

Challenges and Predicaments of Naga Nationalism

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Amongst the communities who have been fighting for autonomy or independence, the Naga resistance movement is the first struggle which has pioneered to interrogate the conventional understanding of the development of nationalities in the northeast of India. It does pose a challenge to the practice of civic nationalism and casts doubts on the possibilities of multi-nationality nations.

Inspired by classical Marxist understanding of nationality, several scholars and activists in India examined the colonial and pre-colonial roots of nationalities and studied the impact of the development of nationalities on Indian politics.¹ The debate on nationality question threw light on many unknown dimensions of different nationalities in India. However, the discourse on nationality remains inconclusive. Questions like whether India, after the withdrawal of the British, has emerged as an independent nation state or whether it is still a dependent multi-nationality state continue to bother the scholars even today. Moreover, most studies on nationalities in India are confined to the experiences of mainland India. Not much work has been done to understand the nationality question in the peripheral regions of Northeast India.

In addition to certain advanced communities, one comes across several communities officially recognized as scheduled tribes in the Northeast. Like the Assamese and Meiteis, these so-called tribal communities are also laying claims as distinct nationalities or nations and leading many a movement for autonomy or independence. The Naga resistance movement is the first struggle of such a kind in the history of post-colonial India. The civil disobedience movement of the Nagas that later took the form of insurgency showed the way to several other ethnic insurgencies in the northeast. The five decades-long movement of the Nagas for self-determination interrogates the conventional understanding of the development of nationalities. It does pose a challenge to the practice of civic nationalism and casts doubts on the possibilities of multi-nationality nations. A critical study of the nature and dynamics of the Naga

national movement, therefore, becomes a necessity for both theoretical and practical reasons.

CONVENTIONAL SCHOLARSHIP ON NATIONS & NATIONALITIES

According to classical Marxist understanding, nationalities emerge at comparatively more advanced stages in the development of history, after the communities reach the stage of settled agriculture and develop common language, cultural symbols and practices that could bind all the members of the community. Marx and Lenin were aware of different trajectories in the development of nationalities. Apart from the classic instances of nationalities developing into independent nation states, they also took note of immature national movements and instances of different nationalities merging and assimilating together to form new nations.² Multi-nationality nations like the USA, the UK, Switzerland etc., are as much a reality as the so-called single nationality nations such as Italy and Germany. In that sense there is nothing unnatural about India being a multi-national state and a nation at the same time. In the mainland under the colonial rule, nationality consciousness as Tamils, Bengalis and Oriyas developed alongside pan-Indian national consciousness as Indians. Shared historical experiences under the colonial rule brought different nationalities on a common platform to fight for independence. Due to the impact of Indian nationalist movement, the nationalities in mainland India instead of thinking in terms of forming separate independent states, felt the need for giving shape to a sovereign multi-nationality nation state.³ However, in the Northeastern region, wherein the Indian national movement failed to touch all regions and segments of the people, the indigenous communities did not respond uniformly to the idea of forming Indian Union. Certain sections of the people in the Northeast who were influenced by the India's freedom struggle were favorably inclined to join the Indian Union. But others, especially the communities living in the hill areas of the Northeast, which was untouched by the Indian nationalist movement, were skeptical about their future in the post-colonial India. Despite their reservations, eventually most of these communities could be convinced or coerced to join the Indian Union. But the Nagas declared themselves as a distinct nation and expressed their desire not to form an independent state of their own.

BACKGROUND TO THE NAGA 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 Naga tribes are found in the northwestern parts of Myanmar bordering India as well. 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 Tangkhul who practise wet rice cultivation, the institution of private property had not developed among the Nagas before the arrival of the British.⁴ The traditional political institutions of the Nagas were decentralized. Each tribe lived in their respective villages under their chiefs. Comparatively the traditional Naga society was egalitarian. But inter-tribal and inter-village conflicts were very common among them.⁵ Although the tribes were living in their present areas of inhabitation for centuries, their tribal background did not permit state formation in the modern sense of the term.

