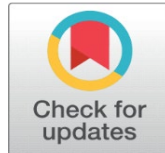


# NAGA NATIONALISM: THE CROSSROAD

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore and look into Nationalism in the context of Nagaland which offers a unique historical background in so far as any discussion on the idea of nation is concerned. Taking into account the pre-British intrusion from 1932 and the opening of a critical chapter from 1947 onwards, Nagaland was historically outside the pale of the great Indian civilization. Year after Indian independence, Nagas fell under the spell of this great nation and the holocaust continues several decades which witnessed different political pathways within.

From its nascent stage in 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club and the birth of Naga National Council (NNC) in 1945 to the signing of the historic Naga Peace Accord in 2015, the Naga political movement have been a complex issue projecting the nexus of policy makers, stakeholders and national workers who operates by exploiting the Naga issue rather than solving it. This paper presents the critical endeavour to situate the Naga political movement in the present context and attempts to understand and reimagine the relevance of Naga nationalism in the light of its expectations respecting its unique history.

**Keywords:** History, Naga Nationalism, Holocaust, Representations and Crossroad.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nagas are Mongoloid tribes inhabiting the hilly regions between the Brahmaputra River in India and the Chindwin River in Myanmar (Burma) in the state of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in India and the Eastern Nagaland in Myanmar (Burma)<sup>1</sup>. The word 'Naga' is shrouded in mystery and it is, most probably, a name given by non-Nagas who came in contact with them. Various interpretations of the word and who first coined it have been speculated upon but so far, no authoritative version has been arrived at. Thus, the origin of the name

<sup>1</sup> Thong, S. Joseph. *Headhunters cultures (Historic Culture of Nagas)*, Mittals Publication, New Delhi, 2022, p.1.

“Naga” has given rise to some considerable speculations, with the result that there are several theories in existence, each with the foundation but with no unanimity of opinion<sup>2</sup>. However, politically, the term “Naga” includes the various tribes of the present state of Nagaland, the tribes Nocte, Wancho, Tangsa, etc of North East Frontier Agency (Arunachal Pradesh) and their congeners in Manipur state and in the Somar tract of Burma<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper is descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary data were used for this study. Primary source would be periodicals (newspapers) published by different Naga national workers and secondary source material would be books, journals and articles. The data collected were associated and analysed with research study and interpreted to understand how Naga nationalism started and has gone through thick and thin, presenting itself at the crossroad and also to understand the impact that it has made on the Naga fabric.

## 3. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Historical evidences suggest that the Nagas, came through different routes into India, and had already established their settlements on the western side of Naga hills, even before the advent of the Ahoms. The Ahom Buranjis have references to the fierce resistance at the hands of the Nagas that the Ahoms had to face, while entering Assam between 1215 AD and 1228 AD. It remains a fact, however, that even after establishing their reign in Assam, the Ahoms never tried to bring the Nagas under their permanent subjugation<sup>4</sup>.

J.H Hutton’s statement “those tribes which are spoken of as Nagas have something in common with each other which distinguishes them from many other tribes found in Assam and entitled them to be regarded as a racial unit in themselves”<sup>5</sup> denotes the uniqueness of the Nagas. Nonetheless, this unique tribe having the nomenclature ‘a nation’ is intriguing. The question emanate, who gave a pan-Naga concept? Conceptualising a methodology for Naga nation and Naga nationalism is difficult, controversial and contradictory as these multiple tribes so-called “Nagas” have been living independently from each other’s existence as is evident in the inter-tribal and inter-village practice of head-hunting culture prevailed in the hills. Without a doubt, the pan-Naga identity was fabricated by the British as there is no consensus among the Nagas on the birth of the nation. A section of Nagas traces to post-colonial origin while others claim to proud historical existence. Whichever end outweigh the other, there is a consensual alignment that, “Nagas are not Indian or Burmese” and ‘Naga land belongs to the Naga people and will be inalienable’<sup>6</sup> as stated by A.Z Phizo (NNC President).

To trace the political history, one needs to go back to the advent of the British and their colonizing expeditions. The first British action that affected the Naga people was the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which, while demarcating the boundary between India and Burma, caused the vivisection of the Naga country<sup>7</sup>. This political boundary was drawn without actual survey and Naga’s opinion were never

<sup>2</sup> . Alemchiba, M. A brief historical account of Nagaland, Janambhumi press, Jorhat, 1970, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> . Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> . Ved Prakash. Encyclopaedia of North-East India, Volume- 1-5, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2007, p. 1904.

