

A Gandhian in Nagaland

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The story of an extraordinary woman from an Ao Naga village who embraced Gandhian thought in the charged 1950s

After circling around a bit, the kitten eventually jumped on the wooden table. I nervously raised the plate with the last kata biscuit. Despite my pleas and mild threats, the kitten kept staring at the kata, whose edges I was nibbling while reading. I glanced helplessly at Utsu, who looked at the kitten and said “kwa-kwa-kwa” authoritatively. The kitten instantly left the kitchen-cum-meeting room of the Nagaland Gandhi Ashram.

“So, Utsu,” I said, as I resumed reading the Ashram’s visitors’ diary, “Jayaprakash Narayan has saluted your voluntary work. How did you choose to become a Gandhian and survive the extreme circumstances in the Nagaland of those days?” She smiled and raised her left hand while tilting her head down—a gesture that gave all credit to god.

Lentina or Utsu (grandmother), as she is popularly addressed, is an 84-year old Gandhian who lives in Chuchuyimlang—an interior Ao Naga village in Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Besides being the first woman from her village to study up to Class VII, she was also the first Naga woman to be trained as a Gandhian voluntary worker at the Kasturba Ashram in Guwahati in the early 1950s.

After serving as a gram sevika for decades, she now does voluntary work at the Nagaland Gandhi Ashram. Utsu’s is an extraordinary story of a Naga woman from a remote village who, against all odds, pursued her passion for education, Gandhian values, and voluntary service.

A giant leap

Born and raised in a modest Naga family in a small village called Merangkong, Utsu showed keen interest in schooling, and studied in three places—Merangkong, Chuchuyimlang and Mokokchung.



In the 1940s and the 50s, among the Nagas, formal schooling served no special purpose; it was considered redundant. The tribes had negligible access to public infrastructure—schools, roads, transportation or communication. Completing Class VII, especially for a girl from a small village, was a giant leap, the credit for which Utsu gave her father, Tinuzulu. “My father encouraged all children to attend the lower primary school in Merangkong where he was a teacher. Four girls from our village were enrolled; all dropped out except me,” she said.

The first attempt to spread education among the Ao Nagas was made by missionaries in Impur, the headquarters of the Ao Baptist Church Association. The British administration instructed every village to send nominees to Impur to be taught the three Rs.

Tinuzulu was one of them. After his training, he taught in the only school in Merangkong, where Utsu studied up to Class II.

For middle school, Utsu came to Chuchuyimlang, about 30 km from Merangkong. And after that, the nearest school was in Mokochung, 60 km away. “There was no transportation; we had to walk all the way. We also had a constant fear of wild animals. We always walked in a group, where I was the only girl. It would take us two days to reach Mokochung. So, along with books, we used to carry rice in our bags to cook on the way,” recollected Utsu.

When Utsu completed Class VII, her brother enrolled her into Kasturba Ashram, the headquarters of the Assam branch of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust.

She trained two years as a gram sevika and then enrolled for a two-year-long midwifery course at Guwahati civil hospital. Finally, Utsu and two Assamese gram sevikas were deputed to a new gram seva kendra at Chuchuyimlang.

There, they offered midwifery services, pre-basic schooling, and spinning and weaving classes. When was this kendra set up, I asked, and Utsu paused, then said, “After Thakkarsahab came to the village.”

This attracted the attention of Natwarbhai (Thakkarsahab), who peered over his glasses. “Natwarbhai, do you remember when you came to Chuchuyimlang?” I asked.

Putting aside the copy of *Mangal Prabhat*, the 85-year-old replied softly, “I even remember the day. You see, a day before my arrival, fire had gutted 30 huts in Chuchuyimlang and a tiger had killed a pig in front of the Ashram. It was April 1955 and Utsu’s gram seva kendra was set up a month later, in May 1955.” Utsu looked at me and nodded, “Hoito”.

Utsu, the lone trained midwife at the seva kendra, travelled to far-flung areas to assist pregnant women. But soon, militants ordered all Assamese sevikas to leave the village. Utsu recollected how “their thatched hut was blown away and they left under pressure. After this, we didn’t know what to do.”

Utsu decided to run it herself. She did all the work, with some support from local, untrained helpers. “Those were trying times. Forget proper sleep, I didn’t have enough time to even finish my meals. All day long, I used to walk from one village to another to attend to needy women and children.”

In 1956, Utsu was at a crossroads. At the kendra, she had come close to Natwarbhai—an idealist Gujarati who, under the influence of Kaka Kalelkar, had vowed to devote his life to Gandhian constructive work in border areas. At 23, Natwarbhai had settled in Chuchuyimlang and established the legendary Nagaland Gandhi Ashram in 1955.

Soon, Utsu and Natwarbhai decided to get married, not an easy affair in the prevailing milieu of the 1950s. Even after 60 years, Utsu distinctly remembers the strongest argument against the marriage, “My elder brother said, ‘We will get independence in a few months. Why are you marrying a foreigner?’” In those days, marriage with an outsider was unimaginable for a conservative Naga family. Secessionist forces were at their peak.

Catalysing social change

But Utsu didn’t cave in. Her marriage grounded her deeper into Gandhian thought. She began work in the Ashram, helping to expand its activities—bee-keeping, khadi sales centres, oil mills, gur-making, horticulture and so on. Later, when the central government appointed Utsu as a member of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, she actively negotiated the trajectory of development in the villages.

By now, the Ashram began to attract visitors ranging from Kaka Kalelkar, Jayaprakash Narayan and Verrier Elwin to Morarji Desai, Umashankar Joshi and Manmohan Singh. But in 1994, the Ashram received an unexpected demand from militants—an annual tax of Rs. 25,000. When Natwarbhai refused to pay up, the militants issued death threats which he did not take seriously. Shortly, the district superintendent of police was shot dead. It was no longer safe to take militants’ threats lightly. Natwarbhai had to leave the Ashram.

Once again, Utsu took charge. Finally, the militants gave in to the powerful village council of Chuchuyimlang and withdrew the death threat but by then Natwarbhai had already set up a camp office in Guwahati and handed over the Ashram entirely to Utsu, who ran it till 2014.

Despite her lifelong service, Utsu’s contribution has remained unnoticed and unreported. I asked her about this and she said, “Throughout my life, I have served quietly. I only worked for my own satisfaction. Now, when I see the babies delivered by me become grandparents, it’s my greatest reward.”

The one-eyed kitten returned, and Utsu picked it up. I browsed through the Ashram’s archives. Two newspaper clippings caught my attention. In the early 80s, a bust of Mahatma Gandhi was installed in Kohima, which the insurgents instantly destroyed, arguing that Nagaland didn’t need any Indian’s statue. In 2012, another Gandhi bust was beheaded in Ukhrul.

Being a Gandhian in the Naga Hills, more so in the charged 1950s, was never without conflict. It took a woman of extraordinary courage to embrace Gandhi and work in his name.

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