

Naga Resistance Movement and the Peace Process in North-East India

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Introduction

Having failed to prevent the partition of the British India into India and Pakistan in 1947, the Indian nationalist elite, who took over political power from the British, aspired to build up a strong and united nation-state in India. As a part of its nation-building effort, the post-colonial Indian state sought to integrate even the backward tribal communities living in the so-called 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas of British India into the Indian Union.¹ Through a carrot and stick policy, the Indian state tried to ensure that majority of indigenous ethnic communities living in the Northeast join the Indian federation. The Nagas, considered by the colonial rulers as backward tribes, however resisted the assimilative policies of the Indian state. By invoking the right to self-determination on the basis of their 'distinct' ethnic identity and 'unique' history, the Nagas defied the Indian state that sought to make them a constituent part of the post-colonial Indian Union. Although they resorted to peaceful forms of protest initially, with the increase in state repression, the Nagas gradually took to arms to fight for independence from the Indian Union.

In the initial years the Indian political leaders expected that the Naga revolt would be easily suppressed by the Indian armed

forces and that the Nagas, like other ethnic communities in the Northeast, would accept India's sovereignty in course of time. But contrary to expectations, the Naga struggle raged for more than four decades, gradually miring the entire region in insurgency and wars of identity. Realizing the limitations of their counterinsurgency strategy in the Naga Hills, the Indian government effected a major policy-shift towards the Naga insurgency in 1990s and made several attempts to negotiate peace with the insurgent groups. It concluded cease-fire agreements with Isak-Muivah (IM) faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) in the year 1997 and later negotiated a similar cease-fire agreement with Khaplang faction of NSCN in 2001. At the time of writing this paper, negotiations were taking place between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) leadership to seek a mutually acceptable solution to the decades-old Naga problem. At the background of the negotiations, however, there simmers a lurking fear that the talks may end up in a deadlock like they did before. Among others, the continuation of inter-tribal and inter-group rivalries among the Nagas and the hostile attitude of neighboring ethnic communities and state governments in the region to the extension of Naga ceasefire agreement to areas beyond Nagaland do pose challenges to the peaceful resolution of the Naga problem. However, because of major changes in some of the parameters that had adversely affected the earlier peace efforts, the prospects of a pragmatic and productive negotiation between the Indian government and the Naga leaders appear to be brighter at the moment than anytime before. The present paper examines the causes for the failure of earlier initiatives and explores the possible solutions for resolving the contentious issues that still stand in the way of a peaceful settlement of the long-running 'India-Naga' problem.

History of Naga Resistance Movement

The name 'Naga' is a generic term that refers to a group of over thirty tribes inhabiting not only Nagaland but also some hilly regions of the states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India. Some of the Naga tribes are also found in the Northwestern parts of Myanmar bordering India. The Naga tribes are reported to have migrated to these places from further east a few thousand years ago. The Naga settlements in the region are

mentioned in the *Royal Chronicles of Manipur* and also in the Ahom *Buranjees*.² Despite racial and cultural similarities, each Naga tribe has its own language and traditional social and political institutions. Till the arrival of the British, most of these communities depended on hunting, food gathering and shifting cultivation for their livelihood. Except among a few of comparatively advanced Naga tribes such as the Angami, Sema and Tangkhul³, which practised wet rice cultivation, the institution of private property was not developed among the Nagas before the arrival of the British. Nor did they have any central political authority like state in the modern sense of the term. Inter-tribal and inter-village conflicts were very common. The practice of head-hunting was quite common among some of these tribes.⁴

For long the British did not evince any interest in extending their authority over the Naga inhabited hill areas of the North-east. They were primarily interested in developing tea plantations in the plains and in the foothills. British officers encountered the hostile Angami Nagas for the first time in 1832, when they were undertaking exploratory tours to build road communication between Assam and Manipur through the Naga Hills.⁵ The development of tea plantations in the region brought them in direct conflict with the Naga tribes. The Nagas, who began to see the growing British interests in the region as encroachment, started raiding and plundering the villages in the plains. They also kidnapped and killed labourers and officers working in the tea plantations. It was primarily to discipline the Nagas and to protect the British colonial subjects and business interests in the plains from the frequent attacks of the marauding Naga tribes that the British forces were compelled to take action against the Nagas.⁶ In some areas the British consciously encouraged the settlement of the Kuki tribes adjacent to the villages inhabited by the British subjects and pitted them against the Naga tribes. The British also used the King of Manipur and the chief of North Cachar Hills to contain the Nagas. Later as they began to realize that unregulated entry and activities of the White and non-tribal Indian settlers in the region would unnecessarily invite confrontations with the savage tribes, the British introduced Inner Line regulations in the Naga and Lushai Hills.⁷ Apart from these measures, the British also undertook several punitive expeditions against the Nagas. By the end of nineteenth century they could subjugate the Naga

resistance and establish authority over them. Later the British set up district level administration in the Naga Hills. Keen to avoid direct interference, the British empowered the village headmen to act on behalf of the British Crown. They even constituted the Naga Hills District Tribal Council to guide the administration of the civil affairs of the Nagas in accordance with Naga traditions. However, the British left the frontier areas inhabited by the Nagas such as Tuensang division and Tirap frontier tract almost un-administered, as they viewed establishment of full-fledged administration in these areas economically unviable and financially burdensome. They also felt that the unadministered areas would act as a buffer between British India and China.

The British government did very little to bring about a change in the social and economic conditions of the Nagas. However, the Christian missionaries, who were allowed to propagate Christianity among the hill tribes, established hospitals and schools in the Naga inhabited areas. The spread of Christianity and establishment of modern political, administrative and educational institutions led to the birth of an educated middle class among the Nagas. From the very first quarter of the twentieth century this newly emerging class, which had no roots in the landed aristocracy and no links with capitalist enterprise⁸, made attempts to rise above tribal loyalties and think in terms of the collective interests of all the Nagas. The First World War in which some Nagas were recruited as labour corps to assist the British forces in different countries also helped the Nagas to be exposed to the modern ideas of nation and nationalism. In 1918 these Nagas, with the assistance of the British officials, formed the Naga Club to work for promoting the interests of the Nagas. When the British government appointed the Simon Commission to ascertain the views of different sections of Indians about the future form of self government, the Naga Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929, asking the British to exclude the Nagas from the political processes taking shape in the Indian subcontinent.⁹ Responding positively to the wishes of the Naga Club, the Government of India Act of 1935 designated the Naga Hills district as an "excluded area" where laws applicable to the rest of British-controlled India would not operate and the Nagas could continue with their own traditional ways of life with little interference from the federal or the provincial government.

