

The Rise of Modern Political Institutions in Tseminyu and the Role of Rengma Civil Society in the Demand for a Separate Rengma District

Sinyhunlo Keppen¹, Dr. Shonreiphy Longvah²

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, St. Joseph University, Chumoükedima, Nagaland, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, St. Joseph University, Chumoükedima, Nagaland, India

ABSTRACT: This study examines the emergence of modern political institutions in the Tseminyu sub-division and the pivotal role played by Rengma civil society in advocating for a separate Rengma district. In the Tseminyu context, modern political institutions refer state-recognized administrative bodies, electoral systems, and representative governance structures such as the office of the Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC), elected village councils that have gradually replaced traditional village councils and customary leadership rooted in clan authority and oral traditions. Their establishment reflects a broader shift from indigenous self-regulation to formalized, state-integrated political systems.

The research explores how Rengma organizations—particularly tribal councils, student unions, and women’s bodies—have played a dual role as cultural custodians and political advocates. Their persistent mobilization for district status is understood not only as an administrative demand but as a call for historical recognition, political inclusion, and protection of identity. Drawing from oral histories, archival records, and field-based narratives, the study highlights the community’s negotiation with state mechanisms while maintaining internal cohesion.

Rather than treating political modernization as a top-down process, this work highlights the agency of Rengma civil society in shaping political structures from below. The movement for a separate district is presented as an assertion of self-determination and localized governance, rooted in both memory and strategic activism. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions on tribal political agency, decentralized governance, and the dynamics of state-tribe relations in Northeast India.

KEYWORDS: Rengma civil society, Modern political Institution, Rengma Hoho, Tseminyu Sub-division, District demand movement, Indigenous governance

I. INTRODUCTION

The creation of modern political institutions has played a critical role in shaping the territorial and administrative aspirations of various communities in Northeast India. Among these, the Rengma Naga have long sought recognition through a distinct district that would address their historical, political, and developmental concerns. This struggle reflects broader patterns of identity assertion, governance, and decentralization in the region. The legacy of colonial rule and the spread of Christianity laid the groundwork for modern political consciousness among the Rengmas. Exposure to Western education and administrative structures enabled the Rengma Nagas to engage with emerging political discourses in the region. As traditional authority structures weakened, a new political awareness emerged, fueling aspirations for self-governance and recognition within broader state mechanisms. The evolution of political institutions among the Rengma Nagas was not merely a byproduct of colonial intervention but also a response to the changing socio-political landscape in which they found themselves. Building upon this historical foundation, the contemporary demand for a Rengma district represents a continuation of this evolving political consciousness and institutional engagement.

A significant milestone in this movement was the transformation of Tseminyu sub-division into a full-fledged district. Tseminyu, historically significant as the homeland of the Rengma Nagas, was granted district status in 2021, marking a crucial step in the administrative reorganization of Nagaland. The elevation of Tseminyu to a district was seen as a long-overdue recognition of the Rengma people’s demand for greater political representation and governance autonomy. This study critically examines the historical context, political mobilization, and institutional mechanisms that have shaped the demand for a Rengma district. By analyzing government policies, community advocacy, and the evolving role of modern political institutions, this study provides insights into the broader processes of administrative restructuring and ethnic assertion in contemporary Nagaland.

Rather than treating political modernization as a top-down process, this work highlights the agency of Rengma civil society in shaping political structures from below. The movement for a separate district is presented as an assertion of self-determination and

The Rise of Modern Political Institutions in Tseminyu and the Role of Rengma Civil Society in the Demand for a Separate Rengma District

localized governance, rooted in both memory and strategic activism. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions on tribal political agency, decentralized governance, and the dynamics of state-tribe relations in Northeast India.

II. THE BIRTH OF TSEMINYU SUB-DIVISION

Although British colonial forces encountered the Naga communities in 1832, it was not until 1923 that the Naga Hills were formally annexed, consolidating them into a single administrative unit with Kohima as the district headquarters (Nshoga 2009, 257). To govern the region, the British introduced the position of Commissioner to assist the Governor, with Deputy Commissioners assigned to individual districts within the Naga Hills and Tribal Areas (NHTA). While Kohima and Mokokchung continued to follow pre-existing administrative practices, Tuensang was subject to distinct regulations, reflecting the evolving complexities of governance.