There were times when the Naga tribes had confrontations with neighbouring kings and tribal chiefs. But, by and large, the Nagas lived autonomous lives, with little interference from outsiders. The Nagas felt a potential threat to their existence only when the British started developing tea plantations along the foothills and encroached into the areas which the Nagas considered as their natural traditional territories. The Nagas reacted to the British advance by raiding and plundering the villages in the plains under the control of the British. To establish peace along the borders and to make peace with the Nagas, the British tried several methods. Initially, they unsuccessfully tried to use the rulers of Manipur and Cachar to check the Naga raids and pitted the Kuki tribes against the Nagas. When such indirect methods failed to yield positive results, the British sent several punitive expeditions against the Nagas till 1880 to suppress the Naga rebellion. The colonial authorities introduced Inner Line Policy Regulations in 1872–73, seeking to stop further encroachment of tribal lands by tea planters and monitor the entry of traders and other plainmen into the hill areas inhabited by wild tribes.⁶ Apart from this, the colonial authorities consciously encouraged the Christian missionaries to work among the Naga tribes to educate and civilize them. The British constituted Naga Hills District and gradually brought different Naga-inhabited areas under their control. But the British realized that these territories had little economic relevance for them. Hence they chose not to waste their resources for creating elaborate administrative set-up in the hills. Instead they chose to administer the Naga-inhabited areas with the help of the traditional chiefs.⁷ No conscious efforts were made to bring about radical changes in the economic and social structure of the Nagas.

However, certain unintended changes did take place with administrative unification of several Naga-inhabited areas and with establishment of peace and order in the hills. The missionaries' role in spreading education and Christianity helped in mitigating the anti-British feelings among the Nagas. Certain new ideas, professions and practices hitherto unknown to the traditional tribal societies began to take root within the Naga society. Educational institutions and churches brought Nagas belonging to different tribes together on same platforms. From within the Naga society there emerged a new class of educated and baptized elite⁸, who rose above tribal loyalties and dreamt of uniting all Nagas. Unlike in the Lushai Hills, wherein the newly emerging educated elite openly confronted with the oppressive traditional chiefs, no such confrontations took place in the Nagas Hills between the traditional tribal chiefs and the emerging educated elite. The traditional Naga chiefs, being more democratic and open-minded, continued to command respect from all—including from the emerging educated elite. Voluntary participation of thousands of Nagas in the First and Second World Wars enabled them to expose themselves to modern ideas of patriotism and nation state. The British administrative policy of keeping the frontier areas aloof from the rest of India kept the Nagas away from the influence of Indian nationalist movement. On their part, the British officers and the missionaries made the Nagas feel that they were racially, culturally and historically different from the plainsmen and that they had nothing to do with mainland India and Indians. The fears nurtured by the British against the plainsmen found its initial political expression in the form of memorandum submitted by the Naga Club to the Simon Commission requesting the British to keep the Nagas out of the proposed constitutional reforms.⁹

NAGA NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

Even during the British rule, the Nagas enjoyed considerable autonomy in the so-called backward tracts, un-administered areas and fully excluded areas, with little or virtually no interaction with the people living in the plains. It was hence natural that the Nagas became apprehensive of their future when the British chose to withdraw from the Indian sub-continent. During this transition period, the Naga Hill District Tribal Council transformed itself into Naga National Council (NNC). The Naga leaders appealed to the British authorities to grant them independence. They began to argue that, since the Nagas were historically, racially and culturally different from Indians and were never occupied by the Indian rulers, the Nagas should be granted freedom as a sovereign country¹⁰ once the British rule comes to an end. They also approached the Indian leaders and expressed their concerns and wishes. After several rounds of negotiations,

the moderate leaders of the newly formed NNC 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.'

