

# Integrating faith and development

## Akeina Gonmei

### Rongmei Baptist Association

It was a hot and humid day in June 2016. In Nagaland's Jalukie valley, the weather should have been pleasant. But the pre-monsoon showers had eluded the countryside. The farmers were desperate for some rain, as otherwise they stood to lose the pineapple and mango plantations that they had nurtured carefully with the support of Rongmei Baptist Association.

Rongmei Baptist Association or RBA as it is popularly known, has attained certain stature and respect among the community for its developmental interventions, thanks to the painstaking efforts of Ms Akeina and her husband Rev H M Gonmei. Over the years, they have been successfully initiating several interventions for the community.

Though Akeina was preoccupied with thoughts of getting grants for community development projects and grooming the incumbent executive secretary Mathiuthai Gonmei, she accorded a warm welcome to the two visitors from Tata Trusts. My colleague and I were in Jalukie to study RBA's journey and also to document Akeina's personal journey as a social worker.

### **Dimapur, the hub**

Akeina grew up in Dimapur, the commercial capital of Nagaland. Dimapur was and continues to be like any other Indian city, with people from different regions settling down to pursue their vocation and profession. Dimapur is home to all Naga tribes, with the Sema Nagas forming the majority. Dimapur has a large number of commercial establishments, owned mostly by the Marwari business community and educational institutions owned and managed by trusts and churches, making it a commercial and educational hub of Nagaland.

The flat terrain of Dimapur extends to Chumoukedima on the foothills of Naga Hills. Serving as the starting point of the hilly road to the capital Kohima, Chumoukedima connects Dimapur and the capital that is about 70km away. Dimapur is also the major entry point to Manipur, with a major national highway passing through Kohima on to Mao and then into the Imphal Valley. Dimapur is the only rail link between Guwahati and Dibrugarh. In a way, it is the most important point for Nagas and Manipuris of the Northeast travelling to other parts of the country for education. Flights of the government carrier were few and far between; private airlines started operations to Dimapur only in 2014.

The northeastern states are a cauldron of tribes and sub-tribes with rich ethnic traditions; but beneath the sublime cultural ethos, simmering tensions prevail among the various ethnic groups.

It is necessary to understand the geography and the sociocultural aspects of this region to appreciate the psychology and sociology of the Nagas and in a way many of the northeastern tribal communities. Remoteness and lack of physical connectivity has often added to the Nagas' disconnect with the rest of the country.

Nagaland was formally inaugurated on 1 December 1963, as the 16th state of the Indian union. The state consists of seven administrative districts, inhabited by 16 major tribes along with many sub-tribes. Each tribe has distinct customs, attire and language. With mutually unintelligible dialects even within a tribe, English has come to be the state language, with Nagamese as the lingua franca. Christians form 90% of the population. Given the insurgency in the region, with many organisations trying to secede Nagaland from the country, RBA's work gains more significance.

### **Rongmei Nagas**

With the advent of Christianity, Nagas gave up their headhunting practice in the 1930s. Some communities are believed to have given it up even earlier. Subsequently, each tribal community was organised into a Christian group such as Ao Baptist Association and Angami Baptist Association. The Rongmeis also had a separate association.

Nagas traditionally settled in the hills to protect themselves from headhunting expeditions of other tribes. Life in the hills was difficult and treacherous for daily chores - right from practising agriculture to fetching firewood and drinking water. As the headhunting practice stopped, Nagas began to explore the plains. The plains were easier to cultivate, had better connectivity and helped people overcome the monotony of living in isolation, besides living in perpetual fear.

Jalukie Valley in Peren district was one such ideal setting with comparatively vast stretches of flat terrain. It was ideal for wet agriculture, or *pani kheti* as the Nagas call it, compared to the onerous slash-and-burn or *jhum* cultivation practised on the hill slopes. In fact, Peren is called the rice bowl of Nagaland. A large number of farmers has been cultivating paddy as a monsoon crop in the kharif season. After harvesting the paddy, in the absence of assured irrigation, they leave the land fallow.

The Zeliangrong tribe inhabits the Jalukie valley and the 50-odd neighbouring villages in the valley as well as the hills. The valley has also attracted a large number of other Naga tribes from various parts of Nagaland, besides the Zeliangrongs from the neighbouring states of Assam and Manipur.