As Nagaland progressed toward statehood, new interim governance measures became necessary. This culminated in the enactment of the Nagaland (Transitional Provisional) Regulation of 1962, a response to the 16-Point Memorandum submitted by the Naga People's Convention in 1960. This regulation established an "Interim Body" appointed by the Governor of Assam, responsible for overseeing governance until formal elections could be held in accordance with customary tribal traditions. The Interim Body, designed to function for three years unless dissolved earlier, convened at least quarterly and had the authority to review and recommend policies for development and governance. However, issues directly related to Tuensang District could only be discussed with the approval of its representatives (Chaube 2019, 156-160).

The evolution of Tseminyu Sub-Division must be understood within this broader political and administrative framework. From its early colonial governance to its significant role in the post-independence reorganization of Nagaland, Tseminyu has consistently been a focal point of political and territorial negotiation. Its eventual transition from a sub-division to a fully recognized district is a testament to the enduring efforts of the Rengma people to assert their political autonomy and gain formal administrative recognition within the modern state structure.

The chronology of Tseminyu Administrative Headquarter under various heads can be summarized as under:

1. On 18/06/1948 Rengma Bench Court was founded under the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, Assam.
2. On 05/08/1956 the Office of the Political Assistant to Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills, Kohima, Assam was Created.
3. On 19/05/1958 upgraded to Circle Officer under Naga Hills Tuensang Area.
4. On 19/04/1959 upgraded to Assistant Commissioner- II under Naga Hills Tuensang Area.
5. On 10/04/1966 the Extra Assistant Commissioner (EAC) office was inaugurated under Kohima District.
6. On 26/01/1981 Tseminyu was upgraded to Sub-Divisional Office (Civil), SDO (C) under Kohima District.
7. On 18/06/1991 The Additional Deputy Commissioner ADC HQ was inaugurated under Kohima District.
8. Tseminyu District became the 13th district of the state of Nagaland. It was created on December 18, 2021.

III. BRITISH COLONIALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE RENGMA POLITICAL SYSTEM

The traditional Rengma political structure, like those of other Naga tribes, functioned autonomously for centuries, with villages operating as self-reliant and independent entities. Governance was centered on the chief, and his councilors in the form of village councils, who managed administrative, judicial, and religious affairs. However, with the advent of British colonial rule in the Naga Hills, including the Rengma-inhabited areas ushered in significant transformations in governance, society, and cultural practices. Their primary objective was to establish control, maintain law and order, and curb inter-village raids, which, while governed by customary law, were considered a challenge to colonial authority. The introduction of a centralized administration disrupted the traditional Rengma governance system, as decision-making authority was gradually transferred from indigenous institutions to colonial administrators. The role of the village chief, once pivotal, became increasingly ceremonial under British rule.

British colonialism brought modern education and Christianity (By the American Missionaries), profoundly altered the Rengma customs, traditions, and belief systems, also the introduction of Western education created a new class of educated elites who began engaging with colonial authorities, often challenging traditional leadership structures. Christianity. The two World Wars had lasting consequences for the Rengma people. During the First World War, approximately 2,000 Nagas, including 200 Rengmas, were recruited into the Naga Labour Corps to assist the Allied forces in France (Thong 2023). This exposure to global warfare introduced the Nagas to modern military strategies and weapons. The impact was even more pronounced during the Second World War, particularly in the Battle of Kohima in 1944, where many Nagas, including the Rengmas, participated in the resistance against Japanese forces. Their experiences with modern warfare contributed to the development of armed resistance in subsequent Naga political movements.

The creation of Nagaland as a state was primarily driven by the political aspirations of the Naga people rather than considerations of population strength or geographical size. Like other Naga tribes, the Rengma Nagas have a distinct history, culture, traditions,

The Rise of Modern Political Institutions in Tseminyu and the Role of Rengma Civil Society in the Demand for a Separate Rengma District

and customs that define their identity. Historically, they occupied and administered their own ancestral territory, reinforcing their status as an integral Naga tribe.

Additionally, the Rengma Nagas have historically been administratively overshadowed. Before Tseminyu was officially declared a district in 2021, their territory was subsumed under Kohima District, weakening their political visibility and bargaining power. The absence of district status meant that developmental policies and administrative attention were often directed toward regions with stronger political influence.

Nagaland's political landscape has also been shaped by shifting alliances among various Naga tribal groups, with major political parties often influenced by the electoral weight of larger tribes. This has made it difficult for smaller communities like the Rengmas to assert their interests effectively. With only one legislative seat, their ability to negotiate for greater political autonomy and development has been severely restricted.

