



# Homosexuality in Nagaland: A Sociological Exploration

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## Abstract

This study examines the regulation and lived negotiation of homosexuality within the sociocultural and religious context of Nagaland, a tribal Christian-majority state in Northeast India. Although homosexuality exists across cultures, it remains highly stigmatized in Naga society, where patriarchal kinship structures, Christian moral frameworks, and communal norms collectively reinforce heteronormativity. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 54 participants, including homosexual individuals, heterosexual respondents, and counselors from three urban centers. Thematic analysis reveals that societal attitudes toward homosexuality are shaped by religious morality, notions of natural order, and family expectations. Homosexual individuals commonly experience internalized stigma, identity conflict, and pressure to conform to heterosexual norms, often adopting strategies such as concealment, digital engagement, and lavender marriages. Online spaces function as critical sites of identity negotiation, but also expose individuals to health risks and exploitation. The findings highlight how sexuality is regulated through everyday mechanisms of kinship surveillance, moral discourse, and shame rather than formal institutional control. The study contributes to sociological understandings of heteronormativity in tribal contexts and underscores the need for culturally sensitive mental health services, inclusive healthcare access, and community-based awareness initiatives.

## INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality has existed across cultures and historical periods; nevertheless, same-sex attraction continues to provoke moral, religious, and political debate. Dominant social discourses have frequently associated homosexuality with moral decline, urban decadence, or social disorder. In the Indian context, such perceptions were institutionalized through colonial legislation, most notably Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized same-sex relations as “unnatural”.<sup>[1]</sup> Scholarly explanations of homosexuality have varied widely, ranging from biological and genetic interpretations to sociocultural and constructivist perspectives. Early scientific inquiries attempted to locate genetic or psychological causes,<sup>[2,3]</sup> while the American Psychological Association affirmed sexual orientation as a normal variation of human experience.<sup>[4]</sup>

Homosexuality was subsequently removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973 and from the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases in 1990.<sup>[5]</sup>

Historical attitudes toward homosexuality have also been ambivalent. Classical Greek societies integrated certain forms of same-sex intimacy within civic life, whereas later Judeo-Christian traditions framed homosexuality primarily in moral and theological terms.<sup>[6,7]</sup> Over time, moral condemnation rooted in religious discourse was partially replaced by medicalized and clinical frameworks that pathologized sexuality.<sup>[8]</sup> Despite these shifts, both moral and medical discourses have functioned as mechanisms regulating sexual behavior. Contemporary queer theory challenges such binary constructions by conceptualizing sexuality as socially constructed and embedded within relations of power.

## **The Context: Naga Society and Sexual Norms**

Nagaland, located in Northeast India, is characterized by diverse Naga tribes with deeply rooted customary traditions. Since the late 19 century, extensive missionary activity has led to widespread conversion to Christianity, which now constitutes the dominant religious identity in the region. The term "Naga" encompasses multiple ethnic groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages and inhabiting the lower ranges of the eastern Himalayas across northeast India and northwest Myanmar.<sup>[9]</sup>

Naga social organization is predominantly patrilineal, and many institutional structures are grounded in male authority. Consequently, gender relations are strongly shaped by heteronormative ideals and rigid divisions of gender roles. Masculinity has historically been valorized within Naga culture, while homosexuality has remained socially taboo and culturally marginalized.

The widespread acceptance of Christian doctrine further reinforced conservative interpretations of sexuality, framing homosexuality as sinful and morally deviant. As Nkosi and Masson observe, debates over the moral status of homosexuality have long been contentious within Christian traditions.<sup>[10]</sup> Studies conducted in post-colonial and religious contexts demonstrate how moral regulation of sex-

uality varies across cultural settings. For instance, research in Hong Kong shows that Confucian filial obligations intersect with Christian moral teachings to sustain heteronormativity within an urban context.<sup>[11]</sup> African scholarship similarly documents how Christian discourse and customary morality combine to frame homosexuality as "un-African," producing experiences of exclusion and spiritual conflict.<sup>[10]</sup>

Nagaland, however, presents a distinct moral terrain. Contemporary Naga society represents a syncretic cultural formation in which Christian morality intersects with customary norms, kinship obligations, and communal honor. Here, Christianity is not merely an institutional religion but is deeply interwoven with kinship systems, customary law, and communal identity. Regulation of sexuality, therefore, emerges less through formal ecclesiastical authority and more through kinship surveillance, collective honor, and moral obligation. In Naga society, strong moral frameworks and social silence surrounding sexuality compel many individuals to conceal their sexual orientation.