The Zeliangrong Nagas consist of three sub-tribes, namely, the Zemi, the Rongmei and the Liangmei. One could equate them to three siblings. RBA works among the Rongmeis in Peren and some parts of Tenning.

### **Akeina's early inspirations**

Akeina, born in 1968, grew up in a typical middle class family, with her two brothers and two sisters. Her father Alotdi Kamei worked in the Public Works Department (PWD) of the government and had the reputation of being an honest officer.

Akeina recalled an instance that left a deep, positive impression on her. "One evening, a group of men came to our house and started discussing something seriously with my father. I watched the discussion through a small window that separated the hall and the kitchen. My father, generally a calm and composed person, suddenly became furious and agitated. He shouted at the visitors and almost chased them out of the house. Later I learnt that they had come to bribe him and that was why he had become so angry. He thought it was an insult to his integrity. That incident left a deep impression on me."

About her mother Ajin Kamei, she said, "My mother too was a deep source of inspiration for me. Though she was not formally educated, I recall her visiting women in our neighbourhood and persuading them to give up brewing alcohol." Traditionally, in many Naga households, rice beer was brewed and consumed. Many earned money by selling rice beer.

"Nagaland is famous for its colourful and artistically woven woollen shawls. These are woven in what is known as a loin loom. My mother advised the women to give up brewing. She succeeded in convincing quite a few women, who quit brewing and took up weaving. I also remember my mother helping many needy women," Akeina recalled. Ajin Kamei was very outspoken about many important issues that the community was facing. Because of her stand on various matters it was felt that she should get involved in politics. Though she did not join electoral politics, she served as the state vice-president of the women's wing of the Congress party.

"Since my father was in the government service, the family had to move to a new place every two or three years and it was our mother who brought stability to the house. My parents, though departed, continue to remain my source of inspiration," said Akeina.

## **Choosing the development route**

Akeina completed high school in 1985 from Christian English School in Dimapur. She completed her higher secondary education from Lowry Memorial Junior College in Bengaluru and Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in Home Science from Handique Girls' College in Guwahati.

Akeina's decision to join Nirmala Niketan in Mumbai for postgraduation in social work - Master of Social Work or MSW – was a turning point. It was her elder brother who told her about this educational opportunity. Akeina was probably the first Naga and the first Rongmei to graduate from Nirmala Niketan. Coming from the sparsely populated Nagaland, travelling in over-crowded Mumbai trains to reach field locations every fortnight - as an academic requirement of the MSW course – is an experience Akeina said she would never forget.

“I had many options after completing MSW in 1993. Some of my classmates joined voluntary organisations. My siblings, settled in Thailand and the USA, advised me to settle abroad to lead a comfortable life,” she said.

However, Akeina had different plans. She returned to Dimapur and began teaching in a school. Besides teaching, she began counselling students and organised a career guidance workshop. Seeing Akeina's enthusiasm and energy, the expert, whom the school had invited as the resource person, advised her to join an NGO. Akeina decided to take the plunge.

For two years, Akeina worked in Prodigal Home in Dimapur. The organisation works among youth who are drug addicts and runs a rehabilitation centre for them. When Akeina joined Prodigal Home, cases of AIDS and fatalities had begun to be reported, and the NGO designed a 'harm reduction programme' especially for young people and habitual drug users. The experience of working with these youth influenced her later choice of career.

“In 1995, there was very little awareness about HIV and AIDS. As a programme coordinator, I engaged with many youngsters. I could see the ignorance and apathy concerning AIDS patients. Even in church there was not much awareness about the severity of the problem. In fact, it was taboo to talk about it. I began talking to the affected people and praying with their families. This assignment took me on a new path. I enrolled for Master of Divinity (M.Div.) in a theological seminary in Dimapur in 2000. My family wanted me to find a job and settle down in life. But I began exploring various options,” she recollected.

## **Stepping into RBA**

RBA is a church-based organisation and is the apex administrative body for the Rongmei churches in Nagaland. "Though there were other Rongmei organisations, we formed RBA in 1988 as an independent entity. We had to start from scratch. As the executive secretary I had to strategise and decide about the future of RBA's work," recalled Rev Gonmei.