It is interesting to note that the Nagas, who fought fiercely against the British in the nineteenth century, gradually began to accept the paternalistic rule of the British and saw the White men as their benefactors. However when the British decided to grant independence to India, the Nagas found it difficult to accept that they would be part of the sovereign Indian State. Their leaders argued that since the Nagas were historically, racially and culturally different from Indians and were never occupied by the Indian rulers, they should be granted freedom as a sovereign country when the British would finally leave India.¹⁰ The Naga Tribal Council, which renamed itself as Naga National Council (NNC) in the year 1946 appealed to the British authorities and the Indian leaders to grant them independence. They discarded the arguments of British officials and Indian leaders who felt that being a small and underdeveloped community, it was better for them to be a part of independent India and negotiate autonomy within the Indian Union. After considerable persuasion and talks, NNC leaders like Aliba Imti and T. Sakhrie signed in June 1947 a Nine-Point Agreement with Akbar Hydari, the then Governor of Assam, wherein it was agreed that ten years after the agreement "the Nagas will be free to decide their future".¹¹

In subsequent years this clause became a subject of controversy among the Nagas and also between the Naga leaders and the succeeding Indian governments. The militant leader Zapo Phizo interpreted the clause to mean that the Nagas had the right to become politically independent after ten years. The NNC delegation met Mahatma Gandhi in July 1947 and even received an assurance that he would stop the Indian government from forcibly integrating the Nagas into the Indian Union. Enraged by the Indian government's disregard for the Nine-Point Agreement, NNC declared independence on August 14, 1947 and intimated the same to the Government of India and to the United Nations Organization. The Indian state, which became independent and sovereign the next day, showed little regard for the aspirations of the Naga leaders and went ahead with the drafting of the Constitution of India disregarding the Nine-Point Agreement. The Constituent Assembly constituted a separate committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the first chief minister of Assam, for suggesting ways and means to accommodate the interests and aspirations of the hill tribes of the region within

parameters of Indian Constitution. The NNC refused to send its representative to the constitutional sub-committee. The Naga leaders rejected the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which disregarded the earlier agreement and made provisions for Autonomous District Councils for the hill tribes within the state of Assam. The NNC conducted a plebiscite in the Naga Hills district in 1951. Declaring that about 99 per cent of the Nagas voted for independence, NNC appealed to India to respect the people's verdict and grant independence to the Nagas. They declined to participate in the Assembly and the Parliamentary Elections held in 1952.

Viewing the Naga resistance as basically a law and order problem created by individuals like Phizo, the Assam government raided the houses of the Naga leaders and banned the Naga newspapers. To escape harassment by the armed forces, several Naga leaders went underground. The militant leaders, through their rigorous propaganda work, spread anti-Indian feelings among the Nagas and inspired them to start civil disobedience movement against the Indian government in 1952. With the spread of Naga unrest in Tuensang division¹² of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and the subsequent deployment of the Assam Rifles¹³, the Naga resistance movement took violent insurrectionary means to achieve its goals.

After the murder of T. Sakhrie, the moderate Naga leader, in January 1956, NNC came increasingly under the control of militant leaders like Phizo. The Naga militants formed the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) in 1956 and initiated armed insurrection to carry ahead their struggle for independence. Within a few years the Naga movement, which was initially strong only in the Naga Hills district, spread to Tuensang Frontier Division and to the Naga inhabited areas in Manipur. To contain the growing militant activities, the Indian government deployed the army and enacted several 'black' laws such as the Assam Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous Districts) Act 1953, the Assam Disturbed Areas Act 1955, Armed Forces (Assam, Manipur) Special Powers Act 1958 etc., equipping the armed forces with more and more powers to deal with insurgents. Taking advantage of the special powers assigned to them, the armed forces resorted to blatant violation of human rights, by committing acts of rape, murder, arson, loot and forced labor.¹⁴

Despite the odds against it, the NNC chose to continue its struggle. The formation of Nagaland in 1963 as a separate state within the Indian Union under the Ministry of External Affairs could not satisfy the militants' urge for freedom. Later in 1964 responding to the appeals of Naga Peace Mission, NNC agreed to a cease-fire agreement with the Government of India and engaged in negotiations with Indian state for about 18 months. However, the peace talks failed to achieve any break-through because the Government of India insisted on solutions within the framework of the Indian Constitution and the NNC was not prepared to accept anything less than independence. The breakdown of talks led to the resignation and replacement of the FGN leadership. With the murder of Kaito Sema, the former defense minister of FGN, the Sema leaders like Khukhato Sukhai and Scata Swu broke away from the NNC and formed the Revolutionary Government of Nagaland in 1966. Later they negotiated with the Government of India and gave up the struggle.¹⁵

The Naga militants utilized India's enmity with Pakistan and China to seek moral and material support from them for continuing their struggle against the Indian state. However, the victory of India over Pakistan in 1971 and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh partially weakened the external support base of NNC, which had already become weak due to internal dissensions. Taking advantage of their weakness, in 1972 the Indian government banned NNC, FGN and other militant organizations. Contrary to the spirit of the Sixteen Point Agreement, the state of Nagaland was transferred from the Ministry of External Affairs to the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Government of India imposed President's Rule in Nagaland in 1975 and went ahead with ruthless army operations. The imposition of National Emergency and further concentration of executive powers in the hands of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave further teeth to counter insurgency operations. During this critical period, a section of the NNC leaders came out and signed the Shillong Accord in November 1975. The Accord stated that the underground militants "on their volition, accept, without condition, the Constitution of India" and that they even agreed to surrender arms in order to prepare the ground for future talks with the Indian government. The signatories of the accord were alleged to be close to Phizo.¹⁶ Although Phizo was aware of the contents of the Shillong Accord,

he neither openly endorsed it, nor unreservedly condemned it. The content of the Accord and the silence of Phizo irritated certain radical elements within NNC. Leaders like Isaac Swu and Th. Muivah openly denounced the Shillong Accord and the Phizo leadership and braving all threats from the supporters of the accord within NNC, they decided to carry ahead the militant movement for independence. By aligning with Khaplang, the leader of Konyak Nagas, the two radical leaders formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980. By initiating several radical and populist programmes/reforms in the fields of economy, culture and politics, very soon NSCN emerged as a powerful and popular Naga militant organization. However, NSCN suffered a jolt in 1988 with the split of the organization into two factions — one led by Swu and Th. Muivah and the other by Khaplang.¹⁷ Due to ideological and personality clashes, NNC also had split into factions.