Although social attitudes toward homosexuality have historically been hostile, increasing exposure to global media, urbanization, education, and generational shifts have begun to reshape public discourse. Processes of modernization and digital connectivity have contributed to the gradual questioning of rigid gender binaries, particularly among younger cohorts.

Despite global scholarship on sexuality, research examining homosexuality within tribal societies of Northeast India remains limited. This study highlights how Christian moral codes acquire unique meanings within small-scale tribal societies where faith, lineage, and community conformity remain mutually reinforcing. It explores how homosexual individuals in Nagaland negotiate identity, stigma, and social expectations. The influence of religion, patriarchy, and cultural norms in shaping societal attitudes and everyday strategies of identity management is examined. The central research question guiding this study is how Christian morality and patriarchal traditions shape the regulation and lived negotiation of homosexuality in Naga society. This question situates the study within broader sociolog-

ical debates concerning religion, heteronormativity, and identity formation.

## **Theoretical Framing of Homosexuality**

The study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to analyze sexuality within a faith-based tribal context. Homosexuality and society's response to it are often embedded in the prevailing patriarchal ethos that hegemonizes the heteronormative gender framework. To understand the issue of homosexuality in Nagaland, the study draws from three central theories, namely the Queer Theory, symbolic interactionism, and status quo bias, while also using shame theory. These theories offer insight into understanding how homosexuality is perceived, negotiated, and challenged within the sociocultural and religious context of Naga society.

Queer theory provides a structural lens for understanding how heteronormativity is reproduced through institutions such as religion, family, and community. It conceptualizes sexuality as fluid and socially constructed rather than biologically predetermined.<sup>[12]</sup> Heterosexuality, according to queer theory, functions as a societal norm, shaping and controlling how sexuality is understood and marginalizing other sexual identities. It examines how institutions such as religion, family, healthcare, and laws are regulated and reinforce beliefs about homosexuality. Hence, this perspective helps us to understand the pre-eminence of heterosexual normativity as the sole accepted form of sexual orientation within Christian precepts and traditional values in the study context. Consequently, stigmatization of homosexuality renders it to the shadows amidst societal pressure and heteronormative expectations.

Symbolic interactionism provides crucial insights into how homosexual identities are socially constructed and performed through everyday interactions. In Blumer's symbolic interactionism, individuals create meaning through social interactions; meanings to him cannot be fixed and can vary according to the individuals.<sup>[13]</sup> How homosexual

individuals in the study area negotiate their identities covertly, in both the private and public spaces, is explored through the lens of symbolic interactionism. The theory helps uncover the tension between societal expectations and personal identity, leading to a better understanding of how individuals adopt heterosexual behavior in public while managing their homosexual behavior.

Status quo bias illuminates resistance to social change, explaining why individuals and institutions maintain traditional norms even when they produce psychological distress. Status quo bias, according to Samuelson and Zeckhauser<sup>[14]</sup>, explains individual and institutional resistance to change and preference for the current state when maintaining it is not in their best interest. Individuals misinterpret the choices at hand, usually choosing the current choice as the safest option, avoiding cognitive effort or psychological attachment to familiar norms. This theory is crucial in explaining certain phenomena, such as why heterosexual individuals uphold traditional values, why gay individuals may remain closeted or enter lavender marriages. It also helps us comprehend the continued resistance of Naga society towards homosexuality and evolving sexual norms. In essence, status quo bias acts as a barrier against acceptance of novel principles and illustrates the psychological consequences of conformity, ranging from internalized homophobia to emotional distress.

