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Self-Determination and Cultural Continuity Among Naga Tribal Students: Navigating Intergenerational Narratives of Conflict, Trauma and Future Aspirations

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Abstract: This paper examines intergenerational dialogue among Naga tribal students from Nagaland, Northeast India who migrate to metropolitan cities for higher education. The Naga peoples comprise Indigenous tribes, with seventeen major tribes officially recognised within the state of Nagaland, each with distinct languages, customary governance systems, and cultural institutions. Decades of armed conflict, political uncertainty, and life under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) have produced a distinctive culture of intergenerational narrative transmission, in which the historical experiences of one generation shape the perceptions and expectations of the next. The study investigates how that transmission travels with students to urban centres such as Bangalore and Delhi, and how the encounter between inherited understanding and lived experience generates ongoing processes of negotiation, reinterpretation, and forward-looking agency. The study uses Indigenous psychology methodologies with forty-four participants: individual semi-structured interviews with thirty-two Naga students and tribal student union leaders in Bangalore and Delhi, six stu-

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dent-only talking circles drawn from that group, and four mixed intergenerational talking circles in which students sat with twelve elders. Member checking was conducted in two phases and reflexive journalling throughout. Participants were drawn from multiple Naga tribes and span a range of academic levels and migration trajectories across both cities. The analysis draws on Self-Determination Theory, reoriented through Indigenous relational frameworks, to trace how the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are renegotiated across contexts. Four interrelated processes emerge from the findings: the negotiation of inherited conflict narratives against lived encounter; the emergence of tribal student unions as dialogical infrastructures performing a function strikingly analogous to that of the traditional Morung; the reconfiguration of self-determination from deferred political aspiration to present-oriented collective agency; and the cultivation of narrative sovereignty as psychological and cultural self-determination.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; self-determination; Naga tribal students; indigenous psychology; narrative sovereignty; well-being futures

Introduction

In Nagaland and across Naga-inhabited regions of Northeast India, knowledge has long circulated through intergenerational relationships, transmitted not only through formal institutions but through story, shared practice, community deliberation, and everyday social interaction. Such modes of transmission are consistent with Indigenous epistemologies, where learning is embedded in relational and communal contexts rather than confined to formalised systems (Wilson 2008, 7; Kovach 2009, 55–60; Smith 2012, 125–127). These processes unfold across both rural and urban settings, where family, church, student networks, and community organisations all serve as sites of cultural transmission and identity formation (Longkumer 2010, 67–69; Ao 2009, 12–15).

The Naga peoples comprise numerous recognised tribes, with seventeen major tribes officially recognised within Nagaland, each with distinct languages, customary governance systems, and cultural institutions. Naga communities extend beyond Nagaland into neighbouring states in Northeast India and across the India-Myanmar border. Despite this internal diversity, a shared historical experience has taken shape over the past century, marked by colonial encounter, armed conflict, and ongoing political negotiations concerning autonomy, identity, and the terms of coexistence within the Indian state (Baruah 2005, 1–5; Kikon 2009, 271–272).

A further dimension of contemporary Naga life that warrants explicit acknowledgement is the central place of Christianity, predominantly Baptist, in the social, educational, and institutional fabric of Nagaland. Following the arrival of the American Baptist mission in the late nineteenth century, which encountered and partly transformed pre-existing Indigenous religious and ceremonial traditions, Christian

congregations and their associated institutions, including Sunday schools, youth and women's fellowships, denominational schools and colleges, and, in subsequent decades, church-led peacebuilding initiatives have become principal sites where intergenerational narrative life is carried out, contested, and renewed (Longkumer 2010, 23–28). Alongside these, family and clan structures, customary tribal institutions, and a range of civic and political associations all continue to function as locations of intergenerational dialogical life. Intergenerational dialogue in Naga communities is therefore plural in its institutional locations, and any single study addresses only part of that field. The analytical object of this paper is the tribal student union in urban migration, examined as a contemporary form of dialogical infrastructure. The *Morung* is invoked here as a conceptual reference point: an emblematic case of structurally embedded intergenerational engagement in Indigenous Naga life that illuminates what dialogical infrastructure looks like as a category, rather than a direct institutional antecedent from which student unions are genealogically derived. Church-mediated, family-mediated, and customary forms of intergenerational dialogue among Naga families and migrants, each consequential in its own right, would require studies of their own. The present framing is therefore a choice of analytical focus rather than a claim of exhaustive coverage, and the limitation is returned to in the Conclusion.