"When I visited villages, I observed that people were uneducated, and their livelihoods were threatened. And they lacked food security. We had to do something more than preaching sermons. When I shared this situation with the church administration and my intention of beginning some development work, some of my own people accused me of becoming worldly, and getting diverted from my religious duties," he recalled. Rev Gonmei responded by saying that people needed food to survive and there was no magic to make that happen.

Around this time, a well-wisher who supported Rev Gonmei advised that registering RBA would give him and his work respectability and recognition. Rev Gonmei took his advice and registered RBA in 1994.

There are many units such as women's wing, youth wing, men's wing and mission wing in RBA, each catering to a specific group of people. Each wing, headed by a secretary, falls under the direct administration of the church. People's Integrated Development Services (PIDS) is the development wing of RBA, formed in 1997, to empower the rural people and to reduce the rate of poverty in the region. PIDS is not registered separately, but functions under RBA. However it is an autonomous body with a board and regulations of its own. The development secretary heads the PIDS. The members of the board, nine in all, come from different backgrounds.

In 1997, RBA started pineapple plantations in the villages of Peren district, under a horticulture programme, with support from North East India Committee On Relief and Development (NEICORD), Shillong. RBA started forming self-help groups (SHG) in the year 1997. Initially RBA faced difficulties, as men discouraged the women in the family from becoming members of SHGs. But a few enterprising women dared to come together and RBA assisted them in forming SHGs.

As some of the RBA leaders knew about Akeina's work at the rehabilitation centre and were acquainted with her family, they invited her to join RBA. They impressed upon her the need to contribute to the overall development of the Rongmeis as they were lagging behind in educational, economic and social spheres. Akeina agreed and began working with RBA in 2000 as youth secretary, and coordinator of women's wing.

Akeina moved to Jalukie, a small town in Peren district, about 45km from Dimapur. Having lived in cosmopolitan cities such as Dimapur, Mumbai and Bengaluru, moving to Jalukie was a big change. The town, though close to Dimapur, had poor transport facilities, with just one bus operating between the two places every day. Power supply was erratic. The only solace

to Akeina was, she was close to the Rongmei community and was a key member of RBA's developmental interventions.

"When I joined RBA, it was a nascent organisation. We had no building of our own. The rented office had two rooms. We were a handful of staff, five to be precise, including the executive secretary. We had very little furniture. In the office, it was almost like a game of musical chairs between the field staff and those in the office," Akeina narrated her first few years in RBA with a smile.

A manual typewriter, an improvised cyclostyling machine and a scooter were the valuable assets in the office. During the day, Akeina travelled to villages and came back to the office that doubled as her quarters at night. "Wooden benches would be shifted at night to make room for me to sleep," she recollected.

"The initial years were challenging but were also fun. It was a great learning opportunity for me. I started as the youth secretary. Three years later, I was made the development secretary and I continue to hold the post till now. Every five years the board reviews my performance," she said.

### **Dual responsibilities**

In January 2001, Akeina got married to Rev H M Gonmei, her mentor when she joined RBA. She considers her marriage another turning point in her career and life. "I moved in with my husband's family. He has seven brothers. In family functions, the headcount of our own family was more than 50! Onions and potatoes were purchased in sacks and not in kilograms," she reminisced with amusement.

The family owned ten acres of wetland, where paddy was cultivated and each one shared the responsibilities. She credited her extended family's invaluable support that helped her carry out the responsibilities at RBA and at home. Her pride was evident when she talked about her children, "Our son and daughter are studying in a school in Dimapur. My son loves music and has already performed in a piano concert."

### **Responding to community's concerns**

During her initial years at RBA, a couple of incidents influenced her perspectives. "We found that fetching drinking water was strenuous for girls and women as they had to go to the streams to bring it. Once a girl who went to fetch water was swept away in a flash flood. It was a very sad incident that touched my heart. I felt the need to do something urgently."

Akeina noticed another problem with regard to water. Traditionally the villagers buried the dead in the plot of land where the houses stood. However, over the years the practice

became untenable since population increased and open spaces shrunk. So if the dead continued to be buried in the same compound as the house, the underground drinking water sources were at risk. This, she felt, was probably the reason why villagers did not use the well water. "We started fencing backyard wells with cement concrete rings so that the wells remained protected and the water didn't get contaminated," she said. RBA raised the issue with the village council and got a separate piece of land allocated as the village burial ground. It was due to such responsiveness to the needs of the community that RBA was able to win the villagers' trust.