In subsequent years this clause became a subject of controversy among the Nagas and also between the Naga leaders and the succeeding Indian Governments. Militant leaders like Zapo Phizo began to interpret the clause to mean that the Nagas had the right to become politically independent after ten years. On their part the Indian leaders showed scant respect for the Hydari Agreement. Enraged by the Indian leaders' disregard for the Nine-Point Agreement, the NNC proclaimed independence on August 14, 1947, one day before India was officially declared independent, and intimated the same to the Government of India and to the United Nations Organization. The Naga leaders refused to join the Bordoloi Sub-committee constituted by the Constitutional Assembly to make recommendations for accommodating the aspirations of the hill tribes of Assam. Subsequently, they discarded the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which made provision for Autonomous District Council for the hill communities. With militant leaders like Phizo taking over the leadership, NNC persisted on its demand for independence. Responding to the call of their leaders, the Nagas in the Naga Hills District voted *en masse* for Naga independence in the 'referendum' organized by NNC. Inspired by their leaders, the Nagas boycotted the first general elections for the Parliament and assembly in 1952 and started civil disobedience movement against the Indian officials and government.

At this point of time the Naga revolt was basically confined to the tribes inhabiting the Naga Hills District of Assam. Although the demand for independence was articulated by the educated Nagas, it had the support of Naga tribal chiefs as well. But from the documents of NNC, it becomes clear that its goal was not to re-establish the pre-colonial authority of the tribal chiefs. Although the speeches and writings of the then Naga leaders romanticized the tribal background of the Nagas and projected the Indians as personifications of all ills and negative qualities, one can understand from the kind of state that they sought to establish that the leaders wanted the Nagas to move ahead, not backwards.¹¹ The Indian nationalist leaders should have appreciated the dilemmas and fears of the Nagas who had little knowledge of India and the Indians, thanks to the British policy of segregation. They should have handled the Naga resistance with patience and maturity. Instead, the nascent Indian State took the Naga revolt as an affront and started using repressive measures to suppress the Naga movement. The Government of India enacted several black acts and empowered the armed forces with

enormous powers to undertake arrest and suppress the leaders and people supporting the Naga movement. Far from solving the problem, the bureaucratic and repressive measures drove the Naga activists to take up arms against the Indian State. The State repression gave moral justification to the logic of the militant Naga leaders and helped in marginalizing the moderate leaders within the NNC. The stories of repression and violation of human rights hurt the sentiments of all Nagas and helped in the spread of militancy to other Naga-inhabited areas in the Northeast.

ACCORDS AND PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Since 1950s the Naga movement took different twists and turns. Realizing the futility of armed solution, Jawaharlal Nehru's government favorably responded to the Sixteen Point proposal put forward by Naga People's Convention (NPC) and entered into an agreement with it in 1960. Following the agreement, Nagaland came into existence as a separate state by merging the Naga Hills District and Tuensang Area. The agreement assured that no Act or law passed by the Union Parliament affecting the Naga religious or social practices, their customary law and procedures, civil and criminal justice and the ownership and transfer of land and resources, would 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 approved 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.¹²

The outcome of the Sixteen Point agreement satisfied the moderate Nagas, who began participating in the Assembly and Parliamentary elections since then. However, the militants denounced the agreement as a compromise and continued insurgency. In the sixties a ceasefire agreement was negotiated and several rounds of negotiations took place between NNC leaders and the Indian government. But the negotiations failed to bring peace to the region, as the parties involved stuck to their stated positions and refused to compromise. The failure of peace talks led to renewal of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations. A section of NNC leaders who sought to escape the State repression entered into negotiations with the Indian government and signed the Shillong Accord in 1975. They agreed to give up arms and seek solutions for the Naga problems within the parameters of the Indian Constitution. The treaty apparently

concluded with the consent of Phizo, who was by then in exile, hurt the sentiments of militant leaders within NNC. Leaders like Isaac Swu, Th. Muivah and Khaplang, who considered the Shillong Accord as a sell-out, formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980. NSCN extended its hold to distant areas inhabited by the Nagas. Despite the progress it made within a limited time, because of personality clashes and tribal animosities the NSCN split into two factions in 1988—the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K). After the split, the NSCN (IM) led by Isaac Swu and Th. Muivah emerged as a powerful Naga insurgent group and soon established its supremacy over other insurgent groups in the region.¹³ Because of its hold over the Naga movement, the Government of India rightly thought that no solution to the Naga problem could emerge without engaging the NSCN (IM).

