

# **NORTH - EAST INDIA**

**Quest for Identity**

**UDAYON MISRA**

The collection of articles presented in this volume deals with socio-political developments covering an important phase in the post-independence history of India's North-east. Though many of the articles were written as responses to developments in the contemporary scene, yet they are marked by a deep sense of introspection and sharpness of analysis. The struggle of the different nationalities, particularly that of the Assamese and the Nagas, has been dealt with by the author with great originality of approach. The author's insight into the problems and issues arising out of the assertion of identity of the major nationalities of the North-east adds a distinctiveness to the entire collection. There is no doubt that both the student and the researcher of North-eastern affairs will benefit from this highly readable volume.

**Dr Udayon Misra** is a Reader in the Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam. He contributes regularly to the "Economic and Political Weekly", Bombay, on socio-political developments in the North-East. He is the author of *The Raj in Fiction*.

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**NORTH-EAST INDIA : QUEST FOR IDENTITY**

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North-East India:

# Quest for Identity

(A Collection of Essays on Socio-Political Topics)



Udayon Misra

*With a foreword by  
Ajit Kumar Sharma*

1988

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*to the memory of my brother*

*Abanikumar Misra*

*(1941—1957)*

## *Foreword*

Real politics in Assam began in 1920, when, in the last week of December that year, the Assam Association which was then the only political organization of the Assamese, closed the chapter of playing its moderate role as a loyal supporter of the British Government and adopted the Congress programme of Non-co-operation. The Assam Association yielded its place to the Assam Provincial Congress. In response to Mahatma Gandhi's call, the Assamese youth and peasants joined the struggle to achieve India's freedom and along with it, Assam's freedom within India. This was the end of provincial isolation of the Assamese nationality and the beginning of a new era of its commitment to Indian nationalism as well as of its trust and confidence in Indian leadership. Once they entered the battlefield, the Assamese soldiers did not look back and were always in the front line. Congratulating the Assamese youth for their courage, devotion and sacrifice, C. Rajagopalachari, who visited Assam in 1922, wrote: "If India had such youth as the Assamese, courage and faith serving the cause in all her Provinces, there would be no need to doubt the early attainment of our goal."

But six decades of hard experience taught such bitter lessons as to lead a new generation of the same Assamese youth and peasants to launch in 1979 another Non-co-operation in a much larger scale and of a longer duration, to protest against continued Indian neglect and colonial exploitation and to announce in not uncertain terms the withdrawal of their trust and confidence in the all-India leadership. This six-year non-co-operation movement concluded by installing a regional

party, the Asam Gana Parishad, in the seat of power in Assam in December, 1985, by voting out all national political parties including the ruling Congress from Assam's political scene.

Such a radical transformation of the Assamese mind was the political consequence of a long chain of events causing repeated fears and frustrations since 1946, more particularly since August, 1950.

The first political shock that was faced by the Assamese was in 1946 when leaders of the Indian National Congress were almost selling out Assam by agreeing to the Grouping formula of the British Cabinet Mission. Had not Mahatma Gandhi stood by them in that moment of crisis and had not Gopinath Bardoloi given a bold leadership to the Assamese resistance movement, the fate of Assam and North East would have been sealed for ever. The Assamese led by Bardoloi successfully asserted the right of all people in the hills and plains of Assam to remain as Indians. The Grouping Scheme was withdrawn and its danger was over. Assam and the North-East was retained as a part of free India.

In the new geopolitical situation the crying need was that of political integration of the hill areas with the plains. As the then Assam Premier, Bardoloi initiated immediate steps for bringing the NEFA (now Arunachal) administration, which was then under the Centre, closer to the rest of Assam. He himself visited NEFA to understand the problems of the people. Later, in free India's Constitution the provisions of the Sixth Schedule as recommended by the Bardoloi Sub-committee of for North-Eastern Hill Areas of the Constituent Assembly were extended to the NEFA along with other hill districts of Assam. Bardoloi was the architect of this Sixth Schedule Scheme which was meant to be the unique experiment of a decentralized State structure. But death snatched him away before he could implement the provisions of the Schedule to the satisfaction of the hill people.

The untimely death of Bardoloi was an event of fateful political consequences in the post-1950 political history of

Assam. With his political vision, catholic outlook and with his understanding of the hill mind and the spirit of freedom of the hill people, he had earned the trust and confidence of the hill population. Steps taken by him for the integration of NEFA in 1947 had already proved that the people in the northern hills were ready to go ahead under his leadership. Other hill areas also had similarly responded. Even the Nagas who were insisting on their demand for independence had placed their full trust and confidence on Bardoloi. What faith the Nagas had in Bardoloi was expressed in a report of the Naga Goodwill Mission which had been sent to Assam by the Naga National Council in 1953. The Mission's report stated; "When Mahatma Gandhi and Gopinath Bardoloi were alive there was a feeling of confidence and trust in the minds of most of our people but that trust and confidence were killed. Now, out of a population of 360 million in India, if there will not be a single soul to come forward to speak boldly for the Nagas, we have all the more reasons to consider that all is not well with the Indian form of democracy." When Bardoloi passed away there was no political leadership to mobilize the people of Assam to resist the Government of India's authoritarian policies and its wrong actions that created a situation of longterm violent confrontations in Nagaland.

The year 1950 recorded a number of events which changed the current of Assam's political history. Bardoloi's death on 5th August created a vacuum of wise political leadership with a distant vision, deep understanding and moral stature. With his death, the process of integration of Assam, which he had earlier started, came to a halt. In the same year. Zapo Phizo, the unrivalled theoretician of sovereign Nagaland was unanimously elected President of the Naga National Council. Thereafter, real politics began in the hills of Assam, which in the long run resulted in the formation of a separate State of Nagaland, clearing the road to separation of other hill areas from Assam.