At present there are four Naga militant groups — NNC (Adino), NNC (Panger), NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) — who claim to be representing the Naga cause. Of the four, undoubtedly the NSCN (IM) group enjoys maximum strength and hold over the Nagas. By strengthening its organizing and military capabilities, by building alliances with other insurgent groups in the North-east and by internationalizing the Naga problem through forums such as the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO) and other international forums of the indigenous peoples, NSCN (IM) has become so powerful that no solution to the Naga problem can be conceived of without engaging this outfit.

Experience of Earlier Accords and Peace Negotiations

Apart from the use of force as a means, the Indian leaders starting from Jawaharlal Nehru made intermittent efforts to bring the agitating Nagas to the negotiating table by trying to win over the moderate elements among the Nagas. In late 1950s, when the Naga Peoples' Convention (NPC), defying the NNC's *diktat*, came forward with a 16 point proposal, the Indian government under the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru entered into an agreement with the NPC in 1960. The agreement proposed the idea of making Naga Hills Tuensang Area into a separate state of

Nagaland within the Indian Union. According to the agreement no Act or law passed by the Union Parliament affecting the Naga religious or social practices, their customary laws and procedures, civil and criminal justice and ownership and transfer of land and resources, shall have any legal force in Nagaland unless accepted by a majority vote of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. The Indian government accepted NPC's proposals concerning local self-government, administration of justice and continuation of the Inner Line Regulation rules. The Indian government also accepted the proposal to place Nagaland under the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India. However, no commitment was given with regard to the proposal for inclusion of the contiguous areas inhabited by the Nagas as a part of the state of Nagaland.¹⁸ Accordingly, the Government of India passed a bill in the parliament and made necessary changes in the Indian Constitution to facilitate the birth of Nagaland as a separate state in 1963. Although the moderates were satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations and participated in the Assembly and Parliamentary elections held in 1960s, the NNC militants denounced the agreement as a compromise. Their decision to continue the struggle for independence eluded prospects for peace.

The second initiative to restore peace and facilitate talks between the Naga militants and the Government of India was taken by the Nagaland Peace Mission, which came into existence due to the efforts of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council. In 1964 the Government of India and the Federal Government of Nagaland signed a ceasefire agreement to facilitate peace talks. The Peace Mission, which included eminent persons like Jaya Prakash Narayan, Bimala Prasad Chaliha and Rev. Michael Scott, placed its proposals before the two parties for pursuance of lasting peace. The Mission suggested, among others, that the Nagas on their own volition would decide to participate in the Union of India and mutually settle terms and conditions for that purpose. On the other hand, the Government of India would consider recasting and adopting a new pattern and structure of relationship with Nagaland, which will satisfy the political aspirations of all sections of Nagas.¹⁹ Elaborating the idea of volition mentioned in the peace proposals, Jaya Prakash Narayan clarified: "We are not asking that this voluntary participation in the Indian Union should

be unconditional. This voluntary participation would follow agreement on the pattern of the future relationship between Nagaland and the Government of India."²⁰

Even Rev. Michael Scott, who was considered a supporter of Naga militants, expressed the view that Nagas enjoyed considerable autonomy in the fields that affect them the most. He said: "If Nagaland, in its present stage of development, has no economic resources enabling it to be independent in the real sense of the word, Naga leaders would be honest and realistic if they face these facts of life and pursue a policy which will bring peace to the people and will also give a reasonable prospect of achieving progress and growth."²¹ He was also forthright in suggesting that the Naga leaders required a clear conception and precise picture of what is meant by independence and sovereignty. At the same time, he pointed out to the Indian government that there was no substance in insisting on solution within the framework of Indian Constitution, for there is nothing sacrosanct about the Indian Constitution. What needs to be insisted on is solution within the Indian Union, and not necessarily within the Indian Constitution. Suggesting different forms of relationship that India and Nagas could think of, he made a mention of a form of relationship for which no precedent existed in the world. That involved entering into an accord with the Naga people, giving them sovereign status and at the same time retaining them within the confederation or within the Indian Union.²²

Despite sincere efforts made by the Peace Mission members to come out with the fairest and most practical solutions possible at that time, the peace talks between the Government of India and the Naga militants ended in a deadlock, primarily because of the continued misapprehension among the parties and their reluctance to think and act above their stated positions.

Apart from the Peace Mission members, another effort to mediate between Indian government and the Nagas was made by one Rungsung Suisa, a moderate Tangkhul Naga leader, popularly known as 'Uncle Suisa'. In the mid-1960s, after consulting Indira Gandhi and other leaders of the Congress Party, he came out with an idea of link relationship between India and Nagaland, wherein the parties could reach some kind of federal agreement with regard to administration of certain subjects like defense, foreign relations, communications etc. and leave to Nagaland all

other subjects of immediate significance. He suggested that Nagaland would not take any steps inimical to the interests of India and that India should assist Nagaland in becoming self-sufficient. He sent his proposals to the leaders of Indian government as well as to the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN). The militant leaders of NNC and FGN, who were not prepared to accept anything less than full independence, paid no heed to his pragmatic suggestion. In 1988 when Indian an emissary came to NSCN leaders with a proposal along Suisa's line, Khaplang split the NSCN by alleging that Th. Muivah and Isak Swu had virtually accepted the Suisa proposal and were ready to trade Naga interests with India. Muivah and Swu openly denounced Khaplang's allegations and swore by their commitment to continue the struggle for Naga independence. It took almost two decades for the NSCN (IM) leadership to accept that there was some substance in Suisa's proposals.²³