Nagaland occupies a complex position within independent India, marked by both institutional integration and unresolved political questions. Various Naga political groups have articulated, since before independence, claims to self-determination grounded in a distinct historical and political identity, including demands for greater autonomy, recognition of Naga-inhabited areas beyond existing state boundaries, and a negotiated political settlement (Baruah 2005, 1–5; Kikon 2009, 271–272). Counter-insurgency operations of the 1950s and 1960s, and the imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958, granting extensive powers of search, arrest, and use of force under conditions of declared disturbance, produced a socio-psychological environment in which narratives of resistance, mistrust, and unresolved grievance became embedded in everyday life (Kikon 2009, 274–276). The 1997 ceasefire brought relief from direct violence, but formal resolution remains incomplete, and the Framework Agreement of 2015 has yet to be fully realised in constitutional terms. For Naga families, the telling and retelling of these experiences became a form of cultural continuity. For younger Nagas, born into ceasefire but not resolution, these narratives arrived as inheritance, shaping their perception of identity, of the Indian state, and of what it means to chart a future.

It is against this backdrop that the migration of Naga students to urban India for higher education takes on particular significance. Moving to Bangalore, Delhi, or other metropolitan centres is rarely a straightforward educational decision. Students

cross not only geographical but cultural and psychological boundaries, entering environments where inherited understandings meet the unpredictability of daily encounter. What they find does not always match what they were told, and that gap becomes a space of continuous intergenerational negotiation.

The paper argues that intergenerational dialogue, in this context, does not operate primarily as a set of formal or facilitated exchanges. It unfolds within the everyday institutional life of tribal student unions through which past narratives, present experiences, and future aspirations are brought into sustained dialogue. These unions are identified here as dialogical infrastructures, performing under conditions of urban migration a function strikingly analogous to that of the traditional Morung, which sustained intergenerational engagement as a structural feature of collective life in Naga villages. As Gill (2025c, 8) notes, intergenerational dialogue is one of the primary ways communities deliberate, contest, and renew the meanings by which collective life is sustained, particularly under conditions of historical harm and structural injustice. The Naga case gives that claim specific empirical form.

Conceptual Framework

Dialogue as relational meaning-making

The intellectual roots of dialogue studies lie in several converging traditions, all of which push against the idea that communication is the transfer of information. Bohm (1996, 2–9) treats dialogue as a collective inquiry into shared meaning, in which participants hold their positions lightly enough to be genuinely altered by what emerges. Freire (1970, 69–74) grounds that possibility in the conditions of power that make exchange possible or impossible, arguing that authentic dialogue demands horizontal relationships; on this account dialogue is not a communicative technique but a transformative practice. Buber (1958, 11–15) states the requirement ethically: real dialogue means encountering the other as a full subject rather than as a category or an abstraction. Taken together, these positions treat dialogue as a relational achievement, always shaped by the histories and power relations through which it occurs.

Two concepts carry most of the analytical weight in what follows. Bakhtin's (1981, 342–346) internally persuasive word describes the individual-level process: inherited discourses arrive not as settled truths but as voices in a dialogical field, continuously tested against experience and re-accentuated as individuals make them their own or hold them at critical distance. Gadamer's (1989, 302–307) fusion of horizons describes the social counterpart: when people carrying different historical experiences encounter one another in good faith, what can emerge is an enlarged understanding that neither held before. Ramsbotham (2019, 73–75), also in this journal, enters a

caution that bears directly on this case: the conditions for genuine horizon-fusion may not exist where power imbalances are severe enough to close dialogue before it has begun. The AFSPA and the history of counter-insurgency are precisely the kinds of conditions that demand such caution.

Intergenerational dialogue and its institutional locations

Within this journal, these foundations have been taken up in directions directly relevant to the Naga context. Choi (2025, 19–21) argues that intergenerational dialogue is best understood as an epistemological framework, and demonstrates through qualitative research with Korean workers that dialogue between generations surfaces the taken-for-granted assumptions shaping divergent worldviews. Generalised generational categories are inadequate to this work: it is the specific historical context of each generation, not age alone, that determines what people bring to dialogue (Choi 2025, 37–38). This maps directly onto the Naga case, where generational worldviews have been formed by radically different experiences of armed conflict, ceasefire, and political uncertainty. Evans-Jones (2025, 45–46) develops the concept of dialogical justice, arguing that justice in post-conflict settings cannot be understood as a bounded event aimed at closure but must be conceived as ongoing and intergenerational. The shift he proposes, from resolution to relationship and sustained answerability to inherited harm (Evans-Jones 2025, 63–64), resonates powerfully with the unresolved situation facing Naga communities.

Two further contributions address where such dialogue is housed. Bakare (2025, 112–114) argues that Yoruba intergenerational dialogue systems are not peripheral cultural practices but foundational social architectures through which communities reproduce their values and sustain collective agency (Bakare 2025, 128–130). Kurian (2025, 90–93) brings the question into the Indian context through a study of hereditary folk artists, revealing cultural transmission as a co-creative endeavour in which elders and younger practitioners both shape what is inherited. The fragility she identifies in these intergenerational spaces (Kurian 2025, 106–109) is precisely what tribal student unions are working to address in migration.