Another major event of 1950 was the entry into Assam of large-scale immigrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan for

whose expulsion the Indian Parliament had to enact a law, which, however, did not protect Assam from future infiltrators. Successive waves of immigrants flooding the plains districts of Assam threatened the integrity and identity of the whole region. The hill people were frightened at the prospect of their identity being swept away by the immigrant flood current and felt that they must protect themselves by erecting boundary walls of separate States to effectively prevent the flood waters from entering their abodes too. The continuous flow of immigrants also started obstructing the age-old process of assimilation of various communities into a composite Assamese society.

Behind the growth of all these disintegrating tendencies was the policy pursued by the Central Government and its bureaucracy in post-independence India. Centre's policies generally conformed to the needs and demands of the leading capitalist interests and were largely colonial in character. Under these circumstances an economically weak State like Assam had not only been deprived of her own resources by the Central Government but had also to countenance opposition from colonial capitalist interests. To cite an instance, the Bardoloi Government was the first in independent India to prepare and publish in 1948 its programme of nationalization of industries and also to declare that the natural wealth of Assam belonged to the people of the State. But soon after, the Central Government announced an Industrial Policy which prohibited Assam from going ahead with nationalization. The Assam Government was compelled by the Centre to leave her economic wealth to be controlled and exploited in the interest of private capitalists. In fact, the Central Government's policy came in favour of the Assam Chamber of Commerce and the same let down the Government of Assam. This was Assam's first unhappy experience as a member of the Indian Federation. Later experiences with the public sector undertakings started in Assam by the Centre like the oil industry showed that these undertakings are also as exploitative and colonial as the private sector of the tea industry.

Thus the story of Assam in the post-1950 era is that of

long term struggles, sufferings, deprivations, neglect, exploitations and apprehensions of the people of the hills and the plains. It is also a story of the consequences of a leadership, which, at the Centre was authoritarian and of a colonial pattern, and, in the State, weak and suffering from a limited vision.

Udayon Misra's '*North-East India: Quest for Identity*' is an attempt to explain and interpret the historical growth of the above story. Misra is one of the very few scholars who has studied in depth the problems of Assam and North-East and expressed his views boldly. Although the articles contained in this book were originally written in response to contemporary developments, they carry an abiding message and his analysis and interpretations of events will be a helpful guide to the study of the North-Eastern region.

Struggles of the different nationalities in the north-East aimed at asserting their identities provide the basic premise of Misra's study. Of them, the Assamese constitutes the major nationality. In these nationality struggles the youth have played a significant role. On account of the failure of the Congress Government and of all the national political parties including the Left parties to understand properly the spirit of these nationality movements and the inability of these parties to work out a viable framework for providing workable autonomy to the hill areas, and because of the Government's inability to take steps to remove economic backwardness of the whole region, a situation of bitterness and bloodshed developed leading ultimately to the formation of small States and increasing demands for more of such States. The creation of these separate hill States has no doubt fulfilled the political aspirations of the educated middle class but has failed to solve the real problems of the people.

In this regard, Misra has shown how the Centre's pumping in of huge sums of money into the hills without building the necessary infra-structure has helped to create a new middle class which, while serving as the bulwork against insurrection,

has given birth to the forces of political opportunism and social corruption.

As far as the movement of the major Assamese nationality is concerned, Misra has stated that it has a long history of neglect, suppression and exploitation. Defending the Assamese movement from its leftist critics, Misra says that centred round the foreigners issue the Assamese movement is not a chauvinistic expression but a mass upsurge of an oppressed nationality trying to assert itself. Discussing the nature and growth of the Assamese movement, the author invites the attention of the Assamese intelligentsia to the need of awareness among them about the aspirations of the tribal population of the hills and plains. How far this awareness will strengthen the process of formation of the Assamese nation will depend, according to Misra, on the mutual trust between tribals and non-tribals. This in turn will depend on how far the elite of the Assamese society, dominated by caste Hindus will be prepared to accommodate the aspirations of the tribal sections of population.

I congratulate Udayon Misra for the valuable work that he has done for the benefit of those who want to understand Assam and the North East and those who want to contribute to the building of a composite Assamese society on a strong socialist foundation.

Guwahati  
15-1-88

Ajit Kumar Sharma

## *Preface*

The articles contained in this volume deal mainly with contemporary developments in Assam and the North-East and have been selected from analytical reports and papers published over a number of years. Most of these have appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, while a few of them are the revised versions of papers presented at national seminars. Though several of these pieces may seem to possess only topical relevance, yet I considered it worthwhile to include them in this collection because they might be of some use to students and researchers working on the North-eastern region of the country. It is but natural that, over the years, some of the views expressed in the articles have undergone changes. I have, however, kept them as they are because they were primarily responses to particular situations.

I am grateful to Prof. B. Datta Ray of the North East India Centre for Sociological Research, Shillong; Prof. Prakash M. Singhi of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad; and Mr. Rashpal Malhotra of the Centre for Research in Rural and Urban Development, Chandigarh, for permitting me to include in this volume my papers published in the following books brought out by their centres: *The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in North-East India*, *Indian Youth and Society: Viewpoints for the Future*, and *North-East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development*. I am also thankful to the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay and the *North-East Quarterly*, Guwahati, for permission to reprint the articles published in the journals.

