal values

"Your life, under head-hunting conditions, depended on another person, and blood relationship was important. However, not just blood relationships, friendship also mattered a lot," explains Chasie. "Different clans had their brother clans in every other village and even tribes where Tenyimia were concerned." Tenyimia consists of 10 different Naga tribes: Angami, Chakhesang, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Poumai, Mao, Maram, Rengma, and Pochury.



A COVID-19 quarantine centre in Chizami village that was rechristened as a creativity hub to lift the spirits of its residents

Along with head-hunting, the grand 'Feast of Merit' constitutes the basis of Naga social life. Traditionally considered the highest form of social honour, the 'Feast of Merit' includes rituals and involves giving a community feast to the whole village. Among the Chakhesang tribe, only those who have performed the 'Feast of Merit' are entitled to wear the prestigious shawls, Hapidasa and Saparadu. They can also adorn their homes with Hapiteh, a wood carving of the buffalo head, which is also symbolised in the Hapidasa shawl.

Seno Tsuhah, a community development worker, says that communities in Nagaland come together not only during times of crisis, but also to celebrate milestones or address important issues. “The value-based community life and sense of belonging have always been strong in our society – if we look at our forefathers’ generations, the community cohesiveness, the universal values of compassion, were always there, and that is still binding us,” she says. When vegetables couldn’t be transported into the State during lockdown, Tsuhah noticed how several villagers started visiting community forests to forage and collect wild edible plants so they could share it with urban dwellers in cities such as Kohima. She was also happy that young people were taking the lead in cultivating fallow fields. The greatest realisation of the community, she points out, has been the importance of growing their own food.

Joy of growing food

The members of the Christo Naga’s Club are sure that their new initiatives will not stop after the pandemic. “Now, we are all grown up, living in towns and cities, and we barely get the time to experience the joy of farming. So, it was a personal rediscovery, going back to nature, cultivating our own food,” says Rosou Pohena, a veterinarian who is also president of the club.

Around the same time, there have been conversations around local food in Chizami, a village perched in the hills of Phek district. Both at the church and community levels, the importance of growing one’s own food and making sure that

the local food is strengthened, appreciated and acknowledged is emphasised.

A year since the pandemic, families cultivating small plots of land have begun expanding their farming. Seno Tshuhah is very hopeful that communities will continue to uphold this practice; during the pandemic, the first example of solidarity shown to one another was sharing food. “Food is at the core of our community life,” she says.

The pandemic has indeed brought people closer in Nagaland, says Dzüvichü. “It has taught me how important it is to help people in our own towns, both within our communities and beyond.”



Members of Christo Naga's Club in Zhavame village at harvest time

Richard Belho, an architect who also does social work, says that the pandemic helped people realise their own vulnerabilities. “People chose to become strong and started

helping each other; we started hearing a lot of stories of people coming out of their comfort zones. The pandemic did light up that spirit in people.”

Kire says there are several lessons to be learnt from the pandemic, including getting one’s priorities in order; creating awareness about the needs of low-income groups in our midst; and nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit among young people who carved out businesses and found new ways of earning an income. “I learned about the resilience of the human spirit even when it has received terrible blows, and also the abiding importance of family and finding new ways to care for each other,” she says.