

NAGA IDENTITY: NAGA NATION AS AN IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Nationalism, as a political phenomenon, has gained much currency in the last few centuries. It has aroused large collectives of people and has become the grounds on which economic, cultural and political claims have been made. The nation has also become a marker of identity for individuals and whole societies. In this paper, I would like to look at the beginnings and formation of Naga nationalism and the important economic, cultural and political claims it makes. The beginnings of Naga nationalism could be located in the specific encounter Nagas had with modernity via British administrators and missionaries. From the 1940s onwards, the claims made by Naga nationalism have been met with certain ideological and militarist response from the Indian state. The response of the Indian state has determined the subsequent efforts of the Nagas to define the contours of their nationalism.

Key words: Nationalism, nation, Naga identity, political, imagined communities, Nagaland, India, Indian response

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Introduction

As identities are mobilized to serve the political designs of vested interests, it seems obvious that the idea of a Naga nation and behind the 'national liberation' and 'secessionist' movements in the region is seemingly at least, incompatible with the idea of the Indian 'nation state'. Identity based on human collectivity has been a central feature of our existence, including in a world wherein human individuality has been celebrated. We organize ourselves into groups and lead our lives in a world inhabited by these groups. In that sense, identity perhaps derives from our belonging to human groupings, which are crucial aspects of our sense of being. Generally, identity is belongingness, sense of sameness, positionality and directionality.

Naga identity

In fact, the core issue of identity had never been addressed in-depth neither at an academic level or political level. The Indian intellectuals in general have shown total disdain and apathy to understand and win over the Nagas. It has to be premised that Naga identity as was constructed in the 1940's was based on its primordial principles. Indian union was not antithetical to the Naga identity. Naga identity had been envisioned by inclusive not by exclusive (Atai Shimray 2005: 60).

Udayon Mishra (1988) maintains that if a deep attachment to one's native soil, to local tradition and to establish a territorial authority can be accepted as mark of nationalism, then the Nagas qualify on all counts. Several scholars like M. Horam, Alemchuba, etc., and Peace Mission (a neutral body recognized by government of India) explicitly maintained 'the stand that the Naga people are unquestionable a nation'. The ethnic source of Naga nationalism is unquestionable. In ethnic nationalism, the focus primarily is on the collective level of identity and community. The Naga nationalism is derived from the inner and dormant resources of the Nagas being an ethnic community and the perception and sentiment they aspire. There is also the important of common identity and shared culture of the Nagas. Shimray argued that the cultural components which have prompted nationalism among the Nagas include dress, food, music and crafts as well as customs and mode of village administration. The absence of a common Naga language has not impeded the growth of a common consciousness. Further, the most common cultural element shared by the Nagas is the religion which is embodied in the general accepted ideal 'Nagaland

for Christ'. According to Sanjib Bruah, "If the Naga conversion to Christianity was the result of their incorporation into a larger political, economic and cultural universe so was their journey on the road to Nationhood (2003: 12)." Therefore, one would argue that religion was not the sole intrigue point to trace which awaken the Nagas, in fact it did bring an awareness to the knowledge of sovereignty.

Socio-Political Impact of British Policy on Nagas

British colonial administration as an alien force had a profound socio-political impact on the Nagas. The maintenance of law and order, introduction of 'civilizing' agencies such as Christianity and education, development of modern means of communication, and above all, the invasion of the Nagas, a stagnant society thus far, with all progressive of change both within and outside the district inevitably brought about gradual transformation in Naga Hills. The changes in socio- religious dimensions influenced the corresponding changes in socio-political life of the people.

Nation building is deeply rooted in modernity. Although foreign missionaries imparted modern education to the Nagas, the main reason the Nagas were so strongly attached to independence was more moral to their animistic base which ordains not to be subjugated to an alien and upon which, Christianity had fervently injected an inspiration of individual freedom.

The initial colonial interest in the Naga Hills and the subsequent pursuance of a policy of 'indirect administration' appears to have been motivated by the geography of the Naga Hills and its strategic importance as a border to lands of greater commercial significance for the British. That the colonial state was not entirely indifferent to the possibilities of economic benefits from the Naga Hills was proved in the emphasis laid on the profitable investment in tea plantations.