The failure of such peace initiatives made by the third parties resulted in the breakdown of the cease-fire and renewal of both insurgency and counter insurgency operations. India's success in Indo-Pakistan War of 1971, the birth of Bangladesh, imposition of President's rule in Nagaland and gradual concentration of all powers in the hands of Indira Gandhi, especially after the declaration of the Emergency in 1975, created such a suffocating situation for the Nagas that in the mid-1970s a few underground Naga leaders came out to negotiate with the Government of India and concluded an accord, popularly known as the Shillong Accord, in the year 1975. The accord stated that the representatives of the underground organizations conveyed their decision, of their own volition, to accept, without condition, the Constitution of India. It was agreed that the Naga militants would hand over their arms and formulate issues for final settlement with the Indian government.

It was obvious that the accord was made under duress. Although the underground leaders who signed the accord were in touch with Phizo, the accord as such was not signed officially by NNC or FGN. As explained earlier, the accord intensified the ideological and leadership struggles and led to the formation of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). The Shillong Accord came in for such sharp criticism that the very soon NNC was forced to disassociate itself from the members who signed

the accord. The exercise did not pay any dividends to the Indian government. After the accord the NNC was considerably weakened, but the insurgency continued in a more organized and militant manner under the NSCN leadership. With the change of leadership from Angamis to Tangkhuls and Konyaks, the Naga resistance, which was confined earlier basically to Nagaland and the hills of Manipur spread to parts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Thus in a bitter way the Indian state realized that peace could not be imposed by entering into an accord with a section of the militants through the bullying tactics. No accord with individuals claiming to be representing the Nagas can ensure peace, so long as the Naga community as a whole does not perceive it as equal, just and honourable. It took nearly two decades for the Indian government to undo its mistake and bring the Naga militants again to the negotiating table.

Changing International and Regional Scenarios

Recent structural changes in regional and international scenarios have, in recent years, compelled both the Indian government and the Naga militants to reconsider their positions regarding the Naga problem. World events like the collapse of the Soviet Union, disappearance of the socialist bloc, emergence of a unipolar world, strengthening of market forces etc. have forced India to revise its security and developmental strategies. At home, the foreign exchange crisis of the early 1990s, the growing strength of the Indian monopolies and the need to explore new markets to compensate for the loss of secure markets of the socialist camp have compelled the Indian policy makers to give up the façade of socialism/mixed economy and embrace the policy of liberalization and globalization. Realizing the limitations of passive dependence on the Western powers, India has begun to look towards East Asia for economic growth and opportunities. India's need to strengthen ties with China, Japan and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries has in turn given birth to the Look East Policy in recent years. With time, the Indian policy makers have come to realize the strategic, economic and cultural importance of the Northeast Indian states for the success of its Look East strategy. It has come to appreciate that the historical, geographical, racial and cultural links that this region has with

China and ASEAN countries can well be assets to India. This realization has compelled the Indian establishment to reconsider its policy towards the northeast.²⁴

Thus, economic considerations have forced India to revise its decades-old policy of looking at Northeast India from a mere defense perspective. Since 1990s concrete steps have been initiated to strengthen transport, communications and other infrastructure in the region in order to facilitate greater economic and psychological integration of the region and its people into the so called 'Indian mainstream'. The policy makers have also recognized the need for effective governance for the success of developmental and welfare policies in the region. The efforts and intentions of the leaders in the Indian capital New Delhi, however, cannot be realized as long as peace eludes this region. Restoring peace in the region, therefore, is very vital for the success of India's Look East policy.²⁵ India has learnt from its experience in the region that insurgency is a political problem, and not a law and order problem. This realization has compelled Indian leaders to explore all possibilities of negotiating peace with the insurgent groups active in the region. The NSCN (IM) being the most organized and powerful insurgent group in the region is but natural that India gives priority to settlement with the NSCN (IM) leadership.

The Naga militants too have their compulsions to look for a solution to the Naga problem through peaceful and political methods. Howsoever heroic may be their struggle, they have realized that they would never be able to pursue the goal of achieving a sovereign Nagaland or Nagalim through violent means. There is a growing feeling among the Naga people that both insurgency and counter insurgency have violated their rights, left them divided along factional and tribal lines, and kept the region underdeveloped and backward. Moreover, for better or worse, the five decades of forced as well as voluntary association with the Indian economy and politics has created a section among them who feel that integration at some level with India is inevitable and advantageous to the Nagas.²⁶ The aversion and suspicion that the Nagas as a whole had against India and the Indians in 1950s have declined over the years, partly because of the impact of Indian education, mass media and films. Decades back, other than the NNC, only church and chiefs exercised influence on the Naga

public opinion. But over the years, several other civil society organizations such as the Naga Hoho, Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), Naga Students' Federation (NSF), Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), the United Committee of Manipur (UCM), All Naga Students' Association of Manipur (ANSAM) etc., have come to play significant roles in the Naga civil society. There is no truth in the allegation that all of them are mere frontal organizations of the Naga militants as they enjoy certain amount of autonomy and there are instances when they did take stands against violence perpetrated by the militants themselves. In recent years, the Naga Baptist Church, Naga Mothers' Association and the Naga Hoho have consistently made efforts to bring an end to inter-tribal and factional quarrels and to build up an atmosphere of peace and reconciliation.²⁷ No Naga insurgent group can now afford to ignore the opinion and aspirations of the Naga people as expressed through these civil society organizations. The Naga civilians have suffered considerably due to counter-insurgency operations and also due to inter- and intra-faction conflicts. The public outrage against the militants' excesses in Mokokchung and Tuensang in 2003 clearly indicates the limits of their tolerance. The Naga militant groups cannot but read the writings on the wall and assess their own actions, policies and programmes.