The delayed recognition of Tseminyu as a district exacerbated these challenges. District status often translates into increased political representation, better infrastructure, and a stronger voice in governance. Unlike other tribes who secured district recognition much earlier, the Rengma Nagas remained without this administrative structure for decades, reinforcing their political marginalization.

The limited representation of the Rengma Nagas in Nagaland's political institutions highlights broader concerns about equitable governance within the state. While the establishment of Tseminyu as a district in 2021 marked a significant step forward, continued efforts are needed to ensure proportional representation, equitable resource allocation, and political inclusivity for smaller Naga tribes. Addressing these concerns would not only strengthen the political fabric of Nagaland but also uphold the principles of fairness and historical recognition upon which the state was founded.

Despite their constrained political influence, the Rengma Nagas remain steadfast in their quest for greater autonomy and representation. Their long history of governance, cultural preservation, and contribution to Naga political movements underscores their rightful place in Nagaland's political discourse. Moving forward, ensuring a more balanced political system that acknowledges and rectifies historical underrepresentation will be critical in fostering a more inclusive and unified Nagaland.

IV. THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE RENGMA CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CREATION OF TSEMINYU DISTRICT

The demand for the creation of a Rengma district in Nagaland has been a long-standing issue, deeply tied to the political, historical, and socio-economic realities of the Rengma Naga community. The absence of district status for Tseminyu until 2021 had resulted in political marginalization and developmental neglect despite the Rengma Nagas' active participation in shaping Naga history and politics. The struggle for district recognition, spanning several decades, reflects the broader dynamics of modern political institutions in Nagaland, where smaller tribes often face structural disadvantages within the state's administrative and electoral framework.

The demand for an independent Rengma district gained significant momentum over the years, particularly due to the perceived neglect by the state government. As noted in *Nagaland Post* on December 18, 2016, the prolonged delay in granting district status deeply disappointed the Rengma community, which saw this as systemic marginalization. In response to the persistent delays, the Rengma Nagas predominantly through its civil society organizations intensified their advocacy through peaceful democratic means. On January 13, 2018, *Nagaland Post* highlighted the growing frustration within the community as they awaited an official announcement, describing the demand as "overdue and more than genuine." The article emphasized that despite the Rengma Nagas' substantial contributions to Naga political and economic affairs, their demands had been repeatedly overlooked. The inability of the government to address these concerns was seen as both a failure of governance and a disregard for historical justice.

A separate district demand for the Rengma people, culminating in the formation of Tseminyu District, was the result of sustained efforts by various civil society organizations. These groups played a crucial role in mobilizing support, engaging in political advocacy, and leading grassroots movements.

A. The Rengma Hoho and its role

The demand for Tseminyu as a district dates back several decades. During an interview with Mr. PollemTep, President of the Rengma Hoho, at his residence in Kohima (May 13, 2022), he provided a historical overview of the movement. He recalled that the idea of district status for Tseminyu was discussed as early as 1987–2003, during the tenure of Mr. Nillo Rengma, the then MLA and Cabinet Minister. However, no formal memorandum was submitted to the government during that period. A more structured approach to the demand emerged under the leadership of Mr. Kegwanyeloin, President of the Rengma Hoho (2006–2012). A committee was briefly formed under KhrielieKevichusa to explore administrative restructuring, which proposed merging Tseminyu (12th Assembly Constituency) with Pughoboto (13th Assembly Constituency) to create a new district. This proposal, however, was ultimately abandoned in favor of advocating for an exclusive district for the Rengma Nagas.

The Rise of Modern Political Institutions in Tseminyu and the Role of Rengma Civil Society in the Demand for a Separate Rengma District

The movement gained momentum under Mr. Kenny Tep, President of the Rengma Hoho, who officially submitted a memorandum to the Government of Nagaland on March 10, 2016, through the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Tseminyu, Mr. Venonyü. At that time, Mr. T.R. Zeliang was the Chief Minister, and Mr. Levi was the MLA representing the region. The demand became more pressing following the creation of Noklak District on December 21, 2017. As a result, the Rengma people intensified their protests, leading to a roadblockade on National Highway 61, which connected Kohima, Wokha, and Mokokchung. However, due to incomplete groundwork for the district's formation, the agitation was called off.