Today, the Indo-Naga peace process has reached a crucial stage during which political scheming has reached under way aiming at an honorable political settlement between the Government of India and the Naga (Uniqueness of Naga History, 2005:1). One of the most important aspects of Naga life is that each tribe has its own area of land. The entire Nagaland is divided into tribal areas and it is practically and morally owned by that tribe. This is true of all hill tribes in the

north-east. No other tribe encroaches on the land area.

The Nagas are distinct ethnic stock of Mongoloid race migrated to the present compact areas from South-East Asia probably through Myanmar crossing Chindwin and Irrawady rivers. As a distinct race, they remained unconquered and unadministered by any foreign power for ages. However the British imperialists came to their territory and forcefully occupied certain portion of their territory from 1882. Later on, they attempted to extend their colonies and declared a “British District” with Kohima as its administrative headquarters against the wishes of the Naga people, where they ruled for about six decades (1881-1947) in the Southwestern and eastern parts of the Naga territory, but the Northern and the Eastern part of the Naga territory, was left uncontrolled and unadministered. This portion of the Naga territory remain independent till today which is known as Free Nagaland. Realizing uniqueness of Naga situation, the British India Government passed an Act called Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873, prohibiting the outsiders from entering into the Naga territory without Inner Line Permit. Even today, no outsider can enter into the Naga country without Inner Line Permit that had being following ever since 1873. Nagas, they have always considered themselves as belonging to an independent nationality. “We are Nagas by birth, Indians by accident,” is a common refrain among the people of Nagaland.

The Nagas have always wanted to live as one people, under one administrative roof. The concept has even found approval in mainstream Naga politics. The Naga rebel groups may have thought for long that they would be able to fulfill this dream by achieving their objective of an independent Naga homeland. They would not admit it, but, of late, groups like the NSCN-IM may have realized that independence may not be possible after all, and that they should settle for something like a ‘Greater Nagaland.’ This, they think, can be formed by the merger of Naga-inhabited areas in adjoining Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and if possible those in Myanmar, into the present Nagaland State and the four hill districts of Manipur – Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul – to be merged with Nagaland, in addition to 26 villages in the district of Churachandpur inhabited by the Zeliangrong tribe. In fact, it has already resolved that the Nagas in Manipur would sever all ties with the Manipur government in the wake of the anti-cease-fire uprising that, it says had displaced more than 50,000 Nagas from the Imphal Valley.

The Naga Nationalism and its History

Greenfeld 1922 cited in Fonkem Achankeng (2015: 98) stated that, “Nations do not just exist; rather they emerge and evolve like many other social phenomena in a difficult and inconsistent process-or simply do not.” However, political identity was the initial root towards Naga identity. Chang suggest that:

The nation had been found and built on the basis of political resistance to imposition of colonial rule over the Nagas, whether it was the British or Indian. It is in the context of this political struggle that many tribes have come together and have articulated themselves under the umbrella of a common identity known as Naga (cited in Morung Express 11-10-2005).

As Sudipta Kaviraj has aptly pointed that, ‘History is to engage ourselves’ where history becomes reality that nationalism gives to itself’ (Sudipta kaviraj, p, 1). It provides insight in the features of formation of nationalist discourse and its strategies of presenting itself, continuity from past to present, because identity of nation is since time immemorial. Similarly, Chaterjee argues that, “Nationalism had become a matter of ethnic politics, the reason why people in the Third World killed each other...” (2009, xi: 3). In fact to understand Naga’s struggle for autonomy, one needs to go back and revisit the history.

Today, the Indo-Naga peace has reached a crucial stage during which political scheming is under-way aiming at a political settlement between the government of India and the Nagas. Therefore it is now clear that while making political decision towards solving the long-standing Indo-Naga political issue, the uniqueness of the Naga history is going to be the fundamental basis of evolving a settlement between the two entities. The Naga Nationalist sentiment is based on the fact that the Nagas are different from the Indians and Burmese. Nagaland became known to the world during World War II, in the fierce battle between allied forces and the Japanese imperial army at Kohima. Nagas were caught in the crossfire engaging as porters, spies and scouts for both British and the Japanese. But even before the war had started, Naga nationalism had already begun. During the World War I, the British government recruited about 2000 Nagas and sent them to France as labour corps, even though the World War did not directly impact the Nagas, it made them indirectly felt conscious about their identity and their existence itself. The

journey across seas and countries awakened the spirit of the Naga nationalism like other parts of India and they began to develop the concept of a Naga nation which had not been dreamt of before. Accordingly, in 1918, an association called the Naga Club was formed with the joined efforts of government officials, village headmen, dobashis, and those Nagas who returned from France. This club was first of its kind with its members from various Naga tribes was social and political in nature.