RBA's programmes, implemented over the past 20 years, evolved from the needs of the community. They can broadly be classified as

- community and capacity building measures such as promotion of SHGs, people's organisations (PO), and village development committees (VDC)
- Market-based livelihood programmes from farm, non-farm activities such as piggery and off-farm activities such as trading during weekly markets
- Skill development programmes for youth and young mothers
- Natural resource management (NRM) and related programmes for enhancement of ecological balance
- Programmes to ensure drinking water, health and sanitation

RBA designs projects according to the needs of the community and then seeks funds. The team discusses the project first with the board. Only when the board approves of the project, the team approaches the funding agency.

### **Jhum cultivation to wadi cultivation**

According to Akeina, the Nagas' socio-cultural practices played a role in switching to plantation or *wadi* cultivation. Nagas were not agriculturists or farmers in the true sense of the term. They were traditionally hunters and shifting cultivators. Nagas continue to practise the traditional *jhum* or slash-and-burn method of cultivation in some districts.

"In the past, our food requirement was simple and minimal. Hunting a wild boar, trapping a deer or shooting a bird was enough. About 60 tina of rice (*tina* read as *tin* is an aluminium container with a capacity to hold 15kg of rice) obtained from the jhum fields was sufficient for a family," said Akeina.

Earlier, villagers would leave a hill slope that was used for slash-and-burn cultivation untouched for 15 years before returning to the same patch of land. The 15-year period would have resulted in thick vegetation. With increase in population and loss in forest cover, the jhum cycle has become short. Now, the jhum cultivation cycle has been reduced to three to five years in some villages. "Young Nagas are no longer willing to engage in agriculture. They are better educated than before, more skilled and hence prefer other jobs

to agriculture. Many villagers prefer to be even a driver than a farmer. The introduction and the success of the wadi programme has to be seen in the light of the above context,” said Akeina.

Introduction of wadi cultivation was in response to shrinking land as a result of indiscriminate felling of trees for timber and unsustainable jhum cultivation practices. As some tribes were clearing forest lands for jhum cultivation, RBA felt that banning logging and jhum cultivation were not practical. Plantations offered the possibility of a sustainable income for a five-year period. Thus jhum fields could still be retained.

“There is also a lack of adequate technical expertise that we can rely on, especially for our plantation initiative. We have an arrangement with an expert from a government scientific research institution whom we consult frequently. We have to overcome these constraints and ensure a positive impact on the community. We remain accessible to the community for troubleshooting,” said Akeina.

RBA tried other interventions like sinking bore wells for additional irrigation for wetland agriculture. The effort did not succeed as loose soil gave way to silting and clogging of bore wells. Geologists advised that the soil was not suitable for bore wells. Vegetable cultivation that they tried did not have a chance to succeed as the local practice is to let animals loose for grazing.

### **Creating community assets**

One of RBA’s initiatives has been creation of community assets. Like in many parts of India, weekly market, popularly known as *haat*, is a centre of economic and social activity for a group of villages. It is a meeting place for farmers, traders and consumers where all kinds of rural, semi-urban and urban products change hands. It also serves as a sort of a social gathering for the community in the vicinity. It is also one of the key outlets for farmers selling their agricultural and other produce to intermediary traders as well as end consumers. Traditionally haats were organised in an open space such as a playground or an abandoned field, where participants transacted business in the open or under makeshift tents.

RBA felt the need for an appropriately designed permanent structure. They facilitated construction of permanent market sheds in the villages of Samziuram and New Jalukie, after convincing the respective village councils. Under its rural infrastructure development programme, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) offered a small grant. They transferred the money directly to the account of the village council. The council supervised the construction of the market sheds. The villagers offered *shramdan* or voluntary labour. After completion, the villagers found the structures beneficial, especially during rains.

The joke in RBA is that, both the pilot projects pioneered by RBA and completed in February 2010 were so successful that some agencies started claiming the idea as theirs! Now the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) and the newly launched North Eastern Rural Livelihood Project (NERLP) have included market shed construction under their funding programme.

