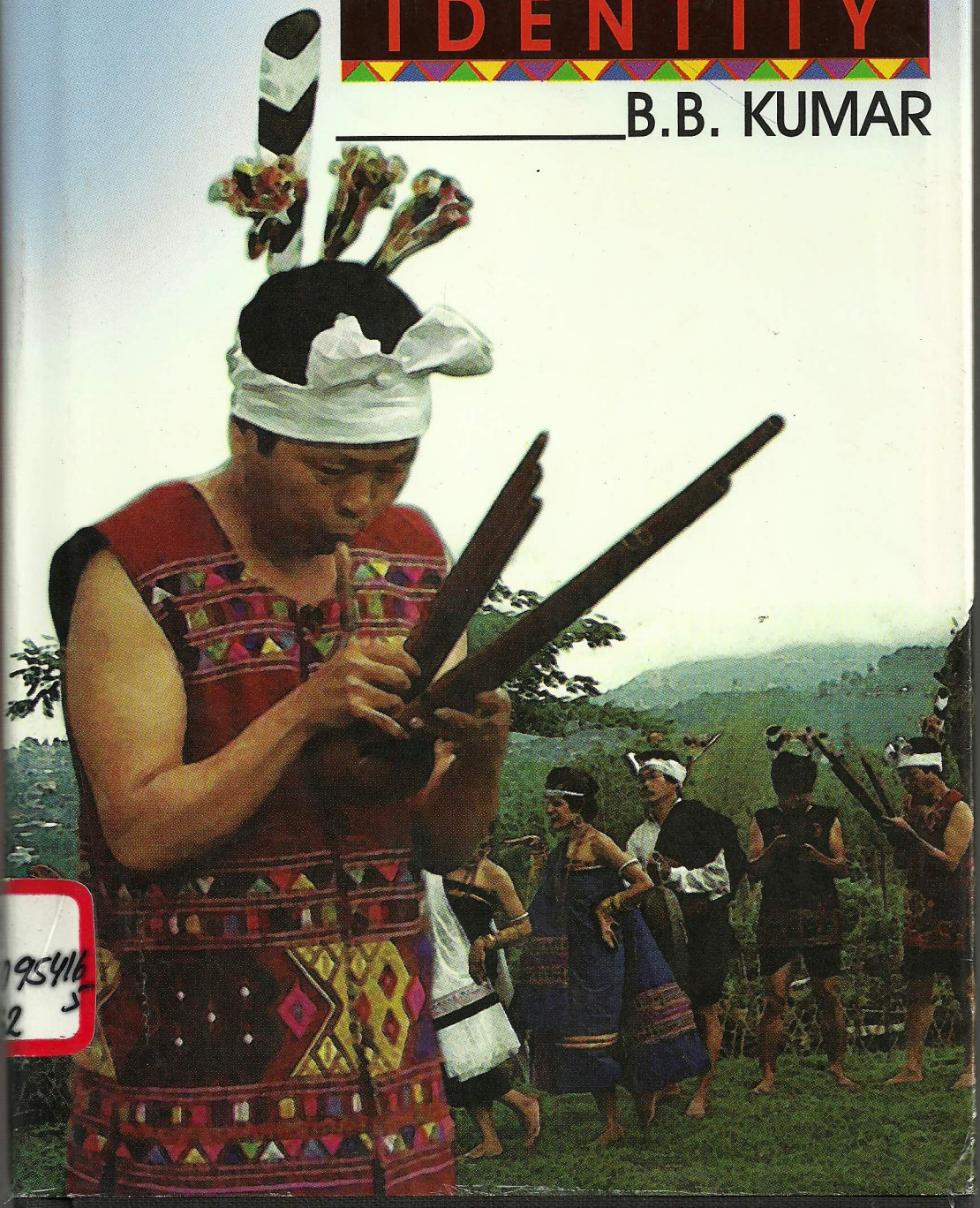


# NAGA

## IDENTITY

B.B. KUMAR



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# NAGA IDENTITY



**B.B. Kumar**

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**B.B. Kumar**, M.A. (Hindi), M.Sc. (Chemistry) and M.Sc., Ph.D. (Anthropology), was formerly the Principal of Sao Chang Government College, Tuensang and Science College, Kohima. He was also member of the Executive Council, Academic Council, and University Court of the North-Eastern Hill University.