I am deeply obliged to Prof. Ajit Kumar Sharma, former Member of Parliament, because he has been kind enough to take time off from his busy schedule to write the Foreword. My thanks to Mr. Krishna Raj, Editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly* and Dr. M.S. Prabhakar, formerly Assistant Editor of the *EPW* and at present the Special Correspondent of *The Hindu* based at Guwahati, for their encouragement and advice. To Tilottoma Misra a special word of thanks for having helped me with her comments and views on almost everything that I have written. Lastly, my thanks to Mr. Ramesh Kumar of Omsons Publications for agreeing to publish the book.

Dibrugarh University  
May 15, 1988

Udayon Misra

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# 1

## The Naga National Question

*The Naga National Council (NNC), the political wing of the Federal Government of Nagaland, has consistently maintained that the Nagas constitute a separate and independent nation. (According to the NNC, except for a century of British rule, the Nagas had never been subjugated and ruled by other people and had never been part of what today constitutes the Indian Union.) This feeling of separateness from the rest of India is widely shared by the Nagas and has sustained them in their protracted struggle against a very powerful adversary.*

*This article examines the historical and sociological basis for this persistent consciousness among the Naga people that they constitute a separate and independent 'nation'.*

THROUGHOUT their nearly 30 years of struggle against the Government of India, the Naga National Council (NNC) the

political wing of the underground Naga Federal Government, has consistently maintained that the Nagas constitute an independent nation. The NNC claims that, except for a century of British rule, the Nagas had never been subjugated and ruled by any other people and had never been part of what today constitutes the Indian nation.<sup>1</sup> This feeling of separateness from the rest of the Indian state is so widely shared by the Nagas that it may be said to be one of the prime forces in their long struggle against a powerful adversary. That the Nagas have successfully carried on one of the most protracted armed struggles in the subcontinent, has drawn serious national and international attention to their cause.

Till the not-too-distant past there had been a tendency to dismiss the Naga struggle as a secessionist movement inspired and aided by foreign missionaries who have been exploiting the fierce feeling for independence of the hill people to break up the Indian 'nation'. In this context, it has also been frequently asserted that there is no such base for Naga nationalism, because the Nagas are made up of at least 14 tribes who have no common language and are constantly hostile towards one another.<sup>2</sup> But the persistence of the Naga struggle against desperates odds has done away with most of these pat arguments which have been based on ignorance of the Naga way of life. Today, it is admitted by even their most bitter critics, that their long struggle has given the Nagas a cohesiveness and sense of national unity to which very few nationalities of the Indian subcontinent can lay claim.<sup>3</sup>

The Naga's loyalty to his tribe or clan is being gradually replaced by his loyalty to the concept of united Nagaland which will include all the Naga-inhabited territory between the Chindwin in Burma and the Brahmaputra in Assam.<sup>4</sup> This demand for a 'greater Nagaland' is clearly linked with the growing tide of Naga nationalism which has succeeded in greatly reducing—if not altogether doing away with—inter-tribe and inter-clan rivalry and differences. This development, from tribe and clan organisation to the idea of a sovereign Naga state comprising the entire Naga nation, has been helped immensely by the

Naga's intensely deep attachment to his native soil and to common local traditions.<sup>5</sup> Foreign occupation of their land has always been fiercely opposed by the different Naga tribes and all recorded history of the Nagas reveals this.

To the Ahoms who ruled Assam from the middle of the thirteenth century, the Naga Hills had plenty of strategic importance, for "it was through the land of the Nagas of Patkoi and the Tirap Division of NEFA that the Ahoms came to Assam over the Patkoi mountain and it was this route that they had to use in maintaining their relations with their kith and kin in Burma."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Ahoms kept a close watch on their frontier with the Nagas and succeeded in keeping them under control. The Ahom policy towards the Nagas was marked by conciliation backed by force; but the Ahom rulers never had any plans for the conquest and annexation of the territories of the Naga tribes. Although the Ahom kings carried out numerous punitive expeditions against the Naga tribes who so very frequently raided the villages on the Assam plains, they realised fully well that to interfere with the internal administration of the Nagas would be hazardous. "The Ahom rulers considered it enough to receive the submission of the Nagas and to allow them to enjoy their tribal autonomy—so long as the Nagas living near the plains, who were granted revenue-free lands and fishing-waters along with retainers in the plains, did not raid Ahom territories and the Nagas on the India-Burma frontier did not ally themselves with the enemies of the Ahoms beyond the Patkoi range to jeopardise the Ahom kingdom".<sup>7</sup>

This acknowledgement of non-interference in Naga affairs resulted in a cordiality and understanding between the Nagas and the Assamese living on the borders of the Naga Hills and an active barter trade flourished.<sup>8</sup> As Ahom power declined towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the Naga tribes once again asserted their complete independence from foreign control, however limited that might have been, and those tribes who had been paying tributes to the Ahom kings ceased to do so. Thus, in summing up Ahom-Naga relations, one may say that while the Nagas

submitted to the strength of the Ahom rulers, the latter respected the Nagas' love for independence and desisted from interfering in their internal affairs.