Ever since the Indian government entered into a ceasefire agreement in 1997, several rounds of negotiations have taken place at highest levels both in India and abroad. Although all peace loving people—Nagas as well as non-Nagas—expected the peace talks to succeed, nothing positive and concrete has emerged out of the negotiations yet. Compared to the peace talks that took place in the sixties, where the parties refused to budge from their stated positions and expected the other party to fall in line with the solution suggested by it, the negotiations taking place now are, however, far more open and reciprocal. The NSCN (IM) is not persisting with its demand for independence and, on its part, the Government of India also is not insisting on acceptance of the Indian Constitution as a pre-condition for talks. Despite the sincerity of the parties concerned, if the negotiations have not succeeded in finding an amicable solution, one needs to probe the complexity of the Naga national question and see whether the very nature of the Naga national movement itself eludes acceptable solution to the decades-long Naga problem.

NAGA MOVEMENT: TRIBAL OR NATIONAL?

At one time the British projected the Nagas as wild-savage tribes. After independence the Indian government officially recognized them as scheduled tribes. On their part, the Naga leaders also accepted such colonial and post-colonial representations and asserted their distinct identity by differentiating themselves from people living in the plains—Indians, 'the non-tribals'. Interestingly, the same leaders project the Nagas as an emerging nation. In fact, they sought to construct the Naga national identity by valorizing the virtues of their tribal background. That they did not see any contradiction between tribal and national identities becomes evident from the renaming of Naga Tribal Council as Naga National Council. But this association of tribe

with nation should not make one blind to the changes that have taken place in the Naga-inhabited areas during the British rule and thereafter. Factors like the growth of Christianity, spread of modern education, establishment of new political institutions, penetration of market mechanisms, expansion of transport and communication network, disintegration of communal ownership, development of the institution of private property etc., have considerably weakened the economic and social base of traditional Naga society. New classes and groups unknown to the tribal societies have begun to play important roles in the Naga social and political lives. But for these material changes, the Naga movement could not have achieved the character of a national struggle. Indeed the Nagas, who were treated as primitive and savage tribes not long ago, have come a long way now by emerging as a distinct nationality. While acknowledging the Naga movement as a movement of an emerging nationality, one should not become blind to the vestiges of tribalism obstructing the development of Naga nationality. Despite the glorification of the virtues of tribal life, the Naga leaders knew that tribal identities do come in the way of Naga unity. The Church in Nagaland made persistent efforts to encourage the Nagas to think and act, rising above the tribal loyalties.¹⁴ The NSCN (IM) used Christianity as an effective tool to unite different Naga tribes. Yet tribal identities still persist among the Nagas. Mutual suspicions and animosities among the Naga tribes continue to affect the organization and leadership of the Naga national movement. Traditional rivalries and clashes between the Aos and Angamis, the Angamis and Tangkhuls, the Konyaks and Tangkhuls are known to everyone. The continuing rivalries among the Naga insurgent groups are adversely affecting the Naga cause. With each Naga insurgent group projecting itself as the real national force and criticizing the others as traitors, the much-aspired unity of all Nagas still remain a distant reality. The Nagas themselves admit that number of Nagas killed in inter-tribal and inter-group clashes far exceed the number of militants killed by the Indian Army. Persistence of inter-tribal and inter-group rivalries stand in the way of coming out with a meaningful solution acceptable to all sections of the Naga society.¹⁵ Of course, in recent years the Church and the Naga Hohos are making efforts in this direction. But how far they can succeed in accomplishing their objective is not clear yet.