The theories collectively give a layered understanding of Naga society where tradition and Christianity are linked with the everyday strategies of homosexual individuals. In addition, aspects of stigma, secrecy, and social rejection are seen through the lens of the shame theory.<sup>[15]</sup> Shame theory further contextualises stigma by demonstrating how internalised shame functions as a mechanism of social control, shaping behaviour, self-perception, and help-seeking patterns.

Together, these theoretical lenses help explain patterns in the findings, including a preference for lavender marriage, hook-up encounters, and the continued resistance of Naga society to accept non-heteronormative identities. These perspectives provide a multi-level understanding of how heter-

onormativity is sustained and negotiated within Naga society.

## **METHODS**

The present study employed a qualitative research design to examine how homosexuality is understood, regulated, and negotiated within the socio-cultural context of Nagaland. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of sexuality. Data were collected from three urban centres - Mokokchung, Dimapur, and Kohima - which represent key sociocultural and administrative hubs of the state.

### **Participants**

A total of 54 participants were interviewed, ranging in age from 16 to 90 years. The sample comprised 25 self-identified homosexual individuals, 25 heterosexual respondents, and 4 counselors (including both theological and clinical practitioners). Heterosexual participants were included to capture prevailing societal attitudes and normative beliefs regarding homosexuality, while counselors were recruited to provide insights into institutional and interpersonal mechanisms through which homosexuality is interpreted, managed, and moralized within the community.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Homosexual participants were recruited through online dating platforms using a swipe-based contact<sup>1</sup> approach. This method was adopted due to the covert nature of homosexual networks and the social stigma surrounding open identification in the study context. Heterosexual respondents were selected using an age-stratified quota sampling technique to ensure representation across different life stages. Counselors were identified through snowball sampling, beginning with initial professional contacts who subsequently referred additional participants.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection involved both online and face-to-

1. An interview method mimicking the swipe-based online dating application such as Tinder.

face interviews. Swipe-based online interviews were conducted with homosexual participants to ensure anonymity and facilitate candid discussion. In-person interviews were conducted with heterosexual respondents and counselors across the three study locations. Semi-structured interview guides were used to explore themes including societal attitudes toward homosexuality, religious and moral framing, family expectations, gender norms, stigma, and experiences of identity negotiation.

### **Data Analysis**

All interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The analytical process involved systematic identification of recurring patterns, followed by coding into broader conceptual categories. Themes related to morality, faith, tradition, stigma, identity negotiation, and social regulation of sexuality were developed iteratively. Comparative analysis across participant groups was conducted to identify convergences, divergences, and contextual variations in perspectives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the intended use of the findings.

Given the sensitive nature of sexuality-related topics and the highly stigmatized context of homosexuality in Nagaland, particular care was taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. No identifying personal information was recorded, and pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting. Online interviews with homosexual participants were conducted through secure communication channels to protect privacy and minimize potential social risk.

For participants below the age of 18, consent procedures followed ethical guidelines appropriate for research involving minors, ensuring voluntary participation and safeguarding well-being. Interviews

were conducted in a respectful and non-judgmental manner, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions that caused discomfort.

All data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. The study was conducted in accordance with principles of confidentiality, respect for persons, and protection from harm.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Sexual Norms as Socially Regulated Structures**

Naga society is characterized by a patriarchal, binary gender system in which cultural traits, norms, and gender roles are deeply embedded within patriarchal values. According to the latest census data, 87.93% of the population in Nagaland identifies as Christian.<sup>[16]</sup> The binary gender framework central to Naga culture is further reinforced by Christian doctrinal teachings that portray homosexuality as sinful. For instance, the Bible states: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."<sup>[17]</sup> Such religious precepts introduce a moral and ethical dimension to the culturally upheld binary gender system, thereby strengthening the heteronormative values prevalent in Naga society. Respondents who identified as spiritual and religious viewed homosexuality as sinful and morally unacceptable. As one 72-year-old heterosexual male respondent stated: "It is not right; This is not according to God's creation."