The British, too, in the initial years of their rule in Assam, followed a policy of non-interference in Naga affairs. After taking advantage of the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) and annexing Assam, the British speedily consolidated their hold over the fertile valley area. But they followed a policy of cautious non-interference towards the hill tribes, especially the Nagas. This was not, as the British later conveniently claimed, to 'protect' the hill people from being exploited by the unscrupulous plainsmen, but because the annexation of the hill areas was not considered profitable. The Nagas first came into contact with the British in 1832, when Captain Jenkins and his men marched through Angami territory on their way to the Assam plains from Manipur. From 1835 to 1851 as many as 10 punitive expeditions were carried out by the British, mainly directed to put an end to the Angami raids into the plains of Assam. After the tenth expedition in December 1850, a policy of non-interference was clearly laid down, and the troops withdrawn. There is evidence of this in Lord Dalhousie's Minute, wherein it is stated "I dissent entirely from the policy which is recommended of what is called obtaining control, that is to say, of taking possession of these hills, and of establishing sovereignty over their savage inhabitants. Our possessions could bring no profit to us, and would be as costly to us as it would be unproductive.....As it is impolitic to contemplate the permanent possession of these hills, so it seems to me impolitic to sanction temporary possession of them."<sup>9</sup>

This policy continued till around 1862, when Cœcil Beadon took over as the Lieutenant Governor and the British started to devise means for bringing the Nagas under their political control in order to put an end to the incursions on the plains. In 1874, Captain Johnstone informed the Chief Commissioner that he had "formally taken under (our) protection on payment of revenue two Naga villages which were in immediate danger of attack, and had ordered the other hostile

villages to leave them alone.”<sup>10</sup> The British occupation of Naga Hills had begun. Although the Chief Commissioner agreed with Captain Johnstone, the highest authorities showed disapproval because such a step “may involve us (the British) in the reduction of the country by degrees to a regular system of government regardless of expenses.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite such hesitation, a ‘forward policy’ was finally resolved upon which culminated in the British occupation of Kohima on November 14, 1878. This was followed by the speedy consolidation of British rule in the Naga Hills. In 1881 the Naga Hills District<sup>12</sup> was established. It may be mentioned in this connection that the British occupation of the Naga Hills was mostly confined to the area covering central Nagaland, with most areas bordering Burma and Tibet being left almost completely unadministered. The Nagas, particularly the Angamis, put up their last fierce resistance to the British in 1879-80 when they laid seige to Kohima for 11 days. This attack was mainly led by 13 Angami village-states along with that of Khonoma.<sup>13</sup> The failure of the Naga attempt to oust the British from their soil may be traced to the lack of unity and the absence of a common organised political authority among the various Naga tribes. At this time, the Nagas were living in their isolated sovereign village-states, each independent of the other and, more often than not, on hostile terms.

With the British occupation of the Naga Hills, the Nagas for the first time had to accept an alien power as their ruler right in the midst of their territory. Till then they had only faced punitive expeditions and had developed their own pattern of guerilla tactics to deal with such expeditions. Thus, the British conquest wrought far-reaching changes in the Naga socio-political set-up and we shall have occasion to discuss some of these changes in the course of the article.

The British took care not to tamper with the tribal pattern of village democracy prevalent in the Naga Hills. By acknowledging the right of the tribal councils as the sole authority to deal with Naga affairs (providing, of course, for

### *North East India Quest for Identity*

interference in exceptional cases) and by isolating the Hills from the plains by introducing regulations, the British succeeded in keeping the Nagas cut off from the rest of the subcontinent. Thus, it is not surprising that the Nagas were not in any way drawn into the anti-British struggle led by the Congress and they were practically untouched by the force of Indian nationalism.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, when on the eve of the British departure from India the British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act and the Extra-Provincial Jurisdiction Act empowering the new Indian Government to continue its administration in the Naga Hills, the Nagas were caught off their guard. They discovered that they had been made a unit of the Indian Union without their consent being sought. The Nagas were psychologically least prepared for such a union.

It is precisely this devolution of power which was questioned by the Naga National Council. As early as in 1929, the Naga Club<sup>15</sup> had submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission demanding that the Nagas be excluded from the scope of the proposed constitutional changes and be kept under the direct administration of the British. In its memorandum, the Naga Club had stated: "You (the British) are the only people who have ever conquered us and when you go we should be as we were." Demanding adequate safeguards from any possible rule by the Indians, the memorandum concluded with the following plea: "If the British Government, however, want to throw us away, we pray that we should not be thrust to the mercy of the people who could never have conquered us themselves, and to whom we were never subjected; but to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times."<sup>16</sup> More than 20 representatives from the different tribes signed this memorandum. This move by the Naga Club, however, yielded no results. But it has to be noted that this was the first collective effort on the part of the leading individuals from the different tribes to spell out their view on the future status of the Naga people. It was 16 years after this move that the Naga Hills District Tribal Council was formed at the initiative of the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, C.R. Pawsey.

This Council, with enlarged representatives from all the tribal councils, emerged in 1946 as the Naga National Council—the only organised political force in the Naga Hills which was clearly representative of the vast majority of the Naga people. The Naga National Council had 29 members representing the various tribes on the principle of proportional representation. Thus for the first time in their history, the Naga people were coming under a single political organisation. The formation of the NNC was decidedly a major step in the consolidation of the Naga nationalistic forces. With the Naga tribes growing ever more apprehensive of their fate in the event of the British leaving the subcontinent, the stage had actually been set for the emergence of the NNC, a large section of its leaders being drawn from the educated section of the Nagas.