Further pressure was exerted through a third memorandum submitted on August 20, 2020, followed by a meeting with the Chief Minister of Nagaland, Mr. Neiphiu Rio, on August 25, 2020. Due to the Corona pandemic, participation in this meeting was restricted to seven representatives from the Rengma community. During the discussion, Mr. PollemTep acknowledged that minority groups often find themselves at a disadvantage in democratic processes, referring to the Rengma Nagas' demographic distribution across Eastern, Central, and Western Rengma regions. Despite these challenges, the movement received external support from several Naga and allied communities. The Southern Angami Public Organization (SAPO), the Pochury Union, and the Mao Union from Manipur—all part of the Tenyimi Union extended their solidarity, strengthening the legitimacy of the demand.

B. Role of the Rengma Selo Zi (RSZ)

On March 11, 2022, an interview was conducted with Mr. Kenneth Kath, President of the Rengma Selo Zi (RSZ), at his residence in Tseminyu. Reflecting on the organization's role, Mr. Kath emphasized that the demand for a separate Rengma district, particularly Tseminyu District, had been a core objective of the RSZ since its establishment. With a clear mandate to safeguard the integrity and well-being of the Rengma people, the RSZ took a leading role in advocating for this cause. The organization spearheaded numerous initiatives, including rallies, agitations, bandhs, banner campaigns, and walkathons, to highlight the community's demand for district recognition.

One notable initiative was the flag-hoisting campaign conducted in Tseminyu on August 9, 2021. Organized by the RSZ, this event symbolized the Rengma community's collective aspiration for the creation of a separate district. Through such democratic expressions, the RSZ sought to amplify the voices of the Rengma people and reaffirm their long-standing demand, a cause that had been championed by the Rengma Hoho since 2006. The movement culminated in a formal memorandum submitted to the state government in 2016, urging for official recognition of the district. Further demonstrations followed, including a *motor rally* on November 18, 2021, organized by the Rengma Selo Zi (RSZ), an apex youth organization. Approximately 280 vehicles participated in the rally, with banners demanding district recognition. This was followed by a *walkathon* on November 23, 2021, covering 58 kilometers to symbolize the 58 years of Nagaland's statehood. Seventy-three individuals took part in the walkathon, signifying the 73 years since Tseminyu was established as an administrative unit with the creation of the Rengma Bench Court in 1948. The event was a symbolic reminder of the prolonged administrative neglect faced by the Rengma Nagas.

The formation of Tseminyu District stands as a testament to the persistent efforts of civil society organizations like the RSZ, which played a crucial role in mobilizing public support, fostering community solidarity, and engaging with state authorities to realize this long-cherished aspiration. The interview with Mr. Kath underscored how grassroots activism, led by committed organizations, can bring about meaningful political and administrative change, reinforcing the role of civil society in shaping regional governance and identity.

C. Rengma Mothers' Association (RMA) and their role

On March 12, 2022, an interview was conducted with Mrs. Suzy Rengma, President of the Rengma Mothers' Association (RMA). As a key civil society organization, the RMA actively participated in the movement through organized rallies, agitations, and bandhs, demonstrating unwavering support for the collective aspirations of the Rengma people. Their involvement underscored the indispensable role of women-led organizations in mobilizing grassroots support and sustaining the momentum of the movement. On November 16, 2021, the Rengma Mothers Association (RMA) organized a *Prayer Rally* in solidarity with the people's aspirations. The event was attended by representatives from various Rengma organizations, including the Rengma Students' Union, Rengma Selo Zi, and the Rengma GB Association. The participation of women and youth in such rallies underscored the widespread support for the cause within the community. Beyond its contributions to the district demand, the RMA also emphasized its commitment to the empowerment of Rengma women. One significant initiative undertaken during their tenure was the introduction of the first-ever Miss Tseminyu pageant in 2022. This event was envisioned as a platform to encourage and uplift women, fostering confidence, leadership, and visibility for Rengma women within and beyond the community. The association expressed optimism that such initiatives would inspire greater participation of women in social and cultural spheres, reinforcing their role in shaping the future of the region.

The Rise of Modern Political Institutions in Tseminyu and the Role of Rengma Civil Society in the Demand for a Separate Rengma District

D. The Rengma Students' Union (RSU) and its role

The Rengma Students' Union (RSU) was at the forefront of student activism in the movement. During an interview with Mr. Heiko Kent, President of the RSU (May 13, 2022), he emphasized the organization's proactive role in advocating for the district status. The RSU also collaborated with other CSOs and organized multiple rallies, bandhs, agitations, and walkathons, using these democratic means to amplify the voices of the Rengma youth. The student body functioned as a bridge between the younger generation and the larger civil society, ensuring continued engagement with the movement.