Homosexuality in Naga society is deeply embedded within a system of social regulation structured by patriarchy, kinship obligations, and Christian moral authority. From a queer theory perspective, sexuality is not understood as a fixed biological reality but as a socially constructed category shaped by power relations and normative discourses. In this context, heteronormativity functions as a dominant regime that defines legitimate identities, relationships, and moral conduct.

Socialization processes play a central role in sustaining this regime. Participants consistently described how family institutions and religious teachings instilled rigid gender binaries and heterosexual expectations from early childhood. These

institutions collectively naturalize heterosexuality by framing it as both morally superior and socially necessary for family continuity and cultural survival. Consequently, homosexuality is positioned not merely as a private identity but as a perceived threat to social order, lineage, and communal stability.

Queer theory helps illuminate how such perceptions are maintained through discursive power. Respondents frequently justified opposition to homosexuality by invoking "natural order" and divine intent, reflecting how moral authority is constructed through religious narratives. These discourses operate as regulatory mechanisms that produce and police normative sexuality. In this sense, stigma functions not simply as prejudice but as a structural tool that maintains heteronormative dominance.

At the same time, the findings also reveal cracks within this regulatory framework. Digital exposure and globalized cultural flows have introduced alternative discourses that challenge binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Some respondents expressed neutral or inclusive attitudes grounded in compassion and non-judgment, suggesting that heteronormativity, while dominant, is not uncontested. From a queer perspective, this indicates an ongoing process of normative destabilization, where traditional moral regimes are gradually renegotiated.

### **Identity Formation as Social Negotiation**

While queer theory explains structural regulation, symbolic interactionism provides insight into how individuals interpret, negotiate, and perform their identities within these constraints. The findings demonstrate that awareness of sexual orientation typically emerges during adolescence, but recognition alone does not translate into acceptance. Instead, identity formation occurs through continuous interaction between personal feelings and social expectations.

Participants' experiences of doubt, regret, and emotional distress reflect the symbolic meanings attached to homosexuality within their social environment. Through everyday interactions with family, peers, and religious institutions, individuals internalize negative labels associated with sexual

nonconformity. These labels shape self-perception, producing what interactionist theory describes as a “spoiled identity,” wherein individuals perceive themselves through the lens of societal stigma.

Identity management, therefore, becomes a strategic process involving concealment, selective disclosure, and role negotiation. Many participants reported adopting dual identities-conforming outwardly to heterosexual expectations while privately acknowledging same-sex attraction. This illustrates how identity is not static but continuously performed in response to situational contexts and anticipated social reactions.

Digital platforms emerged as particularly significant symbolic arenas. Dating applications and social media allowed participants to construct alternative identities that would be impossible in public spaces. Profiles, usernames, and curated self-presentations functioned as symbolic signals enabling individuals to express desire, negotiate belonging, and manage stigma simultaneously.

From an interactionist perspective, these digital interactions represent forms of identity performance. They demonstrate how homosexual identity in Nagaland is actively constructed through repeated social exchanges rather than passively experienced as a fixed condition. At the same time, anonymity reflects the ongoing influence of stigma, indicating that identity performance remains constrained by social surveillance.

### **Persistence of Heteronormativity: Status Quo Bias and Social Conformity**

While symbolic interactionism explains identity negotiation, the persistence of heteronormative structures can be further understood through the concept of status quo bias. This framework suggests that individuals and societies tend to prefer existing social arrangements, even when they produce discomfort or inequality, because change introduces uncertainty and potential social disruption.

The findings strongly support this interpretation. Many heterosexual respondents expressed discomfort toward homosexuality but simultaneously emphasized tolerance as long as social boundaries remained intact. This pattern reflects a preference

for maintaining existing norms while accommodating minimal change - a hallmark of status quo bias.

Among homosexual participants, status quo bias was even more evident in decisions related to marriage and social conformity. Many reported intentions to enter heterosexual marriages despite recognizing their sexual orientation. Such decisions were driven by familial pressure, expectations of lineage continuity, and fear of social exclusion. Lavender marriages thus represent institutionalized forms of conformity, allowing individuals to preserve social legitimacy while concealing identity.