In addition to these internal considerations, the Naga militants are compelled to pay attention to the hard realities of the changing world order. The regional developments such as the birth of Bangladesh, China's deviation from the socialist path and the growing relations between India and Myanmar have considerably weakened the external support base of the insurgent groups. The anti-terrorist policies pursued by the US and its allies since September 11, 2001 have also made it almost impossible for the 'liberation' struggles to achieve their objectives through violent means. These factors apart, the NSCN (IM)'s leadership has also become aware of the practical difficulties that Nagaland will have to face in the event of it becoming completely independent of India. The leadership now appears to have realized that some kind of dependence on India is inevitable and even necessary for the Nagas at this stage of their development.²⁸ Their willingness to negotiate with India should be seen in the light of all these internal and external compulsions.

Recent Ceasefire and Peace Talks

The initiative to convince the NSCN (IM)'s leadership of the need to seek a political solution to the Naga problem through dialogue was taken by P.V. Narasimha Rao, who happened to be the Prime Minister of India at a crucial period when India was compelled to initiate the policy of liberalization. The Indian government sent emissaries to seek communication with the NSCN (IM) leaders. Despite the frequent changes in governments at the Centre, the efforts to bring the NSCN (IM) to negotiating table continued during Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral regimes also.

The efforts bore fruit with both the Indian government and the NSCN (IM) accepting a cease-fire agreement in 1997. Although the initial agreement was only for a period of three months, the cease-fire was extended periodically to facilitate talks. In 1990s the NSCN (IM) leaders met the successive Indian Prime Ministers and had discussions with Indian emissaries in Bangkok, Osaka, Amsterdam, Zurich, Geneva, Kuala Lumpur and other places.²⁹ In 2003, during Vajpayee's term as the Prime Minister for the first time, the self-exiled leaders of NSCN (IM) — Isak Swu and Th. Muivah — came to India to hold discussions with Indian leadership. Later, when the Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Nagaland, he made a public announcement that India recognized the unique history of the Nagas and expressed his government's support to the peace process.

In 2004 after the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) took over power at the centre, at the invitation of Man Mohan Singh, the present Prime Minister of India, Isak Swu and Th. Muivah visited India and had talks with political leaders, ministers and top government officials. After several decades, the leaders visited Nagaland and held talks with the representatives of the Naga civil society. The Naga leaders spent almost six months in India getting feed back from their own people and negotiating their demands with the Government of India. The Indian government treated the NSCN (IM) leaders, not as terrorists, but as political representatives of the Naga nation. On their part, the Naga leaders promised to come as close to India politically as possible and expected that India would in turn respect their basic concerns and expectations. Despite irritants caused by the violent protests of Meiteis in June 2001 against the proposal for extension of

cease-fire beyond the boundaries of Nagaland, the Naga leaders recognized India's constraints and avoided taking any drastic measures that would impede the peace process. This mature understanding and mutual appreciation on the part of both the Indian and the Naga leadership raise the hope of an amicable and mutually acceptable solution to the decades-old Naga issue.

Obstacles in the Path of Peace

Despite the best intentions of the Indian government and the NSCN (IM)'s leadership, one need not expect that the ongoing political dialogue would end with an amicable settlement in the immediate future. The success of peace talks depends considerably on how ably the parties overcome their own limitations and learn to appreciate others' difficulties and compulsions. It is therefore necessary to discuss the basic impediments that are likely to derail the peace process.

Question of Sovereignty

The Naga militants mobilized the Nagas against the Indian State with the avowed objective of establishing a sovereign Naga nation. They had such a faith in their ability to build their own independent state that they viewed all those individuals — Nagas as well as Indians who expressed doubts about the desirability and possibility of a sovereign Nagaland — as their enemies or traitors to the cause. Neither the autonomous district councils provided in the Indian Constitution nor statehood within the Indian Union could satisfy the Naga militants. They rejected Indira Gandhi's offer of a Bhutan type status to Nagaland and paid no attention to Suisa's proposal.³⁰ All the earlier peace initiatives failed to restore peace because of the uncompromising stand of the Naga militant leaders on the issue of sovereignty.

The militant leaders' fixation with the idea of sovereignty was not, however, shared by all Nagas. The NPC, which came out with its 16-point programme and negotiated with the Indian state for a province of Nagaland within the Indian Union, had support of a section of Nagas. Since the formation of Nagaland, many Nagas have voluntarily participated in the election process and elected their representatives to the state assembly and the Indian

parliament. The administrative, political and economic integration of the region with India has given birth to moderate pro-Indian elite among them, which accepts in principle India's sovereignty over the Nagas. While these moderates may still aspire for greater autonomy, they no longer insist on political independence. Even within NNC, there were moderates who were against pursuing violent means and were ready for some kind of autonomy within the Indian Union. But the militants within NNC muzzled the moderate voices and at times physically liquidated them by branding them as traitors. T. Sakhrie was brutally murdered in 1956 for opposing the violent means advocated by leaders like Phizo. When some underground militants, under pressure from the Government of India, signed the Shillong Accord in 1975 and agreed to abide by the Indian Constitution, the radicals opposed to the accord discarded NNC and established NSCN to carry ahead the goal of independent Nagaland. The campaign of the NSCN subsequently forced even the NNC leaders to disown the Shillong Accord and proclaim that they did not abandon the struggle for Naga independence. The fear of compromise on the issue of sovereignty was so strong that even NSCN split into two factions following a rumour that Th. Muivah was planning to surrender NSCN to India. The militants have apparently become prisoners of their own self-declared goals that they are now afraid that their enemies or their own followers would call foul if they dared to reconsider or deviate from the same.

It now appears that NSCN (IM) has understood the practical problems that the Nagas will have to face if they choose to break away from India. This is perhaps why, in the parleys with the Government of India, its leaders are not harping so much on the demand for sovereignty. They are promising to be as close to India as possible provided India recognizes their right to self-determination and their unique history. Of late Th. Muivah was talking about some sort of special federal relationship with the Indian Union, outside the constitutional framework of India.³¹ Although the NSCN (IM) leaders obtained the consent of different Naga tribal Hohos for the continuation of peace talks on behalf of all the Nagas, whether Muivah and Swu will be able to convince all other parties to agree to a compromise on the issue of independence is not clear at the moment. Since other militant groups such as NNC and NSCN (K) are openly stating that they

will not accept anything less than independence, it now depends on the NSCN (IM) leadership as to how it deals with these discontented voices and mobilise public opinion in its favour.