Three modes of engagement with inherited narratives

Three modes are in view throughout this paper and should be named at the outset, since the findings distinguish between them consistently.

The first is direct intergenerational dialogue: the in-person, co-present encounter between members of different generations, exemplified here by the mixed talking circles and by elder visits to student spaces in Bangalore and Delhi.

The second is internally mediated engagement with inherited narratives: the intrapersonal work through which younger participants continue to engage with the cautions, worldviews, and framings transmitted to them, in the temporary or sustained absence of the elders who originated them. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981, 342–346) account of the internally persuasive word, this paper treats such engagement as dialogical in character, since inherited discourses retain their dialogical quality precisely because they remain in active tension with experience rather than functioning as closed transmissions. It is intergenerational in its object rather than in its participants.

The third is peer-mediated engagement with inherited narratives: the lateral, same-generation conversation through which students compare, contest, and re-accentuate what each has inherited, and in which framings taken to be shared across Naga communities are sometimes found to be specific to a family or a tribe. This mode is neither internal nor intergenerational in its participants. It is distinguished from the second because collapsing the two obscures a real difference: peer conversation introduces a second speaker who can answer back, where intrapersonal engagement does not, but that speaker belongs to the same generation as the participant and cannot answer for the generation whose narratives are under revision.

Only the first is intergenerational dialogue in the full sense of a co-present exchange in which both generations can be changed by what is said. The second and third are analytically distinct from it and from each other, and are treated here as parts of a broader dialogical field in which inherited voices remain active; the paper identifies which mode is in operation at each point in the findings. The Discussion returns to the analytical and ethical limits of extending the concept of dialogue in this way.

Self-determination: from individual capacity to relational practice

Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000, 227–230) proposes that well-being depends on satisfying three basic needs: autonomy, acting from one's own values rather than external compulsion; competence, experiencing effectiveness in one's environment; and relatedness, meaningful connection with others. SDT provides a productive scaffold for this study, but its individualist framing requires reorientation. Wilson (2008, 7–11) argues that Indigenous epistemologies are fundamentally relational, grounding knowledge, identity, and well-being in relationships with community, ancestors, and the broader social world rather than in the bounded interior self that Western psychology assumes; SDT's three needs have accordingly been criticised for locating the self primarily within the individual organism rather than within relational obligations and identities (Kovach 2009, 55–60; Smith 2012, 74–78). In Naga tribal culture, the self is understood as constituted through community relationships, obligations to kin and tribe, and responsibilities toward ances-

tral heritage (Wilson 2008, 7–11; Longkumer 2010, 67). To act in accordance with these commitments is not a constraint on autonomy but an expression of it.

The study therefore retains SDT's three-need structure while reorienting each need through Indigenous relational frameworks (Wilson 2008; Kovach 2009; Smith 2012). Autonomy becomes relational accountability: acting from community-embedded values rather than external imposition. Competence becomes the capacity to contribute meaningfully to collective life and future. Relatedness is understood as specifically tribal and intergenerational connection, rooted in shared cultural identity and the dialogical transmission of collective memory. This reorientation contributes to the broader project of extending mainstream psychological frameworks to account for Indigenous understandings of selfhood (Smith 2012, 74–80; Kovach 2009, 55–62).

This reorientation, however, is not without its own difficulties, and three should be acknowledged at the outset. First, retaining SDT's three-need architecture while reframing each need through Indigenous relational categories risks preserving the structural primacy of a Western psychological theory even where the substantive content has been altered; critics from within Indigenous methodology have cautioned that such hybrid framings can read as accommodation rather than genuine epistemological decolonisation (Smith 2012, 78–80; Kovach 2009, 58–62). Second, the move to a relational reading of autonomy must be made carefully to avoid romanticising community as uniformly affirming; intra-community pressures, including the pressure to perform a sanctioned identity, can constrain autonomy as much as external imposition. Third, Indigenous epistemologies are themselves plural rather than monolithic, and a study located in one Naga setting should not be read as speaking for Indigenous selfhood as a category. The framework adopted here is therefore offered as an empirically grounded and provisional reorientation suited to this case, rather than as a generalisable replacement for SDT.

Migration as future-making

De Haas (2021, 3–8) repositions migration as a form of agency, shaped by the desire to achieve particular futures and by the structural capacity to pursue them. In the Naga context, migration for higher education is not primarily a response to conditions at home: students do not leave Nagaland primarily to escape, but to equip themselves to return, and the project is oriented toward community development. Sohdi (2025, 72–75) adds, through his analysis of translation as an intergenerational political act, that the movement between ancestral epistemologies and contemporary professional life involves the kind of cultural carrying and renegotiation in which what is transmitted changes in the act of transmission. Intergenerational dialogue is the medium through which inherited narratives, basic psychological needs, and fu-

ture-oriented aspirations are brought into relation with each other. It is within this dialogical process, unfolding in student unions, talking circles, and informal migrant life, that self-determination is both challenged and reconstituted, and that the conditions for well-being futures are made or unmade.