(One of the first acts of the NNC was to call upon the Nagas to prepare for self-determination and for acquiring fundamental rights.) The secretary of the NNC declared in Kohima on December 6, 1946, that “the NNC stands for the unification of all the Naga tribes and their freedom...Our country is connected with India, connected in many ways. We should continue that connection. I do not mind whether future-India be a Congress government or a League government. But as a distinctive community, as I stated before, we must also develop according to our genius and taste. We shall enjoy home-rule in our country, but on broader issues be connected with India. We must fight for it, we must get it; keep on watching.”<sup>17</sup> The NNC leader was voicing here the Naga people's view regarding their future relationship with India. But it was not clear as to what shape this relationship would take. From the above statement it appears that the NNC had not spelt out its demand for complete independence and would have settled for regional autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

But events were moving so fast in the subcontinent that the Naga leadership soon realised that if it did not spell out its demands in unequivocal terms, the Naga case might be lost. Hence, (the NNC made clear its demand for full independence.) The Indian National Congress had already come to

know of this and, in a letter to the NNC leader, T. Sakhrje, Nehru wrote in August 1946: "It is obvious that the Naga territory in Eastern Assam is much too small to stand by itself politically or economically. It lies between the two countries India and China, and part of it consists of rather backward people who require considerable help. When India is independent, as it is bound to be soon, it will not be possible for the British Government to hold on to Naga territory or any part of it. They would be isolated between India and China. Inevitably, therefore, this Naga territory must be part of India and of Assam with which it has developed such close associations".<sup>19</sup> India was yet to make its claim that the land of the Nagas formed an integral part of the country since time immemorial. Nehru was clearly stating that the 'Naga territory' was too small to exist as an independent nation and for strategic reasons it must join the Indian Union.

The NNC, however, continued to stick to its demand for an independent Naga State and an NNC delegation, led by Angami Zapu Phizo<sup>20</sup> met Lord Mountbatten with the suggestion that the new Indian Government should act as the guardian power for 10 years after which the Nagas would be free to determine their political future. This was followed by the presentation of the Ten-Year Interim Government Scheme<sup>21</sup> to the Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Tribes which visited Kohima in May 1947. On the refusal of the Advisory Committee to make any suggestion to the Constituent Assembly on the question of the 10-year guardianship scheme, the NNC declared that, since the Nagas had their own Constitution, the question of accepting any other constitutional arrangement did not arise. This deadlock was attempted to be broken by Hydari Agreement<sup>22</sup> which acknowledged the NNC's right of control over all spheres of Naga life ranging from prevalent tribal laws to the ownership of land and taxation. But Article 8<sup>23</sup> of this Agreement gave rise to another deadlock, with the NNC claiming that it ensured the Nagas' right to complete independence on the expiry of the 10-year period and the Indian side giving a totally different interpretation. Refusing to accept the Hydari

Agreement, because it was rushed through without proper scope being given for discussion, some members of the NNC led by Phizo met Gandhi in July 1947, and told him of the Nagas' determination to stay out of the Indian Union. Gandhi assured the delegation that in no circumstances would force be used against the Nagas who, according to him, were free to stay out of the Indian Union if they so desired.<sup>24</sup>

Since nothing tangible emerged from the discussion with the Indian leaders, the NNC wrote to Nehru in November 1947, that if the Nagas were denied the freedom to chalk out their own future, "then the Naga people shall cease to be a part of the Indian Union from December 6, 1947."<sup>25</sup> This resulted in the hardening of attitudes on both sides and, when Phizo was elected President of the NNC in 1949, the Naga demand for independence gained further momentum. Under Phizo's leadership the NNC was transformed into a militant political organisation, wedded to the idea of a sovereign Nagaland. The NNC rejected the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, held a successful plebiscite on the question of Naga independence (May to August 1951) and organised a total boycott of the General Elections of 1952. All this was followed by a civil disobedience movement resulting in the mass resignation of school-teachers, boycott of all Government of India functions, and refusal to pay taxes. Through these moves, each more successful than the other, the NNC proved beyond any shadow of doubt that it was the spokesman of all the Naga tribes and that the verdict of the Naga people was in favour of 'home rule'.

Not being able to check the trend of events in the Naga Hills, the Government of India decided to crack down on the NNC towards the middle of 1953. Police action against the NNC leadership and the search of important Naga villages, which followed Nehru's abortive visit to the Naga Hills, resulted in the eruption of armed hostilities. Thousands of young Nagas joined the Naga Home Guard and almost the entire NNC set-up went underground.<sup>26</sup> Thus, chances of

negotiated settlement having receded, the formation of the Naga Federal Government was announced in March 1956. ✓

✦ The Naga Federal set-up was so thoroughly planned, having drawn its strength from the Naga village institutions, that within a relatively short period of time a parallel government started functioning.<sup>27</sup> In order to counter the growing strength of the NNC, New Delhi encouraged attempts by a section of the Naga elite, led by Imkongliba Ao, to bring the Naga Hills directly under the control of the Centre. Accordingly, the 'Naga Hills Tuensang Area', comprising the Naga Hills district of Assam and the Tuensang Division of NEFA, was formed and placed under the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India. To the moderates, this was a great step forward for Naga nationalism and for unity of the tribes. But the Federal Government opposed the move as a compromise, though there was some satisfaction over the fact that the new unit had been placed under the Ministry of External Affairs which, of course, carried obvious implications. New Delhi had succeeded in driving a wedge into the Naga movement and the next step towards finally winning over the moderates was the formation of the State of Nagaland in December 1963. The Federal Government strongly resisted this move and described it as a plan to set the Nagas against one another, and pledged to continue the struggle. ✓

The events that followed are recent history and one need not go into them in detail. Yet, in order to have a better view of the rise of Naga nationalism and how it is being encountered by the Indian Government, one must go into the nature of the Peace Agreement concluded between the Peace Mission and the Federal Government of Nagaland. The Peace Mission appreciated "the desire of the Nagas for self-determination" and their struggle for the preservation of their way of life. It also admitted that the Nagas never formed part of the Indian mainstream and that "the Naga Federal Government could on their own volition decide to be a participant in the Union of India".<sup>29</sup> Jayaprakash Narayan, one of the members of the Peace Mission, declared: "There can be no doubt that the struggle

led by the NFG cannot be regarded as a mere 'problem of law and order'. It is most certainly a struggle for national freedom. It does not aim at overthrowing a government, but it certainly aims at throwing out a Government, namely, the Government of India, which it regards as established here by force...the Naga people are unquestionably a nation. While there can be no doubt that the Naga problem is not a law and order question but a question of freedom for the Nagas, I have also tried to show that the Naga Freedom Movement may take a different character if it is placed in the context of a union of self-governing states.' The Peace Mission proposals could not bring about any solution to the Naga issue, because the Federal Government refused to make any concessions on the question of Naga sovereignty while the Indian Government pressed for a solution with the framework of the Indian Constitution. But the Peace Mission did acknowledge the fact that the Nagas constitute a separate nation and that any union of the Nagas with India had to be a voluntary one.