CIVIC NATIONALISM OR ETHNIC NATIONALISM?

Some scholars who have made intensive study of several national movements across the world made a distinction between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. Although it was also pointed out that they are not mutually exclusive, one can still distinguish between civic and ethnic nationalism on the

basis of whether the emphasis is on territory or ethnic identity.¹⁶ Civic nationalism is born out of the composite civic experiences of different communities living in a particular territory and subjected to common political rule. It justifies itself on the basis of collective historical experiences as subjects living under common political and economic rule. Civic identities, by their very nature, are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Where identities are based on civic nationalism, one can see more than one ethnic group identifying themselves with such identities. Although certain communities or groups of people play decisive roles in constructing these identities, the origin of the civic identities cannot be reduced to the interests and roles of any dominant communities or groups. In Northeast India the Assamese identity and Manipuri identity can be referred to as civic national identities.

As opposed to civic nationalism, ethnic nationalisms' claims to nationalism are usually based invocation of a particular ethnic identity—tribal, religious, linguistic or racial identities. Ethnic nationalism calls for unity of all members belonging to particular ethnic community, irrespective of the political territory to which they belong. Since its emphasis is on ethnic unity, ethnic nationalism by its very nature excludes other ethnic minorities living in the same territory and expects them to accept political supremacy of the dominant ethnic community in the territory. Northeast India is a witness to different forms of ethnic nationalism. Naga nationalism is indeed a classic example of ethnic nationalism. It does not confine itself to the Nagas of the erstwhile Naga Hill district. It appeals to the Nagas of not only the present state of Nagaland, but also of its neighbouring states, namely Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, and for that matter appeals even to the Nagas living in Myanmar. The demand for integration of all Naga-inhabited areas in the region is the product of Naga ethnic nationalism. For such a demand to materialize, one needs to disintegrate the already existing states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The solution of such a kind will not be acceptable to the neighboring states, which have come into existence emphasizing the civic national identities. As long as the people and governments of the states voluntarily accept the demands of the Naga movement, the demand for integration of all Naga-inhabited areas is unlikely to materialize.¹⁷

SELF-DETERMINATION AND SOVEREIGNTY

In the world of nations, every emerging nationality has the right to determine its future. This internationally accepted principle of self-determination is often mistakenly identified with the aspiration to establish sovereign nation state. It is true that many an oppressed nationality in the world chose to form

independent states of their own to escape feudal or colonial domination and subjugation. But it is also equally true that quite a few nationalities across the globe voluntarily came together and/ or accepted to become a part of bigger nations in their own interests. Even in mainland India, we come across several nationalities which joined Indian Union on their own volition and sought autonomy within the federal set-up to protect their culture, language and other interests. In the nationalist discourse, one often fails to acknowledge that these nationalities also exercised the right to self-determination as much as the ones who chose to secede and form independent states. History shows that the principle of self-determination of nations took varied forms in different countries and the establishment of sovereign states is only one of the forms of self-determination.¹⁸

To the extent the Nagas are accepted as nationalities, no one questions their right to self-determination. But the subject becomes contentious when self-determination is identified with sovereignty. It is true that the militants among the Nagas always insisted on independence from the Indian Union and its non-compromising stand on the issue of sovereignty resulted in the failure of peace negotiations in the sixties and led to splits in NNC. The fear of compromise on the question of sovereignty caused split even in NSCN. But this militant position is not shared by all Nagas. Way back in the fifties also there were moderates among the Nagas who were ready to join the Indian Union, provided India assures them of considerable autonomy. The Sixteen Point agreement of 1960, which led to the birth of Nagaland, could not have materialized without the support of some sections of the Nagas. The years of forced or voluntary integration with the Indian State created certain classes and groups of people among the Nagas who are quite comfortable being a part of India. The militants may brand them as traitors, but the fact of the matter is that there are quite a few Nagas who do not share the militants' view that the Nagas have a better future by seceding from the Indian Union.