After years of sustained advocacy and mobilization, the state government finally responded to the Rengma Nagas' demand. On December 18, 2021, the Government of Nagaland announced the creation of three new districts: Tseminyu, Niuland, and Chümoukedima. For the Rengma community, this decision marked a historic moment and was celebrated as the "Greatest Christmas Gift" from the government. The recognition of Tseminyu as the 13th district of Nagaland fulfilled the long-standing aspirations of the Rengma people and was seen as a demonstration of the government's commitment to equitable development.

The official inauguration of Tseminyu district headquarters took place on February 24, 2022, at the Rengma Sports Association Ground, with Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio as the special guest. The event featured cultural performances, music, and other celebrations, reflecting the significance of the moment for the Rengma community. The achievement of district status is expected to bring about enhanced political representation, improved infrastructure, and greater administrative autonomy, addressing many of the historical grievances of the Rengma Nagas.

V. CONCLUSION

Unlike other parts of India, where linguistic unity was a strong basis for state formation, the demand for separate states in the Northeast was driven by concerns over cultural preservation, self-governance, and autonomy. The Nagas, for instance, had been engaged in a long-standing movement for independence and had rejected integration into Assam. Their demand for a separate state was based not on linguistic distinctiveness but on their historical claim to sovereignty and cultural uniqueness. As a result, Nagaland was created and granted statehood in 1963, not as a linguistic state but as a political resolution to Naga aspirations for self-determination.

The case of the Rengma Naga and their demand for Tseminyu district fits within this larger framework of struggles for political recognition. The prolonged delay in granting district status to Tseminyu reflected systemic challenges that smaller tribal groups face within larger state structures. However, after decades of advocacy and mobilization, the recognition of Tseminyu as Nagaland's 13th district in 2021 marked a significant milestone. It not only addressed historical grievances but also reinforced the broader discourse on the need for equitable political representation for smaller communities within the modern political institutions of the state.

The creation of Tseminyu district marks a significant milestone in the political and administrative history of the Rengma Nagas. It represents a long-overdue recognition of their historical, cultural, and political identity, strengthening their presence within the modern political institutions of Nagaland. However, while the district's formation has opened new avenues for development, governance, and economic prospects, critical questions remain about its long-term impact on the sustainable growth of the Rengma community. The success of this political achievement will ultimately depend on strategic governance, equitable resource allocation, and the effective participation of local stakeholders in decision-making processes. The role of civil society has been instrumental in the Rengma political movement, not only in advocating for district status but also in addressing the larger issue of territorial unification. Rengma civil society organizations have been at the forefront of negotiations, peaceful demonstrations, and political discourse, shaping the aspirations of the community.

REFERENCES

- 1) Chaube, S. K. 2013. *Hill Politics in Northeast India*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Publication.
- 2) Cheerangal, F. 2017. *Traditional Governance in Transition Among the Yimchunger Nagas*. Kohima: The Highlander Books.
- 3) Elwin, Verrier. 1969. *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*. Bombay: Oxford University Press.
- 4) Dube, S. C. 1994. *Tradition and Development*. New Delhi: Vikas Publications.
- 5) Mills, J. P. 1968. *Ao Nagas, Lotha Nagas, Rengma Nagas*. Oxford University Press.
- 6) Nshoga, A. 2009. *Traditional Naga Village System and Its Transformation*. Delhi: Anshah Publishing House.
- 7) Nshoga, A. 2017-18. *Folklores of the Rengma Nagas*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House.
- 8) Singh, Chandrika. 2008. *The Naga Society*. New Delhi: Manas Publications.
- 9) Sema, Hokishe. 1986. *Emergence of Nagaland: Socio-Economic and Political Transformation and the Future*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- 10) Thong, Joseph S. 2022. *Headhunters Culture: Historic Culture of Nagas*. Tseminyu: Jos Compilation and Translation Chamber.

The Rise of Modern Political Institutions in Tseminyu and the Role of Rengma Civil Society in the Demand for a Separate Rengma District

- 11) Nagaland Information Commission. 2020. "The First Nagaland Legislative Assembly Was Constituted In." Nagaland State Assembly. February 27, 2020. <https://nlsic.nagaland.gov.in/index.php/2020/02/27/nagaland-legislative-assembly/>.
- 12) Rengma Hoho. 2020. *Memorandum: Tseminyu District Demand and Justifications Thereof*. Tseminyu: Oking, Nagaland.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.