## **Towards sustainable livelihoods**

### **(i) Piggeries**

RBA's work has become increasingly focussed on promoting sustainable livelihoods. RBA orchestrates professional help so that the community members can continue or diversify around those livelihood opportunities that they are familiar with.

Piggery and mushroom cultivation seemed to be possible activities that women could conveniently undertake, with potential for a reasonable income. Choice of piggery emerged after discussions with the village women. For Nagas, pork is a delicacy. A government officer remarked that pork from Punjab worth Rs 55 crore was finding its way to the kitchens of Nagaland, indicating the demand-supply deficit. So introducing piggery as a viable livelihood option was a natural progression for RBA. Women could rear pigs, while taking care of the household chores. The pigs consume the kitchen waste, thus reducing the solid waste load.

RBA gives each woman a piglet. After a year, the pig gives birth to seven piglets on an average. The woman sells each piglet for about Rs 3,500, thereby earning Rs 24,500. Taking feed cost into account, the yearly net profit by sale of piglets can be Rs 18,000. By the second year, the profit is likely to double since the pig can produce two litters. Besides this, a 12-month-old fully-grown pig can fetch Rs 200 a kg and averaging the weight at 100kg, it can fetch Rs 20,000. During festivals, family functions and social occasions, there is a big demand for well-fed pigs.

Akeina is exploring value additions that would suit the Naga culinary practices. "On a recent visit to Thailand and other countries in southeast Asia, I noticed some excellent products like processed pig skin. Since we have piggery as a major activity, such value added products can fetch excellent price. It tastes good, goes well with the culinary practice of the Nagas and can be beneficial to the women. People come to us with their difficulties, and we look for possible solutions to their problems."

## **(ii) Mushroom cultivation**

The recently introduced oyster mushroom cultivation can lead to a net income of Rs 18,000 for a family, for six months of work, if the family grows mushrooms in 500 bottles. In the consecutive year, if they prepare the growing medium (bottles) in two batches, they can harvest round the year, and the income would double, according to RBA.

Traditionally villagers did not cultivate mushrooms, but collected them from the forest. However, a government department introduced oyster mushroom cultivation using straw as a medium. During a visit to Thailand, Akeina and her husband observed oyster mushrooms being grown using sawdust.

RBA introduced this method among women of New Jalukie, Samziuram and Beisumpuikam villages. RBA noticed that mushroom cultivation not only brought in additional income for the family but also provided nutritious food supplement to women and children in the family. With expanding local markets, consumers are willing to pay Rs 100 as wholesale and Rs 150 as retail price per kg.

A 500-bottle unit can easily fetch Rs 14,400 every six months. With availability of local sawdust, from adjoining saw mills, reliable spawn supply and land availability comparatively easy in the plains of Jalukie, mushroom cultivation could prove to be a game changer for many families. For the dietary habits of Nagas, mushroom is not an alien dish and hence marketing is unlikely to be a bottleneck. Most of the villages in the Jalukie valley have weekly markets and hence marketing outlets are more or less guaranteed.

In 2010, RBA sent its staff, Gabriel and Linus to Allahabad for a ten-month training course named 'Specialisation in Community Farming and Sustainable Agriculture' in Makino School of Agriculture. It is a rural leadership course similar to that taught at the Asian Rural Institute in Japan. The two staff returned with new insights and are training farmers and SHG women.

## **Working with the government**

When bureaucrats, especially those new to the locality, raise queries about RBA's work, Akeina explained about their work with the communities, eventually earning the bureaucrats' goodwill.

RBA is the implementation partner in the NERLP works funded by the World Bank. NERLP covers four states, namely, Sikkim, Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland. In Nagaland, the livelihood project is implemented in three blocks in Peren district and also in the remote Tuensang district located close to the Myanmar border. RBA is the implementing partner for the Tenning block of Peren district. The work involves capacity building of SHGs in the NERLP project villages.

“We are the pioneers in the SHG movement in Nagaland. In 2002, we formed the first four SHGs in Mhainamtsi, New Jalukie, Jalukie town and Samziuram. RBA staff had the opportunity to visit Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and learned about the way the groups functioned. Since NERLP came much later in 2014, RBA staff trained NERLP staff on good practices regarding SHGs,” said Akeina.