Dr. Kumar has written/edited/co-authored about 135 books and more than 100 papers. Also, he edited quarterly journal *The Thinker* for 13 years. Presently, he is Editor of the quarterly journals *Dialogue* and *Chintan-Shrijan*.

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*Dedicated to  
the Memory of  
My Father*



in 1867 to work among the Ao Nagas; in 1879 to work among the Lhota Nagas and in 1880 among the Angami Nagas.

The Nagas were exposed to the outside world for the first time during the First World War, when 2000 of them served in France. In 1918, a Naga club was formed. In 1929, they submitted a petition to the Simon Commission, wherein they desired to be left out from the reform scheme for India. The relevant portion reads as follows:

“Before the British Government conquered our country in 1879-1880, we were living in a state of intermittent warfare with the Assamese of the Assam valley to the North and West of our country and Manipuris in the South. They never conquered us nor were we subjected to their rule. On the other hand, we were always a terror to these people. Our country within the administered area consists of more than eight Tribes, quite different from one another with quite different languages which cannot be understood by each other, and there are more Tribes outside the administered area which are not known at present. We have no Unity among us and it is really the British Government that is holding us together now.” (Memorandum of the Naga Hills to Simon Commission on January 10, 1929)

The origins of the word ‘naga’ or ‘nagas’ is shrouded in mystery. But its popularization is certainly a nineteenth century phenomenon. For a very long time, the Assamese plains people have called them as ‘noga’. The appellation ‘nagas’ has acquired a generic form that includes more than 30 tribes who live in Nagaland and neighbouring states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur and the bordering nation-state of Myanmar. The tribes of north east India, however, find mention in the Indian epics i.e. the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as ‘kiratas’. And this denotes the entire race of tribes and is more inclusive in nature than another generic term ‘Bodos’ which denoted a majority of plains tribes since the medieval period. The Ahoms who ruled over Assam and neighbouring hills for over six hundred years (during 1220-1826) have a separate identity of their own as a ruling elite but they married the girls from among the plains tribes as well as caste-Hindus predominantly of the Brahmaputra Valley and are now an Other Backward Classes (OBC).

The Nagas have shared history with the Assamese, Manipuris, Cacharis and the Singphos. There are certain common traits which

make it difficult to distinguish the Nagas from other tribes of the north-east. Their languages share certain features even with the distant Munda group of languages of people living in Jharkhand. The institutions like morung and head-hunting have wide currency even outside India. While the Nagas have many similarities/common traits with the non-Nagas, the intra-Naga differences are at the same time too many. A study of major tribes of Nagaland (Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, Rengma, Chakhesang, Yimchunger, Kalya Kongnyu, Konyak, Chang, Sangtam, Phom, Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei (Zeliangrong), Khiemungan) would reveal that the Nagas differ in their languages, village-polity, social institutions and usages, physical features, temperament, myths of origin and migration, etc. While asserting Naga identity, the similarities between the Nagas and non-Nagas, and intra-Naga differences are often overlooked. Uncritical rejection of facts has led to certain obsessions, bias, subjectivity and myth-making. Such things have happened specially in the case of the Nagas and generally in the north-east.

The Nagas migrated into the Naga Hills from southeast China and Burma over a long period of time. The Naga legends make us believe that all the Naga tribes migrated from Burma across the Somra tracts and reached a place called Khezekenoma just across the border of Manipur. The name Naga was given to them by outsiders. The Nagas resented the name for long, till political expediency caused it to be accepted. The different Naga tribes never lived as one group. Each tribe lived in one village or more but it exclusively belonged to them. Each village was self-sufficient as demands were limited and by and large maintained its independent character. Any interference, trespassing or encroachments by members of other villages (which invariably meant another tribe) in its territorial jurisdiction usually provoked inter village war leading at times to head-hunting.