Recognition of this fact has been consistently upon by the Naga Federal side in all its discussions with Delhi. The Federal side has often said that Delhi has never attempted to view the issue from the Naga angle and has always tried to brush aside the growing tide of Naga nationalism as a secessionist move led by a group of armed rebels intent on capturing power. This allegation is not without basis and applies not only to the then and present Government of India but also to most of our political parties, including those on the Left, who seem to suffer from a certain lack of perspective in dealing with the Naga problem. Meaningful discussion of the Naga problem must keep in mind the fact that the movement is primarily one for self-determination; and a peaceful political settlement of the issue can be achieved only when the Naga struggle is placed in its correct perspective. It will be useful perhaps if we try to understand the Naga pattern of tribal (village) democracy and how the Naga National Council built its organisation on the already existing socio-political set-up of the Naga people. In this context, it will be necessary to refer to the role of tribal councils, the nature of Naga nationalism

and the question of full autonomy *vis-a-vis* the self-determination of the Naga people.

The Naga demand for self-determination has very often been wrongly linked up with Western education and ideas which came in the wake of successful Christian missionary activity in the Naga Hills. The idea of unconditional Westernisation has never been accepted even by that small section of what may be called the 'educated middle class.' It is true that Christianity and Western education brought a section of Naga youth into contact with the liberal ideas of the West and, in the process, helped the growth of nationalistic forces by reducing to a great extent the rivalry among the various tribes. It is but natural that most of the leaders of the Naga National Council belonged to this section. But, an important fact to be noted is that, in the process of the growth of Naga nationalism, no threat was posed to the traditional leadership of the tribal councils and the village headman continued to play as important a role as ever in Naga political life. This was partly due to the fact that the economic pattern of the people had not undergone any major changes during British rule, thus posing no serious threat to the authority of the tribal councils. Another reason was the democratic pattern of self-government prevailing in the Naga village-states. Thus, instead of any clash between the 'nationalist elite' (however small this might have been) and the traditional chiefs and their councils, the Naga nationalists received unstinted support from the Naga form of democracy based on the traditional tribal pattern.

The NNC under Phizo's leadership took immense care to win over the tribal councils and chiefs to the cause of Naga independence. Once this was achieved, the movement, got a firm foundation. It took some time for the Government of India to realise that the main prop of the Naga movement was the tribal council and that the only effective way of reducing their authority would be to reduce their influence—and that, for this, a break-up of the economic pattern of the Naga people, specifically of land-relationships, would be necessary. Even a

rather cursory study of the role of the Indian Army in Nagaland would reveal that, under cover of fighting the insurgents, the entire economic pattern of the Naga people has been attempted to be disrupted. In this connection one may refer to the village re-groupings that were carried out. This disruption of the economic pattern is bound to have far-reaching consequences and will in the long run shake the very basis of Naga society—the village 'republics'. ✓

One might argue that, like the countless other tribes of the sub-continent who till the recent past did not come within the mainstream of 'Indian nationalism' the Nagas too must adjust themselves to the post-1947 situation. But it must be kept in mind that, unlike many other tribes who have been swallowed up by the current of bourgeois nationalism, the Nagas, partly because of their geographical position, have succeeded in maintaining their separate identity based on a cultural and ethnic unity. This has been maintained, in the midst of fierce inter-tribal rivalry, by the long tradition of tribal democracy. Thus, they view their struggle as one aimed at defending their way of life which they feel is being challenged by the Indian ruling classes. One does not assert that the Naga pattern of village democracy will not, or need not, undergo change. It will necessarily change along with the changes in the modes and relationship of production; but this will have to be the result of the working out of contradictions within Naga society although external influences may accelerate the process. The Nagas have been trying to build up a new and united Nagaland by re-invigorating their traditional political institutions which have been an important factor in crystallising national consciousness.

In order to disprove the Naga case for self-determination, it has often asserted that the Nagas do not constitute a nation and that at best they may be called a 'sub-national' group. To begin with, it is stated that the Nagas are in no way distinguishable from their tribal neighbours and that they have never shared a common religion and culture. Hence, the conclusion is drawn that they do not possess one of the most essential requisites for qualifying as a nation, i.e., a national consciousness.

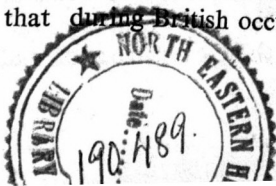
Nothing could be more untrue. One may quote the historian, E.A. Gait, in this connection: "The first thing that strikes an inquirer into the religious beliefs of the hill tribes of this frontier is the extraordinary uniformity of the principle which underlines them all.... There can be no greater mistake than to assume that each tribe has its own individual beliefs, differing widely from those of others and circumscribed by the narrow tribal limits. The facts are quite the reverse and the religion of these tribes—Shamanism, Animism, *Nat* worship, or whatever name may be applied to it—is everywhere practically the same. There are difference of practice rather than of fundamental principles, and are far less important than those which divide the Saktas from the Vaishnavas, the Unitarians from the members of the Salvation army." If a deep attachment to one's native soil, to local traditions and to established territorial authority can be accepted as marks of nationalism, then the Nagas qualify on all counts. Moreover, apart from sharing a common economic pattern which is the basis of their long-cherished political and social institution, the Nagas have evolved the necessary psychological structure on which a common Naga culture rests. It is this that clearly distinguishes them from their other tribal neighbours. The Nagas' not possessing a common language has not been an insurmountable factor in the growth of nationalism, because to common descent, a distinct territory, a common political and economic pattern of life, customs and traditions, the Nagas have learnt to add a corporate will so very essential to the growth of nationalism. The NNC must be given due credit for breaking the isolationism of the tribes and for instilling in the Naga masses the feeling that culturally, politically and economically, their fate is linked up with the national body.