The gap addressed by this study

What remains limited in the literature is empirical attention to how intergenerational dialogue operates where Indigenous youth navigate not only cultural difference but the specific psychological weight of inherited narratives shaped by armed conflict and unresolved political struggle. The present study addresses this gap through work with forty-four participants in Bangalore and Delhi: semi-structured interviews with thirty-two Naga students and tribal student union leaders, six student-only talking circles, and four mixed intergenerational talking circles involving twelve elders.

Methodology

Epistemological positioning

The study is grounded in an Indigenous epistemological orientation. Wilson (2008, 7) describes Indigenous research as ceremony: a relational act of co-construction in which knowledge emerges through relationships rather than being extracted from participants. Reflexive positioning is presented here in the first person to honour the relational accountability that Indigenous methodology requires; the rest of the paper is written in the third person. I am a Naga community member with direct experience of migration for higher education and sustained involvement in tribal student networks in Bangalore. This insider positionality enabled access, linguistic fluency, and relational trust unavailable to an outsider, while also requiring reflexive care: my own inherited narratives about Nagaland, mainland India, and the meaning of education had to be held consciously at the margins of interpretation. Research journaling, regular supervision dialogue, and member-checking all supported this discipline. Kovach (2009, 41–42) argues that Indigenous research from within community frameworks carries a particular responsibility: producing knowledge that serves the community as well as the academy. That obligation shaped every methodological decision here.

Research design and data collection

Data were collected through a three-method design. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with Naga tribal students in Bangalore and Delhi, exploring experiences of migration, engagement with inherited narratives, in-

volvement in student community structures, and aspirations for the future. Interviews ranged from sixty to ninety minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format allowed participants to connect themes in ways a rigid schedule would have suppressed.

Talking circles served as a complementary method, drawing on Indigenous practices of collective dialogue in which each participant speaks without interruption and all voices carry equal weight (Kovach 2009, 98–100). Student-only circles brought together groups of four to eight students from the same city, enabling peer-level reflection; six such circles were conducted across Bangalore and Delhi. Mixed intergenerational circles brought students, including tribal student union leaders, together with tribal elders in the same session; four were conducted in total, involving twelve elders who did not take part in the individual interviews.

These circles made it possible to observe intergenerational dialogue as a live social process rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts. Informal interactions with community members and union officials supplemented the formal data collection throughout. All participants provided informed consent, and descriptions in this article identify participants by tribe, gender, academic level, and city only.

Sampling and analytical approach

Participants were selected through purposive and network-based sampling to capture a range of tribal backgrounds, academic levels, and degrees of community involvement Thirty-two students, including tribal student union leaders, took part in individual interviews: members of the Ao, Angami, and Lotha tribes studying at undergraduate and postgraduate level in Bangalore and Delhi. Participants in the six student-only circles were drawn from this same group. Twelve tribal elders took part in the four mixed intergenerational circles, giving forty-four participants in total. Analytical saturation guided the process: by the final rounds, no new thematic patterns were emerging (Braun and Clarke 2006, 96–97).

Data analysis combined thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77–83), narrative analysis, and dialogical analysis, each adapted to the study's Indigenous epistemological orientation. Themes were understood as patterns of relational meaning rather than discrete content categories. Narrative analysis attended to how participants constructed accounts in relation to the temporal movement between inherited past, experienced present, and imagined future. Dialogical analysis of talking circle data illuminated how meanings were negotiated between participants in real time. Disconfirming cases were incorporated throughout rather than set aside. Member checking was conducted in two phases: individual participants reviewed interview summaries, and preliminary findings were presented to a validation group of stu-

dents and elders participants, in which interpretations were questioned and, in several cases, corrected (Smith 2012, 136–138).

Findings

Intergenerational dialogue among Naga students in migration is not a single, clearly bounded process. It happens in student union meetings and in late-night kitchen conversations; it happens when an elder visits Delhi and sits down with students who have questions they have not known how to ask at home. Four interrelated dimensions of this dialogical life emerged from the data.

Negotiating inherited narratives: between memory and encounter

Across all data sources, one of the most consistent patterns was the extent to which students arrived in other Indian cities carrying a set of expectations shaped by generations of familial and community storytelling. These were not primarily the product of explicit political instruction. They were embedded in the texture of everyday life at home, in the cautions offered before departure, in stories at family gatherings, in warnings from older siblings who had already made the journey. They functioned as anticipatory knowledge, a perceptual frame through which new experiences would initially be processed and evaluated. This pattern was consistent across tribal backgrounds and across both cities, suggesting it reflects a broader socio-political culture shaped by generations of conflict and its aftermath.