Moreover, the response of Naga tribes to the militant Naga movement is not uniform. While anti-Indian feelings are indeed strong among those Naga communities which suffered considerably due to anti-insurgency operations, the Nagas living in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh do not appear to be so keen on the demand for a sovereign Nagalim. It appears that NSCN (IM) leaders are aware of this uneven growth of Naga nationalism. Moreover, earlier because of their obsession with the idea of sovereignty, the NNC militants refused to listen to the British authorities and Indian leaders' logic that no political community could survive as an independent state without adequate material and human resources. However, the experience seems to have made NSCN (IM) leaders realize that in any future arrangements the Nagas cannot totally

remain independent of India. Hence they are not insisting on their demand for independence in their recent talks with India. However, it needs to be seen whether NSCN (IM) would be able to effectively communicate with and convince the Nagas under the influence of other Naga insurgent groups about the need to dilute their demand for sovereignty in their own interests.

ROLE OF THE INDIAN STATE

Following the retreat of socialist movement and anti-colonial struggles in recent decades, today there are remote possibilities of Nagas achieving independence through armed rebellion. Withdrawal of external material and moral support by the Big Powers has considerably affected the insurgent outfits. In the changed international context, the insurgent movements are compelled to negotiate with their respective states to find solution through other means. The NSCN (IM) has only responded to the needs of the time when it chose to accept ceasefire and start negotiations with the Indian State. At this juncture, what form the Naga national movement takes in future depends considerably on what the Indian State choose to do or fails to do.

From experience the Indian government learnt that, partly, the policy makers themselves were responsible for a sensitive Naga issue taking the form of a powerful insurgency. India had to pay a heavy price for mishandling the Naga problem. Although the Indian State has enough military and monetary resources to keep the Nagas forcibly under their control, it would be unproductive in the long run to rely on such means to hold the Nagas. Moreover, India's 'Look East policy' compels policy makers to explore ways and means to establish peace in the region. India has thus reasons to engage the Naga insurgent groups in peace talks and seek early solution to the Naga problem. Despite its own compulsions to seek peace, the Indian State finds it difficult to concede to the demands of the Naga national movement. Although the hill areas inhabited by the Nagas have no economic relevance for India, the Indian State cannot afford to grant independence to the Nagas because of political and strategic considerations. Similarly, the Indian government cannot take any drastic decision to integrate all the Naga-inhabited areas in the Northeast without the consent of the people and governments of the affected neighbouring states.

CONCLUSION

Militant tribal movements are not new to India. Many a tribal community in the mainland India waged heroic struggles against the landlords and the British

government. But the Naga struggle is unique in the sense that it is the first organized resistance movement against the post-colonial Indian state with the aim of establishing an independent nation state of their own. Although they were predominantly tribes then, they did not hesitate to take on the might of the Indian State and continued their struggle for over five decades facing all odds and obstacles. The structural changes that took place in the region over the years did facilitate interactions among different Naga tribes and brought them together. But more than anything else, the common struggle that they waged did help in transforming the Naga tribes living in different parts of the Northeast and speaking diverse languages into a distinct nationality. No doubt, inter-tribal and inter-group rivalries weaken the pace of development of the Naga nationality. But the existence of the Naga nationality is no more in doubt. What really concerns us today is the consequences of the nature and development of Naga nationalism.

The ethnic nature of Naga nationalism has come to pose a serious challenge to India's idea of multi-nationality nation. Yet there is no way that the Naga national movement achieves its objectives without negotiating simultaneously with the Indian State and with the neighboring nationalities upholding the idea of civic nationalism. In the given situation what would be the future of Naga nationalism depends on how the Indian government and the Naga leadership handles opposing concerns and competing interests in the region, and finds a solution that is acceptable to all parties which have stakes in the problem.

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