(The Nagas have often been accused of small nation narrow-mindedness. That their struggle have remained rather insular is true. But the Naga demand for self-determination should not be confused with small nation insularity and xenophoebia.) In discussing the Naga struggle it must be kept in mind that the Nagas were, on the whole, never drawn into anti-British struggle led by the Indian bourgeoisie. Nor have they shared a common tradition with the rest of the sub-

continent. Although geographically a part of the Indian sub-continent, they have maintained their separate pattern of life. British occupation of the Naga Hills did not affect the changes which it did in other part of the country. Hence when the British left India, the overall Naga sentiment was that they be left alone. The NNC made capital of this Naga feeling of apprehension and the Naga struggle began as a movement aimed at safeguarding the Naga way of life which, they felt, would be threatened in the case of Indian 'occupation.' Thus, the NNC has all along asserted that the union of the Nagas with India should be a *voluntary* one. In reply to the charges of secession, the NNC has consistently maintained that the question of the Nagas seceding from the Indian Union does not arise because they never formed part of the Indian Union.

In saying this, the Naga leaders realise that freedom to unite presupposes freedom to secede, and "Without freedom to secede, unification cannot be called free". The point of voluntary union is illustrated by Lenin who, in referring to the secession of Norway from Sweden wrote: "The geographic economic and language ties between Norway and Sweden are as intimate as those between the Great Russians and many other Slav nations. But the union between Norway and Sweden was not a voluntary one.....Norway was ceded to Sweden by the monarchs during the Napoleonic wars, against the will of the Norwegians; and the Swedes had to bring troops to Norway to subdue her." The Naga Federal side has been maintaining similar stand saying that the British had no right to hand over the Nagas to the Indian Government's jurisdiction and that the Nagas should have been given the choice to decide their future relationship with the Indian State.

A question arises as to why the Nagas alone of the tribes inhabiting the entire North-East region initially raised this demand. The answer till, recently, was attempted to be found in the spread of secessionist ideas by the foreign missionaries. But the case of Nagaland was different. Apart from the fact that the Nagas were under British rule for a relatively short period it must be kept in mind that during British occupation



Naga society remained more or less the same with the traditional land-relationships being left untouched. The Naga village, which was more tribal than feudal, continued its existence and phenomenon of the market was absent; capitalist relations of production were not introduced and hence the village unit based on co-operation remained undisturbed. Apart from the Second World War, when a part of Nagaland including Kohima had a direct experience of the war, the Naga people have been virtually cut off from the rest of the sub-continent. The role played by the development of transport, particularly the railways in fostering the growth of nationalism in the subcontinent is not applicable to Nagaland. Moreover, the role played by the middle class in helping the growth of Naga national feeling, though important, was not the motive force. Thus, it may be said that the bulwark of Naga nationalism has been the tribal way of life represented so well by the tribal councils and the chiefs of the various Naga tribes. The Nagas have always fought to defend what they call 'the Naga way of life' and it is exactly on this feeling that the NNC built the bridges between the various tribes, thereby bringing them under the common banner of Naga nationalism.

As far as the official NNC stand is concerned, it still sticks to its demand for an independent Nagaland. But circumstances and political exigency have compelled the NNC to think in lines of a peaceful solution to the Naga problem. With it has emerged the concept of an autonomous Nagaland within the Indian Union. The concept of regional and local autonomy seems to have attained greater significance in the light of recent developments in the Indian political scene and the call from the CPI(M)—among others—for a national dialogue on Centre-state relations. Although the Desai-Phizo talks failed, the Naga underground has not given up its efforts to reach a peaceful settlement on lines of an autonomous Nagaland.

It may be remembered that in the initial stages of the Naga movement, the demand for secession from the Indian Union did not constitute the prime factor; but was taken up later as the Government of India, not trying to understand the

sentiment of the Nagas, launched a policy of suppression. It is necessary to bear in mind that true national equality, as Lenin argued, calls for "wide regional autonomy and fully democratic self-government, with the boundaries of the self-governing and autonomous regions determined by the local inhabitant on the basis of economic and social condition, national make-up of the people etc."