An Angami male postgraduate student in Delhi described how this inherited frame, encountered absorbed across years of family and community storytelling rather than through any single conversation with an elder, shaped his initial orientation:

> 'Growing up, the way people talked about going to the mainland was not like going somewhere new. It was like going somewhere you already knew was not fully for you. We were told to be careful, to stay together, not to trust easily. It was not fear exactly. But it was always there in the background, this awareness that we are different, that we carry something they do not understand.'

This awareness drew on real histories of discrimination and racial othering that Northeast Indian students continue to encounter in urban India. But it was also a frame, and frames shape what one notices. For students whose families had lived through AFSPA-era militarisation, the figure of mainland India carried historical weight that could not simply be set aside on arrival.

Yet the encounter with urban life did not always confirm what students had been told, and the work of revising those inherited frames was, for many participants, internally mediated which is a sustained intrapersonal negotiation with voices that were not physically present but remained narratively active. An Ao male undergraduate in Bangalore described his disorientation in the early weeks:

> 'I came expecting it to be difficult in a certain way. Racism, not being accepted. And yes, some of that is there. But it is more complicated than I expected. Some people are ignorant, some are curious, some become real friends. I had to rethink many things I was told. Not throw them away but rethink them.'

Bakhtin (1981, 342–346) describes this through the internally persuasive word: inherited discourses do not function as settled truths but as voices that must be engaged and either made one's own or held at critical distance. Gadamer (1989, 302–307) frames the social dimension: when people from different historical horizons meet in good faith, what can emerge is an enlarged understanding that neither carried before. From an SDT perspective, this process of critical engagement with inherited framings, while remaining accountable to community values, is itself an exercise of autonomy within a relational Indigenous frame (Wilson 2008, 7–11).

A Lotha male postgraduate student in Delhi, four years into his migration, reflected on how his understanding shifted through conversation in a mixed intergenerational talking circle:

> 'When I first came, I kept my distance from people who were not Naga. But over time I started asking myself: Is this caution coming from what happened to my grandparents, or from what is actually happening to me? That is a question I could not have asked alone. I asked it here, in the union, with my seniors, and sometimes with the elders who came to visit. They did not always give me the same answer. Some said be careful, some said be open. But the conversation itself changed how I think.'

What this participant describes is direct dialogue with elders in a co-present setting, but it is direct dialogue that takes its character from the internally mediated engagement that preceded it: the question he could not have asked alone had been forming through years of internal reckoning with inherited cautions. The dialogue here is generative precisely because it does not resolve into a single authoritative transmission. Elders themselves hold differentiated, sometimes contradictory, views. This resonates with Choi's (2025, 38–39) argument that sustainable intergenerational relationships are built not through the elimination of generational differences

but by creating conditions in which those differences can be recognised and worked through.

Tribal student unions as dialogical infrastructures: a function analogous to the *Morung*

The *Morung* was a central institution in traditional Naga village life: a communal space in which young men lived, worked, and learned together under the guidance of elders, sustaining intergenerational engagement as a structural feature of collective life rather than an occasional activity (Longkumer 2010, 67–69). What made it effective was not any single programme within it but the quality of its everyday social texture: different generations sharing the same space and concerns over sustained periods of time.

Tribal student unions in Bangalore and Delhi perform a strikingly analogous function. They are not simply organisational bodies that coordinate cultural events or advocate for student welfare. They are the primary sites where intergenerational dialogue is embedded in the structures of everyday migrant life. An Angami female student union leader in Bangalore explained:

> 'The union is not just an organisation. It is where we live as a community away from home. The seniors teach the juniors, how to navigate the city, how to study, how to handle discrimination, how to keep our culture alive here. And the elders who come to visit, or who are settled here, they come to the union also. It becomes the place where the generations meet.'

The clearest examples of direct intergenerational dialogue in the data come from these settings. In one instance described by multiple participants in the Delhi community, a visiting elder who had been involved in the Naga political movement sat with a group of students in a talking circle. The exchange that followed, in which students asked about his experiences of conflict and he asked them about their experiences of mainstream India, was described by several participants as among the most significant conversations of their time in the city. An Ao male undergraduate in Delhi captured what distinguished these spaces from more generic social belonging:

> 'When the elders come and sit with us, it is not like a lecture. They share; we share. They are also learning from us, learning what it is like now, what we face here. And we are learning from them what was before, what they carried, what they gave up. It goes both ways. That is what makes it real dialogue.'