<sup>5</sup> . Thong, S. Joseph. Headhunters cultures (Historic Culture of Nagas), Mittals Publication, New Delhi, 2022, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> . Chasie, Charles. The Naga Imbroglia (a personal perspective), standard printers and publishers, Kohima, 2000, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> . Chasie, Charles. The Naga Imbroglia (a personal perspective), standard printers and publishers, Kohima, 2000, p. 29.

accounted as the demarcation was made in distant places on drawing board. The first direct encounter of the British with the Nagas was made in 1832 when Captain Jenkins and Pemberton, along with 700 armed troops and 800 coolies led an expedition trying to link a land route between Assam and Manipur through the Angami-Naga country<sup>8</sup>. Skirmish battle continues between the Nagas and the intruders. In 1866, due to the defiant nature and independent attitude of the Nagas, the British created a separate Naga hills district within Assam.

The introduction of tea plantation align with the expansionist policy of the colonial empire was retaliated vehemently by the Nagas, by raiding on the tea plantation workers forcing the British to implement the Inner Line Permit as part of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, ensuring the safety of the Queen's subjects. "Non-interference policy" as proposed by Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General of India and diplomatic occasional expedition in the Hills continues till the severest fighting in the hills- the Anglo-Khonoma war (1879-80). This rebellious nature of the Nagas opposing intrusion of colonial regime symbolises Nagas as a separate entity albeit the definition of nationalism does not literally apply in this context.

#### 4. NAGA NATIONALISM

The genesis of Naga nationalism started with the establishment of Naga Club in 1918, when the Naga labourer Corp numbering about 2000 went to France, aiding the Allied Forces, witnessed the fighting among the civilized nations. Far from home, they draw a sense of political unity and in verbal resolution, they agreed, on their return to their land, to work for friendship and unity among themselves. The objective of the Club was primarily to look after the welfare of the Nagas by the promotion of understanding, development of fraternal feeling and unity among the Nagas. It was in this spirit, which spearheaded an upsurge of Naga nationalist movement<sup>9</sup>.

Giving lesser importance to the hills, The Government of India Act 1919, categorised the Naga hill areas of Assam as "Backward Tracts". However, when the vast majority of the people in India were moving in the direction of 'Swaraj' under the leadership of Gandhi, the Nagas were cooking an alien dish resulting in the memorandum to the Simon Commission, on January 10, 1929, wherein, the Naga club express the exclusion of the hills from the Reform Scheme of the Government of India Act 1935. In pursuance of the memorandum, the whole Naga areas were left as "Naga Hills Excluded Areas". Soon, however the world was plunged into the World War II and the British attention was diverted to more pressing matters. The Nagas too found themselves in the thick of the war helping the Allied powers against the invading Japanese forces. After the war, expressing his profound gratitude to the Nagas, Lord Wavell, Governor-General of India wrote to Amery, the Secretary of State: "I have written to Clow, the Governor of Assam, asking what can be done to reward the staunchness of these people, both immediately and later, it will probably be difficult to do very much for them, but I feel we must try". He added, "everyone agrees that Nagas did a magnificent work in helping us"<sup>10</sup>. On this credence, C.R. Pawsey, the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga hills initiated an institution called the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (NHDTTC) to coalesce the Nagas. The

<sup>8</sup> . Alemchiba, M. A brief historical account of Nagaland, Janambhumi press, Jorhat, 1970, p.41.

<sup>9</sup> . Venuh, Neivetso. British colonization and restructuring of Naga polity, Mittal publication, New Delhi, 2005, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup>. Op.cit, p 61.

NHDTC Changed its nomenclature to Naga National Council (NNC) at its meeting at Wokha and later became famous for its secessionist demand under A.Z. Phizo.