Integration of Naga Inhabited Areas

The NSCN (IM)'s ability to convince the Nagas of the need to compromise on the issue of independence considerably depends on its success in making the Indian government accept the popular demand of the Nagas for integration of all Naga inhabited areas under one administrative unit. Although there are differences among the Nagas on the issue of sovereignty, there is a near unanimity among all political parties, militant groups and civil society organizations of the Nagas on the issue of integration of all Naga inhabited areas, including those outside the boundaries of the present state of Nagaland. Several resolutions have been passed in support of this demand in Nagaland State Assembly. The United Naga Council, All Naga Students' Association of Manipur and other Naga civil organizations in Manipur are also insisting on this demand. The Naga tribes inhabiting Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have likewise expressed their solidarity with other Nagas living in Northeast India. However, this demand for Greater Nagaland/Nagalim has provoked violent protests by the Meiteis in Manipur. Apart from the Meiteis, the Assamese and the Arunachalese have also expressed their opposition to any move aimed at altering the borders of their states to accommodate the demands of the NSCN (IM). Succumbing to the popular pressures, the state governments in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have declared openly that they would not accept any agreement by the Government of India that altered their state boundaries.³² In such a situation, without seeking some kind of common ground among the communities in conflict, one cannot hope for peaceful solution to the Naga problem.

Historically dispersed over the large tract of hill terrain starting from Lushai Hills on the south to the China border on the north and from Makaw on the east to Mariani on the west, different Naga tribes had different kinds of experiences with the people living in the plains. While it is true that some of the Naga tribes virtually had no contact with the plains, those living in the borders with Assam and Manipur did have some kind of

interaction with the rulers and the people living there. There are historical evidences to show that some Naga tribes challenged the authority of Ahom and Manipur kings and were forced to pay tributes/taxes in kind for sometime to the kings who defeated them. Barring such temporary subservience to external powers, the Naga tribes remained autonomous and in the pre-colonial times the kings in the plains also acknowledged their autonomy and rarely interfered in their internal affairs.

The Nagas at no point of time in history had a unified state of their own. Despite racial and cultural similarities, common political identity among them as Nagas could not emerge in the region till the arrival of the British. As such the notion of common Naga identity is a colonial product and had no historical antecedents. It developed first in the British carved Naga Hills district and after India became independent and as the Naga national movement became militant, it gradually spread to other Naga inhabited areas in the region. Outside Nagaland, the urge to be a part of the Greater Nagaland or 'Nagalim', as the NSCN leaders choose to call it, is very strong in the hill districts of Manipur, but is weak in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Compared to the Naga experience, the Manipuri and the Assamese identities have different historical bases. Although colonialism played a role in their development, these identities had their roots in the experiences of the people living under the precolonial states of the Meiteis, Ahoms, Kochs and Dimasas. Unlike ethnic nationalism of the Nagas, the Assamese and the Manipuri identities were borne out of the composite civic experiences of different ethnic communities subjected to some kind of feudal rule, much before these regions came under the British rule.³³ Those claiming themselves as Assamese or Manipuris did not base their claims on common ethnic or racial identities, but on their collective historical experiences as subjects living under the pre-colonial states. These identities, by their very nature, were multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Where identities are based on civic nationalism, one can see more than one ethnic group identifying itself with such identities. Compared to the Assamese and Manipuri identities, the Arunachalee identity is very recent. It emerged slowly after the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was integrated with Indian Union and named as a separate state of Arunachal Pradesh. This new identity can also be claimed as civic

national identity, as it does not identify itself with particular tribe(s) and it claims to represent all indigenous tribal communities living in Arunchal Pradesh.

In Northeast India one can see the emergence of both civic and ethnic nationalisms. In fact the conflicting territorial claims between the Nagas and their neighbours — the Manipuris, the Assamese and the Arunachalees — can be understood better when juxtaposed as ethnic vis-a-vis civic nationalism.³⁴

It is commendable that NSCN (IM) and the Naga civil society organizations have realized the need to convince their neighbours of their claims. However, if such efforts are to bear fruits, it is essential that they also listen and understand the logic of others and realize the limits of their own stated positions. It makes little sense to claim control over a territory stating that they are the original settlers in the region. The Nagas should realize that many other tribes and non-tribal communities presently inhabit the regions over which the Nagas are staking claims. The concerns of the non-Naga communities for security and their rights over the land where they presently inhabit are of no less significant compared to those of the Nagas. Even in those regions, where majority of the residents happen to be Nagas, the sentiments of the others, who for historical reasons view those regions as part of their composite identity, cannot be wished away. The issue being very sensitive, political maturity demands that the Naga leaders take great care in handling the emotions of all concerned communities. It is necessary to realize that lending direct or indirect support to inhuman acts such as the enforcement of road blockades on the national highways and obstructing the supplies of essential goods to other communities would not create conducive environment for peaceful resolution of the problem of Naga integration. The integration of all Naga inhabited areas could become a reality in future only with the consent of other communities and states in the region and never by coercion or force.

Question of Unity among the Nagas

Another stumbling block in the way of peaceful negotiated settlement to the Naga problem is the lack of unity among the Nagas.³⁵ The history of Naga movement is a witness to several fratricidal struggles among the Nagas along village, tribal, and ideological

lines. At the time of independence there were moderate leaders like Aliba Imti and T. Sakhrie, who were negotiating basically for greater autonomy within the Indian Union, whereas leaders like Phizo gave the clarion call for independence.

In the late fifties and early sixties, while the militants under the leadership of NNC and FGN went ahead with their insurrection, the moderates who rallied around NPC entered into a 16 point agreement with the Indian government. Alongside persons like S.C. Jamir, the former Chief Minister of Nagaland, who claimed that the agreement was the 'bed rock of the Naga movement', there are radicals of NNC and other Naga militant groups who denounced the formation of Nagaland in 1963 as a sell out. Unlike the militants who did not accept anything less than independence, the moderates, while lending support to the demands for more autonomy and for integration of Naga inhabited areas, opposed the idea of secession from the Indian Union.