“Bringing a government programme to people is not easy. RBA hosts the only Rural Self Employment Training Institute (RSETI) in Nagaland. They have been in our campus since November 2011 when the programme was started. They are yet to begin construction, in spite of allocation of funds. I was mistaken for a bank employee because of my repeated visits to the bank to follow up on this matter,” Akeina said with a chuckle. RBA hosts RSETI reluctantly because of space crunch, knowing that if closed for want of premises, RSETI would never open again.

Akeina recalled an instance when the RBA’s data did not match that of the government. The local bureaucrats and others who benefitted from such corrupt practices were an unhappy lot since RBA’s figures showed that the government figures had been inflated to garner more resources.

In Nagaland, the village owns the land and the forest. The village council decides the patch of forest that can be cut. Each family clears the required land and practises jhum cultivation. “Around year 2005, many Nagas got into rubber cultivation on hill slopes or in lands abandoned after jhum cultivation. The government’s subsidy of Rs 1,000 per tree made rubber cultivation attractive to farmers; they failed to think of the consequences. I had read about the dangers of monoculture, as well as falling rubber prices in international markets. I protested in the meetings when the government attempted to promote rubber without giving the complete picture. Many farmers who took it up burnt their fingers. The growth of the plants is not at all as the government experts assured. So now there are rubber plantations, but no rubber from the trees,” said Rev Gonmei about the government’s programme to promote rubber.

During our week-long stay in Jalukie, Akeina shared many interesting anecdotes. “In one particular project with the government, an allowance of Rs 12,000 per month was budgeted for the field staff. There was absolutely no provision for conveyance allowance. I raised this issue in the project review committee meeting. I told them it was not fair to expect the field staff to visit distant villages without reimbursing their petrol expenses. Some didn’t like my raising such uncomfortable questions, but I did not hesitate. Of course, we have to be very subtle in such matters.” This incident is one of many that shows how Akeina resists unfair or discriminatory practices.

## **Seizing opportunities**

The Tata Trusts team that visited Jalukie had a telephone interaction with a senior officer from a development financial institution. The officer, a Naga, had been posted in Dimapur earlier, later worked in another place and returned to Dimapur recently. The person has thus seen the growth of RBA. As a native who understands and appreciates local culture and as an executive with a wider exposure to development programmes in a pan-India organisation, her observations about RBA's growth are pertinent.

"While the southern states were reporting impressive progress on SHG programmes, we were struggling to link banks to SHG schemes, as late as 2000. In spite of our persuasion, banks were reluctant to extend loan to women SHGs. There are very few NGOs in Nagaland. We wanted to partner with a reliable NGO who understood ground realities and had a good rapport with the community. RBA's representative attended one of our meetings. They picked up the idea and began mobilising women," she said.

Since banks were not coming forward to lend directly to the SHGs, the institution advanced wholesale loan to RBA in March 2002, to be lent to women SHGs for retail purpose. RBA repaid all the loans on time without any default.

"The banks have peculiar ways of functioning. For instance, in Dimapur, if one SHG wants to obtain a loan of say, Rs 1 lakh from branch A of X bank, they have to obtain a 'No Due Certificate' from all branches of all the banks in the city! That would take at least one month for the SHG to visit 15-odd branches. RBA came in when the SHG movement was nascent in the state. We found RBA's operations very transparent. They were willing to discuss issues that we were apprehensive about, such as interest rates," the officer added.

## **Promoting diversity within RBA**

Since RBA is a church-based organisation, it mandates its executive secretary to have obtained a BD degree (Bachelor in Divinity, a four-year course offered by many institutions in Nagaland as also in Pune, Bengaluru and Shillong). RBA announces vacancies through church-based networks and personal contacts and recruits through personal references and rarely through public advertisements. RBA recruits young men and women interested in church activities, after a selection process that includes a written test and an interview. All the employees including Akeina are employed on a contract basis. A search committee selects secretaries for five-year terms. Currently Akeina has a mandate of five years and this is her fourth term as executive secretary in RBA.

At a given point of time, RBA works with a couple of funders. "We do not want to expand that base since it's not possible for us to work with more than two or three donors at a time.

We don't have a corpus and hence we need to continuously seek new funders. I am already in discussion with one of the current funders for the next phase," revealed Akeina.