My description of the Naga society as narrated in my book *The Problem of Change* needs recalling. It reads:

“The Nagas are not the ‘naked’ people, as is erroneously understood by the word ‘Naga’. Except for the Angami sub-clan, the Nagas are a group who developed strong village institutions under the leadership of a chief and loved their freedom passionately. Stone worship is common among the

Nagas as they believe that they are born of stone. The various tribes of Nagas, each speaking a dialect of its own, had one thing in common and that was their sense of valour. At different periods of history the Nagas have indulged in constant feuds and head-hunting. The Nagas' conflicts with Manipur, the British forces and the security forces in the post-Independence era are well-known. The feud between the Assamese plainsmen bordering Naga territory is almost a constant feature of known history. In their socio-political outlook, while the Nagas accord equal rights to men and women, the women are prevented from participating in politics, fighting and hunting. The political process in Nagaland, in tune with its past traditions, has not sent any significant number of womenfolk to their legislative assemblies. The traditional Naga attitude towards property was one of 'renunciation'. The Feasts of Merit, which bestowed distinction on their donors, was intended to show the virtues of distributing wealth over its possession. While the Feasts of Merit are still in vogue, the attitude towards property has changed. Acquisitiveness is now dominant, and the traditional institution of communal ownership of property is cracking. The process seems irreversible". (pp.30-31)

Language contributes meaningfully to identify formation. The Naga languages belong to the Tibeto Burman family. There are more than eighteen languages spoken by Nagas in Nagaland itself. The prevalence of Nagamese as the language of dialogue among Naga tribes and of the local market is a recent phenomenon and shows predominant influence of Assamese language. The Nagas had a long tradition of visiting the Assam plains and particularly their *weekly hats* (bazars). The rich Christian religious literature put down in Roman script is another feature of Nagaland's linguistic profile. All these reveal great spirit of accommodation in Naga society.

During the Second World War (1939-45), Kohima was a battle ground of the Allied and Axis forces. The journey of the Nagas from a district of Assam to the status of Union Territory and the State has been very quick. The State of Nagaland was inaugurated on 1st December, 1963. The inauguration of Nagaland as a full-fledged state of the Indian Union brought a population of 3.71 lakhs in an

area of 16579 sq. kms. at par with the bigger States such as the Uttar Pradesh with 74 million people and 2,94,416 sq. kms area, with the same privileges and status. Nagaland was the first state in the country with such meagre population and small area. It was not formed on linguistic lines nor it conformed to the criteria of economic viability but purely on political consideration. The state was to run and continues to be sustained mainly on the grants received from the Consolidated Fund of India.

The formation of the new state gave birth to never ending demands for small states in the north-east and elsewhere in the country on ethnic lines. Nagaland was replicated in Mizoram. The insurgency in Mizo Hills district of Assam by the Mizo National Front (MNF) under the leadership of Laldenga, and the formation of Mizoram as a State of the Indian Union, was much on the same lines as witnessed in Nagaland. The demands for the formation of Meghalaya by All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC), and similar demands for the full-fledged statehood in Manipur and Tripura got encouragement due to the creation of Nagaland. Thus the statehood of Nagaland was the fore-runner of the reorganization of the north-east. The same may be said about the insurgency in the rest of the region. The Naga insurgency is the mother of all the insurgencies in the north-east India. Fortunately, the re-organisation of north east India got completed by 1972 and successive governments at the Centre have wisely resisted demands for further division of Assam and rationalization of boundaries of States of the region on ethnic lines of exclusivity denying the logic of a plural society.

The Naga identity formation is a recent phenomenon. Many tribes who call themselves Naga today, were unaware of the term. Many Naga tribes were not included into that category even a few decades ago. On the contrary, even Kukis, Cacharis, Abors and many other communities were called Nagas in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus the term 'Naga' was a fluid one. It was a loose term. The Naga identity continues to be an evolving identity. However, politicization of the said identity has led to much myth-making and propaganda. It made the study of the Nagas and their identity necessary in anthropological, cultural and historical perspective to remove the perceptual haziness about the same. The present book is an effort in that direction. Dr. B.B. Kumar sums up his approach as follows:

“..... the Assamese, who called them ‘Noga’, the Indian British Government, and to the greatest extent, the Government of Independent India forged and strengthened Naga Unity and thereby their ‘greater identity’. Ironically, many Nagas who suffer from ‘holier than thou’ attitude, blame them the most for keeping them under separate administrative units. The authors long sojourn as an educator in Nagaland and his abiding interest in the history and anthropology of Nagas and other tribal communities of the area was one of the reasons to write this book. The recent movement for greater Nagaland, viz Nagalim, compelled the author to undertake immediate repeat-study of the history and anthropology of the Naga tribes to update and renew the earlier ones. The present book is the outcome of the same. While the recent identity formation and desire of the Nagas to live together, is a welcome development, the same should not be claimed on the basis of history and anthropology; as facts do not substantiate such assertions. At the same time there should not be clash of competing desires to bring complications.”