In the late 1960s, as the efforts of the Peace Mission failed, NNC showed cracks along tribal lines. Following the forced resignation of the Sema leaders from the top positions of NNC and FGN and the subsequent killing of Kaito Sema, former Defense Minister, the Semas disassociated themselves from NNC and announced the formation of Revolutionary Government of Nagaland in 1968. Subsequently their leaders negotiated with the Indian government and gave up the insurgent path. Again in the mid-1970s, when some NNC leaders, allegedly with the blessings of Phizo, negotiated with the Indian government and signed the Shillong Accord in their individual capacities, the militants among the NNC, led by Th. Muivah and Swu, rejected the Phizo leadership and formed NSCN. This tussle took the form of tribal conflict between the Angami and Tangkhul tribes. The rise of NSCN led to the decline of the Angami leadership and the rise of the Tangkhuls and the Konyaks. However, the honeymoon between the Tangkhuls and the Konyaks came to an end with the break up of NSCN into two factions, i.e., NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K). Inter-tribal rivalries sometimes influence the communities' approach to basic demands such as integration of all Naga inhabited areas.

Of late it has come to light that some leaders in Nagaland, who are not quite comfortable with the Tangkhuls, view the issue of integration mainly as the demand of the Tangkhul leaders heading the NSCN (IM). The Khaplang faction openly expressed

its resentment against the Tangkhul-led NSCN (IM) taking the lead in peace talks.³⁶ It is a different matter that the leaders of NSCN (K) have admitted in a different context that the "Nagas in general remained essentially tribal in their social behaviour, attitudes and the working style. In their inter-tribal relationships they could not totally remove mutual suspicions of the past warring era. Anything and everything was still tended to be viewed and approached from the tribal lines. As such the evolving Naga nation remains more or less superficial, thereby making it very fragile and brittle".³⁷

The leaders of NSCN (IM) tried to bring unity among the Naga tribes by raising the slogan 'Nagalim for Christ'. In recent years, the Church leaders in Nagaland are advocating the need for reconciliation and peace among the warring Naga communities in the name of Christianity. The Atlanta Meet hosted by Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and attended by various Naga political and social organizations passed a resolution in August 1997 appealing the Naga people to "relinquish old antagonisms, giving up old grudges. Old memories of injury and insult have controlled our relations for too long." Reminding the Christian maxim that "A house divided against itself cannot stand", the appeal urged all Naga leaders in every sector of society, to take significant steps to bring reconciliation, building upon the best of Naga heritage.³⁸ Since the Atlanta Meet, the Church leaders and the Naga Hohos took several initiatives to bring unity among different Naga tribes and factions.

However, Naga unity still remains a mirage because of the continuing ideological and personality clashes. The NSCN (IM) leaders believe that they are the only nationalist force representing the interests of the Nagas. They consider NNC factions and NSCN (K) as anti-national and reactionary forces. Naturally they question, "How could there be unity between the dead and the living, between darkness and light, between rust and steel, between the reactionary traitors and the revolutionary portraits, between tribalism and the socialism of the NSCN? It is simply a pity for one to talk of unity between the totally perishing Phizo's clique and vigorously risen forces of the NSCN".³⁹ The NSCN (IM) believes that only the strengthening of the nationalist forces under its own leadership could ensure unity among the Nagas. But this strategy of NSCN (IM), which seems to be influenced by

Mao's strategy of winning over all the nationalist forces under Kuomintang to the side of the Red Army, may not work, as the Naga situation is not akin to the one in China. In the complex history of Naga movement, it is not possible to draw a clear distinction between the nationalist forces and the reactionaries. Although in the course of time NSCN (IM) has emerged as the most powerful militant Naga group, it does not still have a hold over all the Naga tribes. However diminished might be their present status, the other militant groups and factions also enjoy some support among certain tribal communities. Apart from the militant groups, there are a few moderate political parties and leaders, which have support among certain sections within the Naga society.

As such the heterogeneous character of the Naga civil society cannot conceive of just one political entity, i.e., NSCN (IM), representing the voices and interests of all sections of the Naga society.⁴⁰ In a situation like this, even though the peace talks could start with NSCN (IM), at a later stage it becomes essential for the Indian state to engage other Naga groups to ensure that all the parties abide by the treaty agreement that the Indian government might conclude with the NSCN (IM) leaders. The experience of the 16 point agreement and the Shillong Accord clearly indicates that lasting peace cannot be established by entering into an agreement only with one faction or group of Naga leaders. In view of the problems that NNC and NSCN (K) factions might create, the NSCN (IM)'s leadership needs to adopt a pragmatic strategy to ensure that the peace process initiated by it would not be derailed by other disgruntled forces. Instead of trying to impose its will on the people, it should listen to the Naga public opinion and respond positively to the process of reconciliation and unity initiated by the Naga civil society organizations.

Limitations of the Indian State

The Indian state could possibly have resolved the Naga problem, if the political elite had correctly apprehended the intensity of the Naga sentiments right at the time of independence. Partly its big brotherly attitude and partly its strategic considerations drove India to hold on to a piece of territory which otherwise had little economic significance to India. India had to pay the price for its

indulgence by spending hundreds of millions of rupees on military and paramilitary forces and for taking up the responsibility of economic development of the state and welfare of its people. India also had to face charges of human rights violations in Nagaland. Contrary to expectations of Indian leaders, Naga insurgency has grown in strength and become an inspiration for other ethnic insurgencies in Northeast India. From its experiences, India has realized that it is impossible to put an end to Naga insurgency only through military and monetary interventions. Similarly the practice of divide and rule might help to weaken the militant movement for a while, but it can never eliminate the roots of insurgency. The changed international political and economic scenario also compels the Indian state to seek a solution for the decades-long Naga problem.