From this perspective, heteronormativity persists not solely because of active hostility but because of collective psychological investment in maintaining familiar social structures. Religious institutions, kinship systems, and cultural expectations reinforce this bias by framing heterosexual marriage as essential for social equilibrium. Consequently, individuals often prioritize social stability over personal authenticity.

### **Stigma, Shame and Health Vulnerabilities**

The intersection of these theoretical dynamics - normative regulation, identity negotiation, and status quo bias - has significant implications for health outcomes. The findings demonstrate that stigma operates as a powerful barrier to healthcare access, particularly in relation to sexual health and mental well-being.

According to a report by the National AIDS Control Organization and the ICMR-National Institute for Research in Digital Health and Data Science,<sup>[18, p4]</sup> Nagaland faces significant challenges related to HIV/AIDS, with a prevalence rate of 1.37% among individuals aged 15 to 49, which is markedly higher than the national average of 0.20%. In the present study, a small minority of respondents acknowledged living with HIV/AIDS, while a considerable minority of respondents reported having sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Despite the serious health risks linked to unsafe sexual behavior in Nagaland, social stigma surrounding HIV-positive status and issues related to sex or sexual orientation remain taboo topics. Healthy practices such as HIV testing,

seeking therapy, and openness about sexuality are frequently viewed through religious constructs of sin, shame, and impurity.

The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS is not confined to the homosexual community alone. According to a report by the Press Trust of India, government officials and NGOs acknowledged that affected orphans face stigma at all levels, including denial of education and healthcare, and are subjected to child labor.<sup>[19]</sup> This pervasive stigma discourages individuals from undergoing testing, for fear of shame and marginalization.

Queer theory highlights how moral discourses surrounding sin and purity construct homosexual bodies as deviant, thereby delegitimizing their health needs. Symbolic Interactionism further explains how internalized stigma shapes self-perception, producing shame that discourages help-seeking behavior. Status quo bias reinforces these patterns by normalizing silence around sexuality, making open discussion socially risky.

As a result, participants frequently avoided HIV testing, mental health support, and open communication about sexual health. This avoidance reflects not individual irresponsibility, but the structural consequences of stigma embedded within religious and cultural frameworks. Health vulnerabilities, therefore, emerge as socially produced inequalities rather than purely behavioral risks.

## **Digital Spaces as Sites of Resistance and Reproduction**

Digital platforms occupy an ambivalent position within this sociocultural landscape. On one hand, they function as counter-spaces that challenge heteronormative control by enabling anonymous connection and identity expression. From a queer theoretical perspective, these spaces destabilize traditional norms by creating alternative networks of belonging beyond family and religious surveillance.

On the other hand, symbolic interactionist analysis reveals that these same spaces reproduce patterns of stigma. The prevalence of anonymous hook-up culture reflects both opportunities for connection and the psychological impact of internalized shame. Participants often described seeking validation through sexual encounters, indicating how

stigma can shape behavioral patterns even within seemingly liberating environments.

Thus, digitalization simultaneously facilitates resistance and perpetuates marginalization, illustrating the complex interplay between structural power and individual agency.

## **Sexuality as a Negotiated Social Reality**

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that homosexuality in Naga society is best understood as a negotiated social reality shaped by intersecting forces of normative regulation, identity interaction, and structural inertia.

Queer theory reveals how heteronormativity operates as a dominant regime sustained through religious discourse and cultural tradition. Symbolic Interactionism explains how individuals actively negotiate their identities within this framework through processes of concealment, performance, and adaptation. Status quo bias illuminates why these structures persist despite growing exposure to alternative perspectives.