In 1929, when Simon Commission came to Kohima, the Naga club on behalf of the Nagas submitted a memorandum demanding that the Naga hills should not be included in the Reformed Scheme of the Govt. of India and that if the British were to withdraw, the Nagas should be left alone to charter their own political future and determine for themselves as in ancient times. The British parliament, thus, decided to treat the Naga Hills as an Excluded Area and Partially Excluded Naga inhabited areas from the Government of India Act 1935. The administration of Naga Hills was left to the Governor of Assam. From 1935-45, the Naga nationalist negotiated intensely with the British India for independence.

In April 1945, Charles Pawsey, the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills district founded the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (NHDTTC) with the aim of uniting the Naga tribes together. With their roots in the Naga club, the Naga nationalist leaders changed the NHDTTC into Naga Nationalist Council and it became a national institution. Thus, the Naga struggle took a direction in which their determination was to attain freedom. This was the beginning of the modern phase of Naga movement.

In 1947, Sir Akbar Hydari, the then Governor of Assam tried negotiate with Naga National Council (NNC) on behalf of the Government of India. The negotiation brought about an agreement between the NNC and the Government of India known as the 9 point agreement or the Hydari Accord. But the nine point Accord was the most controversial which gave rise to another deadlock. It said that the Governor of Assam as the agent of the Government of Indian union will have a special responsibility for a period of ten years to ensure the due observation of this 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 arrived at.

It was claimed by the NNC that it ensured Nagas have the right to complete independence after expiry of 10 years. It was a clear promise of self-determination and assurance. On 9 November 1949, a three member delegation of the NNC met the representative of the Government of India. The Government of India representatives refused to ratify the Accord and it was no longer considered to exist by the Indian Govt. On July 17th, 1947, a Naga delegation under the leadership of A.Z Phizo met Jinnah and on 19th met Gandhi. Gandhi after meeting the Naga delegation stated: “Nagas have every right to be independent. We do not want to live under the domination of the British and they are now leaving us...if you do not wish to join the Union of India nobody will force you to do that” (Shimray, 2005: 58)

Unfortunately Gandhi did not live to carry out his promise. As no agreement or understanding was reached between the two parties, and with the independence of India and Pakistan coming closer, the Naga nationalist were anxious and thus declared themselves independent on August 14th, 1947. They send their declaration of independence to the Government of India and also to the United Nations and also informed that the Nagas did not accept the Indian Constitution.

The NNC under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo conducted a plebiscite in 1951. The support to live as a sovereign nation was overwhelming and the referendum turned out to be 99.9 percent in favour of independence from India. But this result was ignored by the Government of India. Nehru when faced with the demand of independence simply exploded with anger and said “whether the heaven falls or India goes to pieces and blood run red in the country I don't care, Nagas will not allow to become independence” (Ibid: 59).

In 1952, the NNC launched the civil disobedience campaign refusing to pay taxes. There was total non-participation in the first Indian general election. No Naga stood or voted for the election. On March 30th, 1953, the Nagas welcomed Nehru's decision to visit Kohima. He was accompanied by her daughter Indira Gandhi and Burmese prime minister U Nu. The NNC were busy preparing to submit a memorandum. But just before the meeting he gave instruction to stop any Nagas from making any written or oral address to the reception. As a result Naga delegation

walked out of the meeting. Nehru was humiliated and he was left to address only a handful of Government servants. Arrest warrant for NNC leaders were given. Realizing the danger of armed repression, the formation of people's sovereign republic of free Nagaland was announced. This was the political wing of the NNC to direct and monitor its activities mainly in eastern Nagaland (Burma). In 1956, the NNC formed the Federal Government of Nagaland and with it, its armed wing was also formed known as the 'Naga Home Guard' later known as the 'Naga army'. It was the first armed resistance group to oppose Indian army force. The Assam Disturbed Areas Act of 1955 was introduced which enabled the Assam armed police and Assam rifles to act without any legal restriction whatsoever. Thus the 'reign of terror' broke out. There was an open war which resulted in heavy casualties for both the sides. There was intense fighting between Naga resistance and Indian security force. It forced the Naga leaders to go underground. Thus, an undeclared war between the Nagas and India began which leads to much bloodshed, armed violence, raids, murder, arson, looting, kidnapping, burning of villages. Even the church was not spared and many innocent victims lost their lives.