While hoping for the best, one should however be pragmatic enough to acknowledge what the Indian state can and cannot do. In some aspects it finds itself a prisoner of its own acts of omission and commission. Having inherited the territory from its colonial masters, India cannot easily undo the demographic changes that the British colonialism has brought in the region. Moreover, the post-colonial developments like establishment of liberal political and administrative institutions and practices, reorganization of the states, spread of modern education, development of monetary economy etc. have given birth to new social forces with their own territorial conceptions and interests. The competing conceptions of territoriality articulated by these new social forces impede to a considerable extent the powers of the central government to exercise its constitutional powers to alter the boundaries of the existing states. As such the Indian state, even if it is in favour of appeasing the NSCN (IM), it cannot agree to cease-fire in all Naga inhabited areas in the Northeast or redraw the boundaries of the states in the region to give shape to Nagalim or Greater Nagaland. In attempting to solve Naga problem, the Indian state cannot afford to encounter disturbances in other states of the region. As such no final decision on the integration of all Naga inhabited areas can sensibly be taken without consulting and convincing different parties, groups and communities affected by it. Similarly, even if India officially recognizes the distinct and unique history of the Nagas, it cannot afford to grant full independence to the Nagas without inviting hostile reactions in other parts of India. If the

Nagas are granted independence, there will be similar demands from other communities and groups in the region, which the Indian state cannot afford to entertain. Of course, India can well give up its insistence on finding a solution within the constitutional framework. It can work towards an honourable and mutually acceptable treaty agreement with Naga representatives. While recognizing the Nagas as a distinct entity and granting them internal sovereignty it could still have the Nagas as strategic partners within the Indian Union.

Conclusion

Had Naga militants and the Indian government realized their own limitations and appreciated each other's expectations and compulsions, the Naga problem would have found a solution long back. Mutual suspicion, inflexible mind-sets and preconceived notions let down the peace initiatives of 1960s. If the parties in conflict expect the present phase of peace talks to succeed, they need to take lessons from the mistakes/limitations of the past. An atmosphere of trust and confidence must be created for a meaningful dialogue.

It is also required of the Naga representatives to be realistic about their demands. While one is free to put forward any number of demands for the purpose of bargaining the deal, one should be able to make out which ones of their demands are achievable in the given regional and international scenarios. There is no political wisdom in holding on to demands that are not achievable. For the sake of rhetoric, the Naga militants can say that they will continue to fight for political independence for another century or so, but they have to realise the truth that right to self-determination does not necessarily mean political independence. There can be many other ways open for the communities to exercise this right. It would be suicidal for any community to opt for secession, when it does not have the minimal material and human resources to sustain independence. The Nagas ought also to realize that their demand for integration of all Naga inhabited areas under one administrative unit could become a reality only with the consent of other communities in the region, which is a difficult to visualise in the near future. Unilaterally the Indian government cannot enter into any agreement with Naga militants on this issue, ignoring

the opinions and sentiments of other communities and states. Rather than using coercive tactics to make other communities accept their demand, it is better for the Nagas to opt for peaceful persuasive means to win over its neighbours.

The Naga intellectuals and civil groups have to play their part in building rapport with their counterparts in other states. In view of the fact that emotions are involved in the issue, the process may take a long time and the Nagas may need to show maturity and patience. Only in an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence, can the communities understand one another's points of view and explore solutions acceptable to all the parties in conflict. Scholars like B.K. Roy Burman and Sanjib Baruah have made some suggestions regarding possible alternatives for resolution of the problem of Naga integration.⁴¹ Granting autonomous state status to the Naga inhabited regions within the respective states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and the cultural integration of Nagaland with these autonomous states could be one of the options that could be explored. It would have been easier for the Nagas to seek realistic answers to their predicaments had the Naga society been united under one leadership. Unfortunately the division of the Naga society along tribal and ideological lines restricts the possibilities of coming out with viable alternatives. Being aware of the negative effects of inter-tribal and inter-group rivalries, the Naga Hoho and the Baptist Church have rightly appealed to all Naga groups for reconciliation of their differences by forgiving their enemies and forgetting their bitter past. All the Naga militant groups should pay heed to the appeals of the Naga civil society groups for unity and reconciliation among the Nagas. As long as the Nagas are divided, they cannot negotiate a durable peace and settlement with the Indian state.

The Indian government, on its part, should take up greater responsibility to ensure that peace talks yield positive results. For the talks to succeed, the Indian government should give up its traditional policy of looking at Naga resistance from a security angle. No amount of money pumped into Nagaland could put an end to Naga insurgency, as the Naga struggle is not aiming at economic development. The Nagas continued their struggle for five decades basically for political recognition of Nagas as a distinct nation.⁴² As such Naga resistance movement is basically a struggle of an emerging nationality for a political identity of its

own. Being basically a political problem, the Government of India should realize that the Naga problem cannot be resolved by military or monitory strategies. It should therefore be clear to the Indian leaders that the Naga problem could be resolved only through political means. While engaging the Naga militants in political dialogue, the Indian leaders should treat them as political representatives of the Nagas, not as terrorists or misguided citizens. India and the Indians must recognize in letter and spirit the unique history of the Nagas and respect their right to selfdetermination. The Indian government should officially admit that the repressive strategies that it adopted to break the Naga resistance movement have led to large-scale violation of human rights and alienated the Nagas from India. Apart from acknowledging it, the Indian government should openly apologize for its misdeeds and convince the Naga people that irrespective of whether the talks succeed or not, it would not again resort to inhuman means in future that would cause hardships to the Naga civilians. While India has the right to protect its national interests, it should become pragmatic enough to realize that insisting on finding solutions within the framework of the Indian Constitution may not always be in the interests of India. The experience of Canada shows that the Canadian interests are best served by according official recognition to the aboriginal Indians as the First Nations and negotiating treaties with them to determine what kind of relations they would like to have with the Federal and Provincial governments. Given the geo-political realities, the Nagas have to depend on India in one or the other matter. The Nagas need better relations with India as much as India needs with the Nagas. Hence there is no need for India to worry that the Nagas' demand for self determination would go against its national interests. The symbolic recognition of the Nagas as a nation and entering into a treaty with NSCN (IM) leadership, recognizing them as representatives of the Naga nation, helps India to advance its interests better. The peace negotiation is indeed a test for Indian leadership to prove its tact, diplomacy and creativity. Only when the Indian government and the NSCN (IM) leadership succeed in making a fair deal acceptable to all sections of the Nagas and also to other indigenous communities in the region, one could hope for an enduring peace and development in the region.

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