Democracy has greatly contributed to forging of a composite Naga identity in Nagaland. Notwithstanding insurgency and occasional boycott, the forces of insurgency articulated the proud and independent character of the Nagas even as the forces of democracy had used the tradition of democracy in Naga society to make it participate in elections. Fortunately, the democratic forces are having now a upper hand. The small group of people who wanted to secede from India are losing support as democratic processes are gradually integrating the Naga people into the mainstream of economic development and modernization. The nation could reasonably be proud of a moderately stable constitutional culture in Nagaland particularly in the backdrop of the earlier insurgency movements and violence.

The growth of the middle class in Nagaland was intimately linked up with the spread of education and was not based either on a landed aristocracy, which never existed, or on commercial activity, which came only with the introduction of English education. Even here the middle class is the dominant group. It comprises the politicians, bureaucracy, businessmen from contractors to shopkeepers, and those belonging to independent professions, such

as law and medicine. The migrant middle class is a product of the massive expenditure on development schemes dating back to the 1960s and consists of contractors, shopkeepers, foodgrain dealers, etc., from North India. They are mainly concentrated in Dimapur, which is outside the purview of ‘inner-line’.

The middle class phenomenon in Nagaland has four distinctive features: (1) the absence of a traditional bourgeoisie or capitalist class; (2) the contradictions and conflicts between two easily identifiable groups – the indigenous middle class and the migrant middle class; (3) the control of the indigenous middle class over the apparatus of the State, including the bureaucracy and agriculture, and of the migrant middle class over industry and trade; and (4) the economic leverage commanded by outside business houses.

If ‘identity’ is to look different, to stand apart from others, the Nagas have a distinct identity in terms of physique, folklores, folktales and world-view. Times have changed them but still they are distinct. And yet at the same time they know interdependence. They have practiced tolerance towards others point of view. They view their future among a community of believers in different faiths and races. Vital fragments of the past still live on in dress, customs, ceremonies, festivals and in their attitudes towards women despite mass conversion to Christianity. The uniqueness of the Nagas lies in their institutions of governance – the villages, the *morungs*, methods and processes of cultivation involving the community, their arts and crafts, their rituals and beliefs; and their lores and tales.

Identity movement should lead to re-creation of memories of tribal life. Unfortunately, not much work is done in this behalf. What is happening is domination of political issues over memories, over stories related to conservation of ecology, over traditional music and dance forms, over common ownership of natural resources.

There are two contradictory forces in operation in Nagaland. One is for democracy, peace and development; and the other for violence, insurgency and extortion. Increasingly the forces of peace are gaining strength and the conclusion of peace with major insurgency groups by the Government of India is bound to herald an era of constructive activity and say of the Nagas not only in their own affairs but in the affairs of the country as a whole.

There should be sincere and imaginative efforts to accord the

people of Nagaland powers that could be given to a federating unit that is possible within the constitutional and parliamentary framework of empowerment. The Nagas have a great sense of realism and once it is clear to them that the Government of India is willing to give them all that they could within the framework of the constitution and powers of parliament, it should not be difficult for them to conclude an agreement to end this long period of strife and uncertainty. The empowerment of Naga people and their democratic institutions of governance would lead to peace and amity among the tribes and in its neighbourhood and unprecedented economic and cultural progress.

For a variety of reasons outlined earlier, Nagaland, the sixteenth State of the Indian Union, occupies a significant place in the national consciousness. The end of insurgency in Nagaland and heralding of peace process and launching of massive economic programmes in that State would release the energy of the people in a constructive manner. In the language of a Buddhist monk (infact of a song) **"The snow has fallen, but don't be sad, After the snowfall, comes the warmth of the sun."** The sun is bound to rise not in distant future but in our life-time and illuminate Nagaland and the whole region. The civilisational idea of and democratic realities in India allow regional or local identity to co-exist with national identity without any stress or animosity. A Naga serving in another State or living within Nagaland finds no conflict either of interest or of values in his being a Naga and an Indian simultaneously.

I am sure *Naga Identity* would add to greater understanding that the Naga identity and the Indian identity reinforce each other and support the forces of inclusiveness, dialogue and peace in Nagaland. The book is accordingly commended for wider readership.