However, while armed confrontation continued, efforts were made to bring peace. In the late 1950's the idea that statehood within the Indian union might provide an answer to the demand for independence surfaced. This was the proposal associated with the new organization called the Naga People's Convention. It was formed as an over-ground organization to act as an intermediary between the Govt. of India and the Federal Govt. of Nagaland.

The first Convention was held in Kohima from August 22 under the chairmanship of Imkongliba Ao. It recommended that the Naga Hills District and the Tuensang Area should be amalgamated and a new unit called 'Naga Hills and Tuensang Area' (NHTA) should be formed. It came into effect in December 1957 and was placed under the Ministry of External affairs. The second convention was held in May 21st, 1958, in the Ao village of Ungma. This convention set up a liaison committee to contact the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) in order to bring a political settlement. In the third Naga People's Convention (NPC) held in October 1959 in Mokokchung, it decided to propose that Nagaland might be made into a separate state within the Indian Union. It further emphasized local autonomy for the Naga Hills District, and a separate electorate for the Naga tribes. The word "Naga" denotes a conglomeration of hill tribes rather

than a single entity. Here the 16 point agreement was drafted and was put to Government of India. The NPC was looked with suspicion by the FGN and its sympathizers as the idea of statehood was conceived by the Government to divide and delude the Nagas. The participation of Indian intelligence bureau in the setting up of the NPC can be found in the memoirs of that bureau's Director, B.N. Mulik. With the signing of the 16 point agreement by NPC representatives and the Indian officials in July 26th, 1960, it appears that the appeal for statehood was officially recognized. The Government of India passed the 13th Amendment Act and thereby created the state of Nagaland on 1st of December 1963. The creation of statehood was not the end of events. It did not create any major abatement in the nationalist movement. The movement did not fall as it was expected. Instead there was an even greater explosion of Naga nationalist sentiments which is continuing till today.

Attaining Statehood was not the end of Naga nationalist movement but instead it brought more of self realization of what one has been fighting for. It was on September 4, 1964 between the Government of India and the Federal Government of Nagaland, realization came on the necessity of bringing peace to Naga territory as there was an undeclared war going on between the Indian Army Forces and the Naga Army.

Therefore in order to normalize the situation, the Government of India constituted a high level commission called Formation of Peace Mission in 1964. But even this organization seems fail to response to the call of Naga struggle therefore in 1975 Shillong Accord was signed, this was the most infamous accord signed between the Government of India and some authorized underground representatives. This created further division among the Nagas, because of the fact that it was simply a political trap to suppress the Naga National Movement for freedom. Consequently after the formation of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980, they procured more sophisticated arms from foreign countries to defend motherland and in the year 1988 the splits of NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) took place, and it was followed by the NSCN Cease-fire agreement of 1997, signed between the Government of India and NSCN (IM) with the sole objective to continue the peace process during which the Naga political talk could be held. And today, peace process is going on and at the same time political negotiation is under way. All these developments have not taken place without a reason and historical facts (Uniqueness of

Naga History, 2005: 7).

The Naga people's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) was formed in 1978, this was the first democratic rights organization of the Nagas and it was largely through its efforts that people in other parts of the country became aware of the brutal repression of basic rights by the armed forces operating in Naga inhabited areas. Naga Mother's Association had been formed on February 14, 1984 at Kohima. Its objectives include upholding womanhood, human values and rights; serving as a channel of communication for Naga women's mutual interest and welfare; encouraging human development by educating the masses for responsible and wholesome living; and recreating interest in the traditional socio-cultural values of the Nagas and maintaining their self-identity and sense of self reliance.

Naga Nation as an Imagined Communities

Any definition of a nation must also take into account the claim of the people living together within a territory, that they are a separate unit and 'seeking a control over their own way of life under the banner of a common organization. Ernest Renan observed that, "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle, one lies in the past, one in the present. A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future, A nation's existence is a daily plebiscite just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life" (Ernest Renan, 1990). Which means, nation is a daily engagement of one's sacrifices.