The relatedness need is profoundly implicated here (Deci and Ryan 2000, 235–237). Students who described feeling isolated or culturally invisible in mainstream university environments consistently identified the tribal student union as the place where this isolation was overcome. As Kurian (2025, 93) observes in her study of Indian folk-art communities, the relational space in which intergenerational transmission occurs is itself fragile and requires deliberate sustaining; its erosion is not merely cultural loss but psychological harm. The competence need is addressed through the practical mentoring that senior students provide to newcomers, extending well beyond academic guidance to include navigating racial discrimination, maintaining cultural practice in an unsupportive environment, and representing the Naga community professionally. Bakare (2025, 128–130) argues that Indigenous dialogue systems function as foundational social architectures through which communities reproduce their values. The tribal student union exemplifies exactly this quality.

Reconfiguring self-determination: from political aspiration to lived agency

Self-determination carries multiple registers of meaning in these communities. For elder participants, it remained primarily a political category: the ongoing claim for autonomy, recognition of Naga-inhabited areas, and a negotiated settlement. For younger students, the political dimension coexisted with a more immediate understanding of self-determination as something that also had to be enacted in the present, through the choices and commitments of daily life.

The shift was most often articulated in an internal, reflective register with students working through what self-determination now meant for them, in light of how their elders had spoken of it. An Angami female postgraduate student in Bangalore, completing a master's in public policy, articulated this internally mediated generational shift:

> 'Self-determination is not just a political word for us. It is also about whether I can actually make choices about my own life, what I study, where I go, what I do with what I learn. In the city, there are so many things that make you feel you do not belong, that the system is not built for you. But I choose to be here, I choose to study this, and I choose to take it home. That choosing is also self-determination.'

Her educational project is entirely oriented toward return and community contribution; her autonomous agency is inseparable from communal commitment. This reflects the SDT autonomy need as reoriented through a relational Indigenous frame: not independence from community but the capacity to act from within it, from

one's own deeply held values (Wilson 2008, 7–11; Deci and Ryan 2000, 229–231). Where this autonomy was frustrated, through racial discrimination or institutional indifference, multiple participants described this not only as personal constraint but as a challenge to the community's collective capacity to shape its own future.

The productive dialogue between generational understandings was most visible in the mixed talking circles. Elders described self-determination as requiring patience and collective endurance; students consistently offered a more immediate counterpoint: self-determination must also be enacted now. The same theme was returned to in direct intergenerational encounter. A senior Naga community elder, speaking in a mixed talking circle in Delhi, reflected:

> 'We fought for something that was not yet there. These young people are building something that is already beginning. Both are necessary. When we sit together and talk about it, what we sacrificed, what they are doing, I think we understand each other better than we would if we did not have these conversations. The dialogue itself is part of the self-determination.'

Intergenerational dialogue is not simply a means toward self-determination but a practice of it: an exercise of collective agency in the face of historical and political uncertainty. Evans-Jones (2025, 63–64) argues that what matters in peacebuilding is not whether formal political settlement has been achieved but whether communities remain in sustained, accountable relationship with their own histories. The talking circle is a small but genuine instance of this.

Narrative sovereignty: reclaiming the right to define the self

Narrative sovereignty, the capacity of individuals and communities to define their own identities and histories rather than having those definitions imposed from outside (Episkenew 2009, 1–8), emerged as a consistent preoccupation in the data. For Naga students in urban India, this capacity is under pressure from two directions simultaneously: external stereotyping that positions Northeast Indian people as culturally foreign within their own country, and from within the inherited narrative field, where community discourses shaped by specific historical experiences may not account fully for contemporary urban lives.

An Ao male undergraduate in Bangalore described his response to the external pressure:

> 'People have assumptions about us, that we eat strange food, that we are not really Indian, that we are simple people from the hills. I do not

> argue with this directly. I just show who I am, how I speak, what I know, what I care about. My presence is itself a statement.'

The internal dimension was equally visible. Several participants described discovering, through conversation with students from different tribes, that narratives they had understood as universal Naga truths were specific to their own tribe or family. This is peer-mediated engagement with inherited narratives in the sense set out in the conceptual framework. Its participants belong to a single generation and no elder is present to answer, so it is not itself intergenerational dialogue. What makes it consequential for intergenerational process is that inherited voices are the material under examination, and that students emerge from these lateral conversations better able to distinguish, in what they have been given, what is specific to a family or a tribe from what is shared. An Ao male postgraduate student in Bangalore described the process:

> 'I used to think the way my family sees things is the Naga way. But when I sit with students from other tribes, I realise we have different stories, different ways of understanding the same history. That has not made me less Naga. It has made me more aware of what is specifically mine, and more able to choose what I carry forward.'

What emerges is a reflexive narrative sovereignty: an ongoing, dialogically constituted process through which participants develop a more critical and intentional relationship to what they have inherited. Sohdi (2025, 84–86) argues that intergenerational translation is always a site of both continuity and struggle, where epistemic and cultural boundaries are navigated in ways that sustain collective well-being while exposing tensions around legitimacy and authority. The experiences here illustrate exactly this: productive struggle that generates not the loss of identity but a more agentic relationship to it.