*Balmiki Prasad Singh*

**(Balmiki Prasad Singh)**

26 November, 2004

Guru Nanak Jayanti Day  
New Delhi

Chancellor, CIHTS (deemed to be University),  
Sarnath and former Union Home Secretary

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## PREFACE

The Nagas lived in self-sufficient village republics. Most of their villages were located at the hill-tops or on the spurs of the hills. They were well protected against the enemy attack and in many cases, even the sections of the village (*khels*) had their separate defence arrangements. Different clans of a tribe inhabiting a village lived in different quarters (*khels*) of the village. The clan solidarity was the most pronounced phenomenon in the Naga society.

'Naga' is a generic term used for about thirty tribes inhabiting our North-Eastern fringe and across our border in Myanmar. Most of the tribes known as "Naga" today were not aware of the term before the establishment of the Naga Hills district. The Nagas of Tuensang started using the term only after the advent of the administration in that district in the early 1950s and especially after the formation of Naga Hills Tuensang Area. In this case, an interesting encounter with an elderly Chang is worth quoting. He said: "We were calling ourselves Chang. You people came and told us that we are Nagas and we started calling ourselves Nagas. We started learning Hindi, but you told us to learn English. And we started learning English." The Nagas used to call themselves by the respective names of the tribe concerned; but the more pronounced trend was to identify oneself with the village of one's inhabitation. Thus their identity used to be mostly village based.

There is considerable confusion about the Naga identity among the Nagas and the non-Nagas. The Naga identity, as exists today, is a recent construct. It continues to evolve and is a case of greater identity formation. The author attempts in this book to analyze Naga identity formation in the broader framework, taking into consideration their history and culture, origin, migration, ethnicity, social structure and village polity. It also deals with the politicization

of the Naga identity. The book aims at removing perceptual haziness about the Naga identity.

Shri B.P. Singh, former Home Secretary, Government of India has kindly written the foreword of the book. The author expresses his grateful thanks for the same. The author is thankful to Shri J.N. Roy, *IPS* (Retd.), treasurer Astha Bharati, for encouragement for writing the book. He also thanks Shri Ashok Kumar Mittal of Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi for speedily undertaking the publication of the book.

**B.B. Kumar**

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Naga Students Federation (NSF) has issued a directive and a warning against any academic research into the Naga people's history without its permission. The immediate provocation for the directive, as reported, was due to their concern about 'genome research project' which has been undertaken in Nagaland University by some Naga and non-Naga scholars. It requires, among other things, the collection of blood samples from every Naga tribe. The NSF, whose support to Naga nationalist aspirations and Naga sovereignty is well-known, is afraid that such physical anthropological research may reveal, beyond doubt, the physical distinctiveness of different Naga tribes. The NSF maintains that the history of the Naga people had been distorted by the research by non-Naga scholars. The president of the apex Naga students' organization said that 'people from outside the Naga community' would not be allowed to undertake any research on Naga history without the organization's permission (*Frontline*, September 26, 2003). This development makes it clear that the universities; Nagaland University now, and North-Eastern Hill University earlier, have failed to create healthy academic ethos; and the above-mentioned directive is the manifestation of the new form of 'academic terrorism'.

The Britishers kept the Nagas isolated from the rest of the country. Some prominent British colonial functionaries wanted the separation of the Naga and other tribal inhabited areas of the North-East from the rest of the country. Their strategy, commonly known as the Coupland Plan, of the formation of a separate Crown Colony or a Hill State could not succeed as the independence came too early

after Second World War for them. The Nagas by and large wanted to remain in India. Their only apex organization, Naga National Council (NNC), passed a resolution just before independence, and wanted the Naga Hills district to remain a part of Assam State in India. The demand of self-determination was made by a section of the Nagas afterwards.

The generic term 'Naga' was loosely used for a number of tribes on our eastern fringe a century ago. Not only the tribes calling themselves Naga today, but even the Kukis, Kacharis, Abors, Mikirs and the Nepalis settled there were called Nagas. On the other hand, even Nagas did not know about the particular nomenclature, and even resented to be called Nagas. Every Naga tribe has its own name. Its neighbours also gave separate name to a tribe. Thus the composite Naga identity is of recent origin and it lacks claimed historical support. The history of the Nagas is the history of the individual tribes; it is also the history of a thousand Naga village republics.