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1. The British had never exercised their jurisdiction over all the Naga tribes. Most of the north-eastern Naga-inhabited areas were left completely untouched till 1947. For details see "The Rising Nagas" by Yusoso Yuno, Vivek Publishing House, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 105-106.
2. For population-wise break-up of the various tribes see Techno-Economic Survey of Nagaland, NCAER, New Delhi, 1968, p. 9.
3. Referring to this Neville Maxwell writes: "Their [the Nagas'] social organisation is tribal and they are sometimes thought of as a primitive people even by the standards of the Indian subcontinent, but it is seriously to misrepresent them. By the standards of literacy, village self-government and democracy, and quick aptitude to the instruments and institutions of modernisation, they are far from backward; their political leadership is mature and sophisticated, and their sense of national identity as strong as that of any other people of the subcontinent, and stronger perhaps than most": "India and the Nagas", by Neville Maxwell, Minority Rights Group, Report No. 17.
4. The present state of Nagaland covers an area of 16,488 square kilometres and lies between 25°6' and 27°4' north of the Equator and between the longitudinal lines 98°20' E and 95°15' E. But this area, which forms the Nagaland constituted by the Government of India, is not acceptable to both the 'loyal' as well as the underground Nagas who are of the opinion that Nagaland should include the entire Naga-inhabited areas between the Chindwin and the Brahmaputra. This attitude was reflected in the reaction of both the state

- government of Nagaland and the underground Nagas to the Indo-Burma Border Agreement (1975). Both sections felt that large chunks of Naga territory had been handed over to Burma. The population over Nagaland is approximately 5,16,000, but that of the entire Naga-inhabited area is around one million.
5. Although the Naga tribes differ from one another, each possessing its own language unintelligible to the other, yet they share a common tradition and culture in the form of religious beliefs and social customs.
  6. Devi, Lakshmi: "Ahom-Tribal Relations", Gauhati 1968, p 21.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
  8. Naga-Assamese trade flourished for centuries and Nagas bartered and sold commodities like salt, cotton, ivory, wax, and medicinal herbs to the Assamese who in turn supplied the Nagas with rice, clothes, etc. Evidence of this is seen in the wide use of 'patois' Assamese in Nagaland, especially in areas bordering the plains of Assam. See Yusoso Yuno, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
  9. Elwin Verrier, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, OUP, Bombay, 1969, p. 162.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
  12. The Naga Hills District covered only central Nagaland and did not include the other Naga-inhabited areas under one administrative unit. Naga scholars of today blame the British for the deliberate division of their land into Naga Hills proper and parts of Assam, Manipur, and Burma. This step they feel, was aimed at keeping the Naga tribes divided and hence, to check the growth of Nagaism and Naga nationalism. "Had the British visualised the foremost demand of all Nagas for integration into one unit and state, they would have received a lot of warm goodwill from the Nagas. Time and again, the British rule which created firm boundaries where previously there had been none, between India, China and Burma, cutting across the Nagas here and there against their will, had certainly laid the basis of future trend of Naga progress into conflict with the neighbours." Yusoso Yuno, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
  13. Khonoma the birthplace of Phizo, was the largest village state in the Naga Hills. Khonoma is the birthplace of a very large number of Naga intellectuals, revolutionaries and social reformers.

14. The Indian National Congress claimed that the Nagas were involved in the national movement and to prove its case it cited the struggle of the Zeliangrong Nagas under their leader Guidinliu. But Guidinliu's struggle was primarily confined to her tribe (which is made up of three sub-tribes, the *Zemis*, *Liangmeis* and *Rongmeis*) and was based on inter-tribal rivalry, anti-Christianism and the revival of animist rites. It was during the Japanese advance into Dimapur during the Second World War that the Nagas felt some degree of oneness with the rest of the subcontinent. But even in the fight against the Japanese, as in the earlier anti-British uprisings, the Nagas fought for preserving their own identity.
15. The Naga Club, the first organisation of its kind in the Naga Hills was formed in 1918. It was the first effort at organised all-Naga opinion.
16. Alemchiba, M "A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland", Naga Institute of Culture, Kohima, 1970.
17. Yusoso Yuno, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-168.
19. Aram, M: "Peace in Nagaland" Arnold Heinemann (India), New Delhi, 1974, p. 117.
20. Angami Zapo Phizo was born in 1900 in the village of Khonoma. He started his career as a businessman. Served in the INA of Subhas Chandra Bose from 1943 to 1945; was in Central Jail, Rangoon, along with other INA prisoners after the British recaptured Burma. He returned to the Naga Hills in 1940 and joined the Naga National Council: was elected President of the NNC in 1949 and has been its undisputed leader since then. In self-imposed exile in England since 1957.
21. The Naga National Council, in its suggestion regarding a 10-year Interim government of the Naga People, laid down the following terms:
  - (a) The interim government of the Naga people will be a government by the Naga people, having full powers in respect of legislation, the executive and the judiciary;
  - (b) Nagaland belongs to the Naga people and will be inalienable;
  - (c) The interim government of the Naga people will have full powers in the matter of revenue and expenditure, an annual subvention to cover the deficit being given by the Guardian Power;
  - (d) For defence and for aiding civil power in case of emergency, a force considered necessary by the Naga National Council will

be maintained in Nagaland by the Guardian Power. The force will be responsible to the Naga National Council who will in turn responsible to the Guardian Power.

22. Aram, M; *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.
23. Article 8 of the Agreement was worded as follows:  
"The Governor of Assam as the agent of the Government of the Indian Union will have a special responsibility for a period of 10 years to ensure the due observance of the Agreement, at the end of this period, the Naga National Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of the Naga people be arrived, at."
24. Yusoso Yuno: *ap. cit.*, p. 182.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
26. The Naga Home Guard was raised by Phizo from among the Naga ex-servicemen and young recruits. It was the beginning of the Federal Naga Army. The Naga Youth Movement and the Naga Women's Society are the youth wings of the Naga National Council.
27. The Federal Government adopted a Constitution which declared: "Nagaland is a people's sovereign republic. This has been so from time immemorial. There shall be a parliament with a strength of 100 Tatars (members of the Tatar Hobo or House of Representatives). The President will be elected by the people and his cabinet will consist of fifteen Kilonsers (Ministers). While guaranteeing religious freedom and the equality of the sexes, the Federal Constitution further declared: "Land belongs to the people and it will remain so. There will be no land tax, and other forms of taxation will be formulated by different administrative units.

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