Second, what can we draw what is imagined communities? Anderson opines that "It is imagined as a community, because regardless of the inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (1991: 7). It is a collective of tribes who hardly knew each other almost a century back to come together and call themselves a Naga Nation. Anderson observed that it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communities. In this view, there is an understanding that nation doesn't have a strong picture in the beginning but through gradual process they are

structured. There are various factors social, cultural, economic and political go into the making of a nation. Anderson (1991: 40) stated that ‘print capitalism’ as a quintessential factor in imagining a national community, which talks of nation-building as a process of socio-political development, which ideally – usually over a longer historical time span – allows initially loosely linked communities to become a common society with a nation-state corresponding to it. In the case of Nagas, certain cultural factors related to the coming of colonial modernity among the Nagas, such as modern education and print culture had an important role in providing resources and tools for imagining a nation. Chang argues:

The growth of a Naga middle class and exposure to global events and processes also did not fail to contribute towards this imagining. Nation is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently and limited and sovereign. It is limited in the sense that largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings has finite elastic, boundaries etc and beyond that lie other nations, because the whole population of the world as such cannot be imagined as a community. Referring to this text, Naga society is also exactly of one could imagine because the members have been scattered some to Myanmar, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Assam, Nagaland. But in spite of this, Nagas have strong feeling of oneness. He further stated that ‘communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but the style in which they are imagined (cited in Morung Express 11-10-2005).

According to Partha Charterjee, nation was entirely a product of political history and in the same way what Nagas claim today is also political in nature, saying that Nagas were never ruled or dominated, in fact they have their own way of living. Further argues: “Nations were not the determinate products of given sociological conditions such as language or race or religion; they had been, in Europe and everywhere else in the world, imagined into existence” (Chatterjee, 1993: 4-5).

The limitations might come that the Nagas doesn’t have a common language, but to critique that same as Indian, prior to Independence or for that matter post independence India never have/had a common language, each region or State has different languages and dialects, thus language actually doesn’t constitute a nation. Chaterjee further stated two kinds of distinction that is,

inner and outer domain, “material domain of the outside of the economy and state where sovereignty was accepted and their inner domain of the cultural identity” (Ibid. P. 6).

Major institutional forms through which this imagined community came to acquire concrete shape, especially the institutions of what Anderson so ingeniously called “print-capitalism” (Anderson, 1991:44-46). Here, in the case of Nagas, newspaper as another technology for imagining a nation. Local newspapers construct the notion of Naga and the nationality of Naganness. Language, according to Anderson appears as a gradual, unselfconscious, and pragmatic, not to say haphazard development, since nation is entail with the political interest per se.

In this way print is both a medium for nationalism and a means of nationalization, as product and process thus we understand that print culture is a nation’s consciousness. Finally, it is imagined as an community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Finally, it is the fraternity that makes it possible, over the centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. In Naga context, Nationalism has been the most powerful political idea of the past several years, and as a powerful idea, nationalism has induced millions of willingly to die in its name. It represents the union of a political phenomenon with the identity of the human being and hence it is a frame of reference for individuals and their societies.

Conclusion

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. Whereas, Naga integration is a movement for self-determination; desiring to live together as one people in our one homeland having our own self-rule government. Naga integration is the legal and moral right which means, integration of contiguous Naga inhabited areas bringing them under one political identity; safeguarding socio-political rights free from alien interference. By virtue of birthrights and as a matter of human rights, the Nagas desire to live together as one family maintaining pristine democratic self-rule

government in their own way. It explicitly addresses the removal of all the arbitrary and imaginary boundaries created without the free and informed consent of the Naga people by the Government of British-India and Burma and India. It is a self-determination of a group of indigenous people who are living within a distinct geographical areas inherited from their ancestors. To them, Naga integration and self-determination is their birth right.

Therefore, Naga integration is nothing more than a process of seeking one's own identity. It is a process of seeking home in one's own land that was misplaced and disintegrated by the invaders. It is a question of human rights because birthrights have been deprived and denied by snatching rights from living together in one's own undivided homeland. The question of Naga integration would have not arisen, had their territory been not disintegrated. History is very clear that Naga peoples' movement is never a separatist or secessionist movement because Nagaland does not fall under Indian Union and Naga territory was/is never an integral part of Indian Union. Therefore, Nagas clarify that dismembering or impairing, either totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent states like India and Burma does not arise because India, Burma and Nagaland are separate political entities.

But this paper also problematizes the fact that, India and Naga should march together sharing greater amount of relations with each other, this should be the political negotiation on the issue in contemporary context. The very fact that if the Nagas in general accept the uniqueness of Naga history, there is no reason why the Nagas should not be united, and also why the Indo-Naga political issue should not be resolved in the most honorable way maintaining good relationship with each other.

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