As a result of this strategy, it has been a challenge for RBA to retain its staff. As projects get completed, some of the staff recruited for the project have to be relieved. But in general, RBA encourages long stints. John joined RBA in 2002 right after completing his school examination. RBA sent him to Jabalpur and Shillong for training as they had just started the wadi programme funded by Action for Food Production (AFPRO). Presently John is the NRM coordinator in RBA.

The staff salaries range between Rs 6,000 and Rs 10,000 per month, reasonable in the region, given the limited job opportunities. A staff member who has been with RBA for more than 15 years earns Rs 9,000. RBA's effort is to use the grants for community activities rather than on administrative expenses.

While the core of the work is for and with the Rongmei Baptist Nagas in the Peren, Jalukie and Tenning areas, RBA has a policy to recruit staff irrespective of their religious or clan background. For instance, a senior staff member is a catholic; there are staff from Zemi and Liangmei tribes. RBA has had staff from Ao, Angami, Lotha and Chakesang tribes from Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha and Senapati. Some have got government jobs; some have got better opportunities based on their work experience in RBA.

The diversity among RBA staff might appear insignificant for someone not familiar with the region. But in a region where tribal and clan affiliations are extremely strong, trivial issues can turn into a potential source of conflict, tension and violence. In such a context, RBA's effort to promote diversity is laudable.

### **Interventions – some glimpses**

RBA looks beyond affiliations in its interventions. In one of the villages we visited, RBA has introduced wadi programme and backyard poultry through women SHGs. None but the Zemi tribe inhabits the village. Many of the church leaders could not comprehend why RBA was active there. But RBA's stand is very clear – irrespective of who resides in the village, their goal is to work with and for the poor, on livelihood issues. However, it must be noted that on the way to this village, there were a number of villages inhabited by the Sema tribe, who are found in large numbers in Dimapur and in Zunheboto districts of Nagaland. RBA did not promote any intervention in the Sema villages though the area is contiguous with the village we visited.

For RBA, working with a community that is united at one level as Naga yet segregated by many sub-identities based on strong religious and tribal affiliations is a tightrope walk. During a visit to Samziuram village, we assumed that the women were having piggeries and

we were keen to understand the economics of the same. However, the coordinator politely replied that they were not practising piggery since they were Seventh Day Adventists (SDA), a section of Christians for whom pork and piggery are taboo. For us outsiders, it was unimaginable that a Naga could give up pork, since it is considered a delicacy in Nagaland. RBA then introduced mushroom cultivation and backyard poultry for the SDA women.

Daniel hails from Mhainamtsi village. His parents and brothers have been practising jhum farming. When he came in contact with RBA in 2004, the latter sent him for training to Imphal. It was unheard of for a Naga youth to have ever been trained as a cobbler. On completion of his training, Daniel came back and began making chappals for women, by establishing a small shop in his village. Seeing that the designs that he was offering to customers were getting a good response, he decided to shift to Jalukie town, the main market. This was a big decision for him – to leave his village and family in pursuit of his business. Renting a small room with a partition that separates his home and shop, he persisted with his business. His presence in the town has helped him to significantly increase business activity. During our study visit, we visited his shop that had attractive chappal designs. He mentioned that most of his buyers are wholesalers from Dimapur. A good month can result in a net income of Rs 10,000. In slack months, the sales could come down to Rs 5,000. What is notable is that Daniel persists in his new-found profession. He understands the need to diversify in designs of chappals, to add some machines and get working capital from schemes like Micro Units Development & Refinance Agency (MUDRA).

### **Looking back**

The name Akeina roughly translates as ‘one who is looked upon as a role model by 200 people’. The meaning seems to ring true. One of RBA’s staff said, “She is considered a star by village women and men.” During five days of field interaction, we, the visitors from Tata Trusts, observed that she was energetic, lively and full of enthusiasm while interacting with her staff, the community and visitors. The villagers revered and respected her; they also treated her like a member of the family, which was mutual.

Reflecting on her journey since 2000, Akeina observed, “There is a perceptible difference and marked community acceptance of RBA’s developmental efforts. Compared to other tribes of Nagaland, the Zeme, Rongmei and Liangmei communities that we work with are relatively slow in responding to new ideas and adapting to a different work culture. Earlier numerous meetings were needed to convince villagers. Church leaders and pastors had to be convinced about our programmes. Now interactions have become faster, community acceptance easier. We are taking a clear position that development effort of RBA is for all, irrespective of clan and community affiliations. For us economic betterment means a path to social harmony. We do not implement any programme that doesn’t bring harmony to the

community. Our efforts have slowly opened up the minds of the community and church leaders.”