Discussion

Dialogue as infrastructure: beyond the facilitated encounter

The tribal student union reveals a mode of dialogical life that existing literature tends to overlook: one where dialogue is not periodically organised but is a condition of ordinary collective life. The *Morung* operated on exactly this principle, sustaining intergenerational engagement through the simple fact of shared space and shared concerns over time (Longkumer 2010, 67–69). The student union works on the same logic in a new context. What the concept of dialogical infrastructure captures is the structured social arrangements through which dialogue is sustained as an ordinary feature of community life rather than enacted episodically.

Bakare (2025, 128) argues that Indigenous African dialogue subsystems function precisely as infrastructure in this sense. The tribal student union is a Naga instance of the same category, performing in urban migration a function strikingly analogous to the one the *Morung* performed in the village. Gill (2025c, 12–13) observes that meaningful dialogue requires the cultivation of trust and sustained commitment over time. The student union provides these conditions through cultural memory rather than deliberate design. Kurian (2025, 92–93) confirms a parallel dynamic in Indian folk-art families: the relational space in which transmission occurs must be maintained because its dissolution severs the bonds through which identity and resilience are reproduced. What the tribal student union does, often without its members naming it as such, is to maintain that space under conditions of geographical displacement.

Extending SDT: when autonomy is relational

The most theoretically significant finding concerns what autonomy actually means for Naga students. Students who made choices their communities would affirm consistently described these as autonomous; students who felt pressured to perform tribal identity in ways that felt inauthentic described this as constraint, regardless of whether the pressure came from inside or outside the community. The distinction that matters is not between individual and community but between acting from one's own deeply held values and acting under pressure that overrides those values.

Wilson (2008, 7–11) argues that within Indigenous epistemologies well-being emerges from the quality of relationships rather than from independence from them. Deci and Ryan's (2000, 229–230) own distinction between external regulation and identified regulation allows for exactly this reading: fully internalised values, even those originating in tradition and community, are compatible with genuine autonomy. The Naga case grounds this distinction empirically, and its implications suggest that autonomy as self-governance and autonomy as relational accountability may be fundamentally different orientations toward the self (Smith 2012, 74–80).

Intergenerational dialogue as negotiation, not transmission

The mixed intergenerational talking circles provided the clearest evidence against any account of intergenerational dialogue that treats it as unidirectional. In one session in Delhi, an elder whose understanding of mainland Indians had been shaped by counter-insurgency experience in Nagaland found himself in conversation with a student who had developed a close friendship with a colleague from Uttar Pradesh. The exchange did not produce neat resolution but generated the kind of shared meaning Bohm (1996, 6–9) describes as emerging when participants allow their assumptions to be genuinely suspended. Choi (2025, 38) frames this as the move-

ment from disagreement to co-creation, and Evans-Jones (2025, 47) calls it intergenerational listening as an ethical practice: being genuinely willing to be affected by what one hears. The framework adopted here treats direct intergenerational dialogue, internally mediated engagement with inherited narratives, and peer-mediated engagement with inherited narratives as analytically distinct processes within a broader dialogical field. Grouping them within a single field nonetheless carries weaknesses that must be acknowledged, and three are particularly salient. First, when an inherited narrative is re-accentuated in the elder's absence, the elder cannot respond, contest, or be changed by what the younger participant does with the inheritance; the accountability that Bohm (1996, 6–9) and Evans-Jones (2025, 47) place at the centre of genuine dialogue is asymmetrically distributed. This holds for the peer-mediated mode as much as for the internally mediated one: a second speaker is present who can answer back, but not one from the generation whose narratives are under revision. Second, neither mode carries the affective and embodied texture of co-presence that participants themselves consistently identified as making elder visits and mixed talking circles distinctive, and treating the three modes as belonging to one field should not be allowed to obscure that experiential difference. Third, there is a risk of conceptual overextension: if internal processing of any inherited content counts as intergenerational dialogue, the concept loses analytical purchase. Two restrictions follow. Only the direct mode is described here as intergenerational dialogue without qualification; the other two are described as engagement with inherited narratives, and the word dialogue is used of them only in the Bakhtinian sense of voices held in active tension. And that engagement is claimed only where inherited voices function as active interlocutors, tested, contested, and re-accentuated in relation to lived encounter, rather than as settled background assumptions. Direct dialogue retains a distinctive role in the model both because it is empirically central to participants' own accounts and because it restores the accountability that the other two modes cannot themselves sustain.