With the question of transfer of power, On February 20, 1947, the NNC submitted a memorandum to Her Majesty's Government and Government of India. It stated that the Naga people were independent and their country was not subjugated by the Burmese nor the Ahom and Nagaland never formed part of Assam or India at any time before the advent of the British. The NNC spell out their political aspiration and made clear its stand on complete independence. On May 1947, the Indian Government send delegation to NNC offering Nagaland to join the Indian Union. The NNC declared that "the Naga Hills would cease to be a part of India with the departure of the British". Responding to this declaration, on June 26, 1947, the then Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari, was send to Kohima, to impress upon the Nagas "the reality of the political situation" and to explain what soon to be independent India stood for. T. Sakhrie, the then Secretary of the NNC explained that "in fairness, justice and equality, Naga land should be restored to the Nagas"<sup>11</sup>. The reaching of Nine Point Naga-Hydari agreement was further bolstered by the 11 Member Naga delegation's meeting Gandhi on July 19, 1947 to deliberate on Naga independence, to which Gandhi supplemented saying "Nagas has every right to be independent. We did not want to live under the domination of the British and they are now leaving us"<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, Gandhi himself became a victim of Hindu fanatics who contradict in their philosophy.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly while replying to the debate on the discussion on the constitutional fate of the tribes of north east vehemently argued: ".....the tribal people in areas other than Assam are more or less Hinduised, With regard to the tribals in Assam this is not the case. Their roots are still in their own civilization and their own culture....."<sup>13</sup> The word of Dr. Ambedkar is a clear cut indication that he was intended to create 'Sovereign Tribal Nations' under the nomenclature of Autonomous District Council. He was inspired by the model of shared sovereignty that was implemented in USA and marked a peaceful co-existence of the Red- Indians and the White Americans. However, Ambedkar's idea of 'Tribal Nation' could not see the light of the day.

With the assurance of Gandhi, the NNC declared Naga Independence on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947, a day ahead of India's declaration of Independence. Nonetheless, destiny had something else in mind. The imperialist policy of Nehru's "Gigantic Nation" aided by the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution turned out to be the greatest Tragedy. To augment this declaration, the NNC conducted the Plebiscite on 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1946 wherein 99.9% voted for sovereignty. The Government of India never acknowledged and implemented the Naga-Hydari agreement which was reflected in Sir Gopinath Bordoloi's statement at Shillong on November 9, 1949; "the agreement was no longer considered to exist by the Indian Government"<sup>14</sup>.

## 5. THE GENESIS OF HOLOCAUST

Things took a different turn when Phizo announced the establishment of the People's Sovereign Republic of Free Nagaland and formed an underground Naga army. The split of NNC in 1955 led to assassination of Sakhrie by the extremist in

<sup>11</sup>. Chasie, Charles. The Naga Imbroglio (a personal perspective), standard printers and publishers, Kohima, 2000, p.40.

<sup>12</sup>. Ibid, p.42.

<sup>13</sup>. "Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Naga Nationalism" Nagaland post, 11 November 2018, p. 6. Nagaland post <http://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2018/11/22dr-r-ambedkar-and-naga-nationalism/>.

<sup>14</sup>. Chasie, Charles. The Naga Imbroglio (a personal perspective), standard printers and publishers, Kohima, 2000, p.44.

1956. The departure of moderate elements from NNC resulted in the rise of internal and external conflict in the Naga hills. Being aware that Nagas would not willingly join the “Gigantic nation”, thousands of troops were sent to forcefully occupy the Naga territories. The civilians of Naga hills were subjected to collateral damage, unintended civilian deaths, prosecuted and torture without valid reasons, women were molested, abused and raped, goods and properties were wilfully destroyed. The book “Naga Saga” by Kaka D. Iralu and NNC’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary souvenir narrates the holocaust of inhuman act beyond human imagination perpetrated by the Indian forces to women, elders, leaders not sparing children and infant. To add salt to the injury, the Government of India introduced several oppressive laws and acts like the Disturbed Areas Act, the Armed Force Special Powers Act, and Prevention of Unlawful Activities Act, etc. and these “Draconian Laws” continued to be imposed and enforced in Nagaland, challenging the creditability of the so called ‘biggest democracy of the world’<sup>15</sup>.

## 6. THE CROSSROAD

Failing to come to a consensus in the Shillong Accord 1975, factionalism among the nationalist workers created, leading to the formation of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) on January 31, 1980 by Isak Chishi Swu, T. Muivah and S.S. Khaplang. With the demise of A.Z. Phizo in 1990, the NNC split and the nationalist movement was spearheaded by the newly founded revolutionaries. Later, sharp differences developed between Muivah and Khaplang over clan rivalries within NSCN-IM 1988, giving birth to NSCN faction led by Isak and Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Khaplang led faction (NSCN-K). NSCN-IM has been in ceasefire agreement with the Union Government since 1977, and NSCN-K followed suit in 2001 for peaceful political talk. Nonetheless, violence continued in the form of fratricidal killings and clan wars, which gave birth to several other insurgent outfit with limited areas of influence<sup>16</sup>. The prolonged peace talks only resulted to sprouting out of 11 Naga Political Groups in the last 10 years, all claiming to be the champion of the Naga cause. While on the other hand, the external adversaries rejoice every time a new faction develops in Nagaland. The open secret of their (Indian) ideology is to create as many as factions as possible to drag out the talks for solution<sup>17</sup>. Mushrooming factions is still a huge cause of concern but the silver lining is that there is clarity on who is working for Naga nation and who is for self-enrichment in the name of Naga movement. Corruption, exorbitant taxation, fraud, dishonesty, alien to our ancestral practices have become a norm of the day as some individualistic leader keep dancing on this decadal issue. This truly downgraded and destroyed the creditability of Naga nationalism, and has become a mockery to the point where its own people no longer trust and take it seriously.