At the same time, the study highlights signs of transformation. Digital connectivity, generational change, and emerging inclusive attitudes indicate that sexual norms in Naga society are not static but are gradually evolving. This suggests that social change is occurring through incremental negotiation rather than abrupt disruption.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that a complex interplay of cultural norms, religious authority, social institutions, and emerging global influences shapes homosexuality in Naga society. Rather than existing as an isolated individual experience, sexual identity is deeply embedded within broader systems of social regulation that define moral legitimacy, family responsibility, and acceptable personhood. The findings reveal that heteronormativity is sustained not only through explicit disapproval but also through everyday socialization processes that naturalize gender binaries and reinforce expectations of heterosexual marriage, reproduction, and lineage continuity.

These dynamics reflect the operation of normative power that constructs heterosexuality as the default social order while marginalizing non-conforming identities. Homosexuality is framed not merely as a personal deviation but as a perceived disruption to collective stability, kinship structures, and religious morality. Consequently, stigma in the Naga context operates as a structural mechanism embedded within cultural narratives, institutional practices, and moral discourses rather than solely as interpersonal prejudice.

At the same time, the study highlights that individuals are not passive recipients of these norms. Consistent with symbolic interactionist perspectives, homosexual individuals actively negotiate their identities through processes of concealment, selective disclosure, and adaptive performance. Digital platforms have emerged as crucial symbolic spaces that enable identity exploration, community formation, and resistance to dominant social expectations. Yet these same spaces also reflect the enduring influence of stigma, as anonymity and casual interactions often arise from the need to avoid social surveillance and moral judgment.

The persistence of heteronormative conformity is further explained by status quo bias, which encourages both individuals and communities to maintain familiar social arrangements despite their psychological costs. This bias is evident in the widespread pressure to enter heterosexual marriages, the prevalence of lavender marriage as a survival strategy, and the reluctance to openly challenge existing norms. Such patterns illustrate how social stability is frequently prioritized over personal authenticity, producing ongoing identity conflicts and emotional strain among homosexual individuals.

Importantly, the findings also reveal signs of social transition. Exposure to global discourses through media and digital connectivity is gradually reshaping attitudes, particularly among younger generations. Emerging narratives of tolerance, religious compassion, and individual autonomy indicate that heteronormative structures, while deeply entrenched, are not immutable. Instead, they are undergoing slow but discernible renegotiation.

The study, therefore, concludes that homosexuality in Naga society should be understood not simply as a marginalized identity but as a site of ongoing social negotiation between tradition and change, conformity and resistance, and regulation and agency. Addressing the challenges faced by homosexual individuals requires moving beyond individual-level interventions toward broader cultural and institutional transformation. Efforts to reduce stigma must engage with religious discourse, kinship norms, and community values while fostering inclusive dialogues that reconcile cultural identity with human dignity.

Ultimately, the trajectory of sexual diversity in Naga society will depend on the extent to which social institutions can adapt to evolving understandings of identity while maintaining cultural cohesion. Recognizing sexuality as a socially constructed and dynamically negotiated reality offers a critical pathway toward building a more inclusive and equitable social environment. By examining sexuality within a tribal-Christian context, this study contributes to broader sociological debates on heteronormativity, identity negotiation, and cultural regulation of sexuality. It underscores the need for culturally sensitive mental health support, inclusive healthcare, and community-based awareness initiatives to address stigma and improve well-being.

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## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare relevant to the content of this article.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The study was conceived and designed by Rongpangmen Jamir. Data collection and analysis were performed, and the draft of the manuscript was written by Rongpangmen Jamir and revised by Professor Toshimenla Jamir. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript. This article forms part of the doctoral research requirements for the

PhD thesis of Rongpangmen Jamir at Nagaland University.

## ETHICS APPROVAL

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Human Research Ethical Committee of Nagaland University (Ref. NU/HREC/2025/01/08). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants provided consent for the anonymised publication of their data. For participants under 18 years of age, consent was taken from both the participant and their parents or legal guardians.

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## CONSENT TO PUBLISH

Participants provided consent for the anonymised publication of their data.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the sensitive and confidential nature of interviews with LGBTQ participants in Nagaland, the data are not publicly available. The data may be accessed upon reasonable request to the corresponding author and with the approval of the Human Research Ethical Committee of Nagaland University.

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