Migration as everyday peacebuilding and well-being futures

Mac Ginty (2014, 548–552) argues that sustainable peace is built through the accumulated practices of ordinary social interaction rather than primarily through formal political processes. Galtung (1969, 167–172) frames this structurally: positive peace is the presence of social conditions that enable communities to flourish, not merely the absence of direct violence. The dialogical practices observed here are everyday peacebuilding in exactly these senses. Naga students in Bangalore and Delhi are building the social fabric through which community life can be sustained in the absence of formal political resolution. Evans-Jones (2025, 63–65) proposes dialogical justice as an orientation that evaluates peacebuilding by its capacity for sustained, accountable listening across time. By this standard, what happens in tribal

student unions is genuinely peacebuilding: it sustains accountability for inherited harm and cultivates the relational trust that future political engagement will require.

For Naga students navigating migration, well-being is inseparable from its temporal dimensions. It depends on making sense of the past, feeling capable and connected in the present, and holding a vision of the future that is collectively significant. Intergenerational dialogue is the bridge through which these dimensions are brought into relation. The student who leaves Nagaland intending to learn, gain exposure, and return because her community needs what she is acquiring is performing a temporal integration: using inherited values to orient a future-making project. Gill (2025b) frames this as the core function of intergenerational dialogue in communities marked by historical harm: enabling communities to engage with their pasts without being imprisoned by them, and to imagine futures grounded in who they have been as well as who they intend to become.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how intergenerational dialogue shapes self-determination and well-being among Naga tribal students who migrate for higher education. The argument has been that dialogue, in this context, operates as a living institutional process rather than a discrete communicative event: embedded in the everyday structures of collective life through which inherited narratives, present experiences, and future aspirations are brought into sustained negotiation.

A first contribution is conceptual: the proposal of dialogical infrastructure as a framework for understanding how intergenerational dialogue can be a structural feature of community life. Tribal student unions do not host dialogue but embody it. This extends the work of Bakare (2025, 128–130) on Indigenous African dialogue subsystems and Kurian (2025, 90–93) on cultural transmission as co-creative endeavour, applying their insights to a post-conflict Indigenous migration context. A second contribution is theoretical: the reorientation of SDT through Indigenous relational frameworks. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness take on culturally specific forms in the Naga context that SDT's individualist framing does not fully anticipate. Autonomy is relational accountability. Competence is collective contribution. Relatedness is intergenerational and tribal connection. This responds to established critiques of the individualist assumptions embedded in mainstream psychological theory (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008) and offers a grounded alternative for contexts where the self is constitutively communal.

A third contribution is empirical: a detailed account of how intergenerational dialogue operates in a post-conflict Indigenous migration context that has received limited scholarly attention. The findings regarding the negotiation of inherited conflict

narratives, the tribal student union as a dialogical infrastructure analogous to the *Morung*, the reconfiguration of self-determination, and the cultivation of narrative sovereignty illuminate aspects of well-being futures that are missed when scholarship focuses only on formally facilitated dialogue or on the political dimensions of Indigenous self-determination claims. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample is drawn from two cities only and from participants engaged enough with community structures to be accessible through union networks; students less connected to tribal organisations may have different experiences.

The single-researcher positionality, reflexively managed throughout, inevitably shapes interpretation. A further analytical limit, signalled in the Introduction, is that this paper examines one institutional location of intergenerational dialogue among the several that operate in Naga life. The tribal student union was selected because it is where the students in this study spend most of their collective time in migration, and the Morung is invoked alongside it because it offers a well-documented Indigenous case against which the category of dialogical infrastructure can be specified. That is a choice of analytical focus, and it carries no claim that student unions are genealogically derived from the *Morung*, nor that other locations of intergenerational dialogue matter less. The role of Christian, predominantly Baptist, church institutions in mediating intergenerational narrative life among Naga families and migrants is at least as consequential, is not addressed here, and warrants dedicated study.

Future research might extend the comparative scope across additional migration cities, attend more closely to gender dynamics within student union dialogical processes, and follow students longitudinally to trace how intergenerational narratives evolve across full migration trajectories. The most consequential conversations in these students' lives happened in student union rooms, in late-night kitchen discussions, and in talking circles where elders and students sat together and asked each other questions they could not have asked alone. Those conversations, ordinary, relational, and woven into the fabric of everyday collective life, are where inherited narratives are reworked, where self-determination is enacted, and where well-being futures are imagined and pursued. To overlook them because they are not facilitated by professionals or conducted in purpose-built dialogue spaces is to miss the living tissue of how communities sustain themselves across time.

Declarations

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee (RCEC), CHRIST University, Bengaluru, India, prior to data collection (Approval No. CU: RCEC/00124/08/24)

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The authors used AI-assisted tools during the preparation of this manuscript for language refinement, clarity, and structural editing. All conceptualisation, analysis, interpretation, and substantive writing are the authors' original work. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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