Rev Gonmei was philosophical. He reflected on the ground reality and about the criticisms about their work. “We invite donors to see our work. RBA is a pioneer in taking up development interventions under the aegis of the church. There are struggles within and without. We need to build bridges and have continuous dialogue with other associations.”

### **Looking ahead**

When queried about future plans for RBA, Akeina’s personal plans in and beyond RBA, Akeina was thoughtful in her responses. “This is my fourth term in RBA. In 2020 I will complete 20 years. I would like to pass on the mantle to a new person. We will prepare, support and groom the person to take up the responsibility. Should we reach 1,00,000 people, 200 villages and have a staff of 200? I think the new person should decide on RBA’s growth strategy”.

On the personal front, Akeina said that she has not yet decided on her future course of action. She said she might start a new mission. Rev Gonmei shared his ideas beyond RBA’s work. “With a small group of like-minded individuals we have registered an NGO called Socio-economic and Environmental Society. I want to concentrate on socio-economic and environmental issues facing our community. For instance, excessive jhum cultivation has led to soil erosion on the hill slopes. This has resulted in silting of wetland in the Jalukie valley where a large number of farmers practise pani kheti. Some farmers had to abandon cultivating the land that used to be so fertile a few years ago. We have already registered the NGO and I want to focus on the work of this NGO in the coming years,” he said.

For Akeina and Rev Gonmei, the journey of integrating faith and development has been a long-drawn effort that needed a lot of patience and perseverance. Their efforts have made RBA evolve a new model of community development while continuing to remain a faith-based organisation. RBA has successfully converged the developmental agenda through a platform created by the local church, and has been adaptive to respond to the evolving needs of the community and strategise its interventions. The duo’s experience of this journey might offer many insights to others travelling similar paths.

## **Work life balance**

“After marriage, when I came to my husband’s house, it was a completely new experience for me. With eight brothers and one more cousin joining us, it was a large family. I had just started working for RBA. Attending to work and household responsibilities was a constant challenge. The family home in Mhainamtsi had a toilet that was in the yard, further away from the house. I used to joke that even walking to the toilet was a luxury. I would run to save time! It was multitasking at its best – attending phone calls, paying attention to the work in the kitchen, preparing kids for school and so on. I managed because of the strong support from my marital family.”

Akeina recalled a meeting held in Kohima. “NABARD officials wanted me to attend a meeting, where the RBI governor was scheduled to speak. I was in my eighth month of pregnancy with my second child. I was not sure if I could manage the travel and also sit in the meeting for a long time. But they persuaded me to go. After the meeting I fell ill and had to be admitted to a local hospital, but fortunately I survived the stress.”

## **Gender, development and church**

Akeina narrated two episodes that are worth reflecting upon. “We had a meeting in 2014 to celebrate 100 years of Rongmei Christianity. The church decided to felicitate past as well as present leaders who had made significant contributions to Rongmei Christianity in its 100-year journey in Manipur, Assam and Nagaland. It pained me to see that among more than 100 leaders who were felicitated, there was only one lady Aram Pamei, who had worked for human rights.

About a year later, in January 2015, we had a women’s conference at Noney in Manipur, where men and women Rongmei Christians had assembled. It was a gathering of more than 15,000 women, where I was one of the speakers. I challenged them in my speech. I asked the audience how many of them had given their best to Rongmei Christianity. Hundreds of hands went up. Then I asked why among the 100 persons felicitated in 2014, there was only one woman. The audience greeted my speech with a big applause. I believe the senior leaders in the church also took a positive note of the points I raised. I hope that the gender perspective would change.”

### **About Akeina Gonmei**

- Successfully initiated community development through the church and works among Rongmei Nagas in Peren district and parts of Tenning in Nagaland
- Pioneered formation of self-help groups in Nagaland, by bringing women together
- Introduced wadi cultivation in place of slash-and-burn jhum cultivation
- Development interventions include livelihood promotion, health, water and sanitation
- Inclusive approach in all activities and interventions

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