The historic Peace Accord signed between NSCN-IM and the Indian Government on August 3, 2015, is rather complex than a permanent solution. The Naga Peace process involves several other insurgent outfits and stakeholders besides NSCN-IM. In November 2017, six different factions of NSCN and NNC came together under the banner of Naga Nationalist Political Groups (NNPGs) and initiated negotiation with the Union Government. In 2020, a heated exchange took place between the Naga

<sup>15</sup> Singnya, S. Naga nationalism is essentially a movement for the restoration of our political rights, the Morung Express, 14 August 2023, p.6. <https://morungexpress.com/naga-nationalism-is-essentially-a-movement-for-the-trstoration-of-our-political-rights/>.

<sup>16</sup> Kumar, Chirantan. “Understanding the Naga Issue. The rise Naga sub-nationalism and the Naga Peace Process”, journal on Naga Nationalism, 19 September 2023, p.118.

<sup>17</sup> Nyam, Philip. Mushrooming factions: mockery to Naga National Movement, Nagaland Post, September 30, 2023, p.6, <https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2023/09/30/mushrooming-factions-mockery-to-naga-national-movement/>



groups and the then Governor of Nagaland R.N. Ravi, who was also acting as an interlocutor in this matter on behalf of the Union Government. NSCN-IM General Secretary T.H Muivah asserted that the demand for separate flag, separate constitution and greater Nagalim could not be relinquished. While the NNPGs Maintained good relations with R.N. Ravi and agreed to continued their dialogue with the Union Government, NSCN-IM's insistence on a separate flag and constitution provided to be a stumbling block for arrival at any final solution to the Naga issue<sup>18</sup>.

With the appointment of former Intelligence Bureau (IB) Special Director Akshay Kumar Mishra as the Union Government's interlocutor in the Naga peace process after the resignation of R.N. Ravi, the peace talks with NSCN-IM came back to track in 2021. In September 2022, the NNPGs also met the new interlocutor and discussed about the peace process. NNPGs Coordinator Alezo Venuh stated, "on our part, we are ready to sign the agreement at any time but the situation so far has not arrived<sup>19</sup>". It is noteworthy here that the Union Government has been holding two separate negotiations, with NSCN-IM since 1997, and with the NNPGs since 2017. The leadership of NSCN-IM claims to have the support of various Naga Nationalist groups and Naga civil society organisation, such as the Naga Hoho, Naga Student Federation, Naga Mother's Association, Naga Council. The NNPGs, on the other hand, comprise various rebel groups that have splintered from NSCN-IM.

## 7. CONCLUSION

History has made us doubt the sincerity of GoI. The GoI in the past, instead of seeking permanent solution has rather basically succeeded in prolonging the problem by manipulating the situations as and when desired by her. The lackadaisical attitude of the GoI makes us wonder whether India is genuinely concerned about resolving the Indo-Naga political issue and whether India is prepared to be honest with her commitment. Had the GoI been sincere, the Indo-Naga political issue would have been resolved long ago. Critically evaluating the greater Nagalim demand, a proposed homeland for all the Nagas which not only includes parts of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam and carving out areas of Myanmar, there is no provision in the constitution of India according to which this demand can ever be made by any government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement "I wish to say that I have confined my work within the framework of the constitution, only done what was assigned to me by the constitution. I have not indulged in any encroachment" on the event marking Constitution Day celebration at Supreme Court and "this statement 'NATION FIRST' will keep alive the Constitution for centuries to come" indicate a double standard in the Indo-Naga political solution and will be the reason for the oldest unresolved political issue in Asia.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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<sup>18</sup>. Kumar, Chirantan. "Understanding the Naga Issue. The rise Naga sub-nationalism and the Naga Peace Process", journal on Naga Nationalism, 19 September 2023, p.119.

<sup>19</sup>. Ibid, p.121.

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