The Nagas had harmonious relationship with the Ahom kings. At least the Aos and the Lothas never raided the plains for the heads. Few cases of the conflict between the Eastern Nagas and the Ahoms is recorded by Gait in his *History of Assam*. But such raids became gradually less and less. Angamis and other Nagas served in the Ahom army. The Naga raids in Assam and Cachar plains started only after the arrival of the Britishers in the North-Eastern scenario. Similar interface existed between the various Naga tribes and Manipuris, Kacharis and Singphos.

The demand of the right of self-determination was voiced by the NNC under the leadership of Phizo. It was based on the grounds of (i) ethnic distinctiveness, (ii) distinct social life, way of living, laws and customs, etc., and (iii) different religion – Animism and Christianity. The Nagas are in noway distinct from other tribes of the region. Their social life, way of living and customs are also dissimilar in many ways. Animism and Christianity are also not the exclusive religions of the Nagas. On one hand, there are many traits, which are not shared by all the Naga tribes, on the other hand, there are many common culture markers, which are shared by the Nagas and the non-Nagas.

The Nagas are polyglot; they speak dozens of mutually un-intelligible languages. The physical features differ even from one

household to another in a village. The intra-Naga differences in their social structure, village polity, dress, hair style, tattooing, setting of the village, housing pattern also differ significantly. The mode of agriculture, sowing of seed and harvesting is also not identical. Their mortuary rites and beliefs after death are also not similar. The migration has taken place almost from every direction. But the places of origin are not far away from their present habitat.

The Naga tribes have mixed origin. They have incorporated Mongoloid, Austric, Aryan and even Negroid ethnic elements in them. Even the individual Naga tribes have taken ethnic elements from diverse sources. In spite of such vast diversity, the "greater identity formation" has taken place, which is a welcome development. The Naga identity is a stable one today.

The greater identity formation of the Nagas was only possible by bringing them under single administrative unit of Naga Hills district followed by the unification of Naga Hills and Tuensang area. It became a dense administrative region after the formation of the State. Unprecedented growth of education and development activities brought the Nagas nearer to each other than never before. Even the spread of Christianity was facilitated by the State formation. It was not possible for the Nagas to even know each other without bringing them together under bigger administrative unit. It is interesting to know that even as late as 1929 after the formation of the Naga Hills district the Nagas hardly knew each other. The Memorandum presented to the Simon Commission by the Naga Club gives clear picture of the knowledge of the Nagas about themselves. It says:

"Our country within the administered area consists of more than eight Tribes, quite different from one another with quite different languages which cannot be understood by each other, and there are more Tribes outside the administered area which are not known at present. We have no Unity among us and it is really the British Government that is holding us together now."

It is clear from the above statement that the Assamese, who called them 'Noga', the Indian British Government, and to the greatest extent, the Government of Independent India forged and strengthened Naga Unity and thereby their 'greater identity'.

Ironically, many Nagas who suffer from 'holier than thou' attitude, blame them the most for keeping them under separate administrative units.

The authors long sojourn as an educator in Nagaland and his abiding interest in the history and anthropology of Nagas and other tribal communities of the area was one of the reasons to write this book. The recent movement for greater Nagaland, viz. Nagalim, compelled the author to undertake immediate repeat-study of the history and anthropology of the Naga tribes to update and renew the earlier ones. The present book is the outcome of the same. While the recent identity formation and desire of the Nagas to live together, is a welcome development, the same should not be claimed on the basis of history and anthropology; as facts do not substantiate such assertions.

This study seeks to analyse the process of Naga Identity formation in the broader framework. Tracing origin and history of the Nagas, it discusses at length their migration, culture, social structure, ethnicity, religion, languages and village polity. Also, it deals with the politicization of the Naga identity. The role of the institution of Morung among the Nagas has been examined as well.

**B.B. Kumar**, M.Sc. (Chemistry), M.A. (Hindi) and M.Sc., Ph.D. (Anthropology), was formerly the Principal of Sao Chang Government College, Tuensang and Science College, Kohima. He was also member of the Executive Council, Academic Council, and University Court of the North-Eastern Hill University.

Dr. Kumar has written/edited/co-authored about 135 books and more than 100 papers. Also, he edited quarterly *The Thinker* for 13 years. Presently, he is Editor of the quarterly journals *Dialogue* and *Chintan-Shrijan*.

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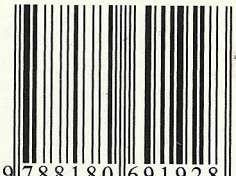
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