

Understanding the Naga Issue

The Rise of Naga Sun-nationalism and the Naga Peace Process

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The North Eastern Region (NER) of India has a long history of conflicts, and has witnessed some of the most complex and prolonged conflicts that independent India has faced. The present challenge of insurgency in the NER commenced in the 1950s, particularly with the eruption of the Naga armed rebellion against the Indian State. The Naga assertion for separate nationhood before the Government of independent India was followed by the formation of several insurgent movements that spread across the region. These various insurgent movements were stirred by a range of factors, including inter-ethnic conflicts, immigrant inflows, sub-national aspirations, secessionist demands, and the economic neglect of the region by central and provincial governments across different epochs.

The Naga insurgency is not only the first, but also the most protracted conflict that North East India has recorded so far. Most other insurgent movements of the NER not only owe their inspiration, to a great extent, to the Naga movement, but

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have also have received support from the Naga ultras from time to time.¹ It is for this reason that the Naga insurgency is referred to as the mother of all other insurgencies in the NER.² Today, more than 50 active and inactive insurgent groups exist in the region, and none of the original ‘seven sisters’, the states initially included in the region, has remained untouched by the insurgency.³ [Sikkim, which was included in the NER in 1998, has remained untouched by the troubles]. Despite a significant reduction in violence in North East India in recent years, insurgency remains a continuing problem in most of these states. Many insurgent groups have been found to be running kidnapping and extortion rackets with a sense of impunity, even after signing ceasefire agreements with the government.⁴ According to R.N. Ravi, the former Governor of Nagaland and the Centre’s interlocutor for the Naga talks, the armed gangs of Nagaland run their parallel ‘so-called governments’ and challenge the legitimacy of the state, without any resistance from the state law and order apparatus.⁵ The impact of insurgency and related problems has been deleterious to

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- 1 Sinha, K.K., “Insurgency in the North-East: An Overview”, in Dipankar Sengupta and Sudhir Kumar Singh eds., *Insurgency in North-East India: The Role of Bangladesh*, Authors Press in association with SPANDAN, Delhi, 2004, p. 31.
 - 2 Ibid.
 - 3 Kedilezo Kikhi, “What Ails the North-East? Challenges and Responses”, *Sociological Bulletin*, Volume 58, Number 3, 2009, p. 359.
 - 4 Pushpita Das, “Is Northeast Poised for Lasting Peace?”, *MPIDSA Issue Brief*, July 8, 2020, p. 10, <https://idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib-northeast-poised-for-lasting-peace-pdas.pdf>; “Post deal, extortion by Naga rebels should end: Manipur parties seek guarantee from Centre”, *The Hindu*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/post-deal-extortion-by-naga-rebels-should-end-manipur-parties-seek-guarantee-from-centre/article29872194.ece>.
 - 5 Vijaita Singh, “Armed gangs rule Nagaland: Governor”, *The Hindu*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/nagaland-governor-slams-collapse-of-law-and-order-in-state/article31915402.ece>.

the general wellbeing of the people and development of the region. It is in this context, that the present paper endeavours to trace the history of the rise of Naga sub-nationalism and the continuing Naga peace process.

NAGA ALIENATION: EMERGENCE OF NAGA SUB-NATIONALISM

The Naga secessionist insurrection was the first instance of insurgency that was experienced by India in its NER. It was also the first armed ethnic conflict in independent India that was waged for political purposes.⁶ The roots of the Naga insurgency however, can be traced back to the rise of Naga sub-nationalism in the pre-independence era.

It is worth mentioning here that the term ‘Naga’ has often been used in a generic sense, rather than its specific use, as, in the beginning, the Nagas seldom used this name for themselves.⁷ There exist a number of different tribes within the umbrella nomenclature ‘Naga’, such as the Angami, Ao, Chang, Kabui, Konyak, Lhota, Reñgma, Sema, and many more, speaking not merely different dialects but different languages altogether, and their traditional costumes also differ sharply from one another.⁸

The Nagas, in general, are known to have maintained their distinct identity ever since they entered India. 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

6 Namrata Goswami, *Indian National Security and Counter-Insurgency: The Use of Force vs non-violent response*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, p. 43.

7 Robert Reid, “Assam”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Volume 92, Number 4663, 1944, p. 244.

8 Ibid.

the Ahoms.⁹ 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.¹⁰ The Ahom-Naga relations saw numerous ups and downs, with the reciprocation of violent raids upon each other, on the one hand, and mutual exchanges of favours and gratitude, on the other.¹¹ 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.¹²

The Nagas experienced a great change in the aftermath of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which paved the way for the entry of the British into this hitherto lesser-known land. The British entered into the Angami area of Naga Hills in the year 1832, when British employees of the East India Company were marching towards the Assam Plains from Manipur.¹³ Due to the independent minded attitude of the Nagas and their defiant nature, the British-Naga interaction invited violent skirmishes in the beginning, after which the British decided to create a separate Naga Hills district within Assam in 1866.¹⁴ One of the purposes behind the creation of this district was to ensure the safety of the 'Queen's subjects' from Naga raids.¹⁵ The British implemented the Inner Line Permit system under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations of 1873; categorised the hill areas of the North East as 'Backward Tracts' under the Government of India Act, 1919; and later on, as 'Excluded Areas' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' under the Government of India

9 Ved Prakash, *Encyclopedia of North-East India*, Volume- 1-5, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2007, p. 1904.

10 Ibid, pp. 1904-1906.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, p. 1906.

13 Ibid, p. 1899.

14 Ibid, pp. 1899-1900.

15 Ved Prakash, op. cit., p. 1911 and Robert Reid, op. cit., p. 244.

Act, 1935.¹⁶ Though these measures were apparently taken in the name of protecting tribal interests, in practice, the Inner Line Permit effectively drew a boundary of British commercial interests in the Assam plains, protecting these areas from the raids by hill tribes.¹⁷ The end result of these policies was a widening of the rift between the plainsmen and the hill tribes, eventually leading to mutual distrust between them.

While referring to the hill tribes of Colonial Era Assam, the former British bureaucrat Sir Robert Reid, who also served as the Governor of Assam from 1937 to 1942, stated in a lecture that he delivered on February 11, 1944, that:

They are not Indian in any sense of the word, neither in origin, nor in language, nor in appearance, nor in habits, nor in outlook; and it is only by historical accident that they have been tacked on to an Indian Province¹⁸ [Assam].

Governor Reid had, in fact, prepared a confidential note in the year 1941, outlining the need for turning the Hill areas of Assam into a British protectorate, until the tribes of these areas develop themselves on their own lines, without any external influence.¹⁹ The Secretary of State for India, L.S. Amery found the idea of this ‘Crown Colony’ so impressive that he gave a

16 Ashish Kundra, “Understanding the history of the Inner Line Permit in the Northeast”, *Hindustan Times*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/understanding-the-history-of-the-inner-line-permit-in-the-northeast/story-dvA0y8Nd6yxMprtxZAYpUM.html>; V. B. Ganesan, “The secret British plan that fell through”, *The Hindu*, May 12, 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/the-secret-british-plan-that-fell-through/article6002139.ece>.

17 Ashish Kundra, op. cit.

18 Robert Reid, op. cit., p. 247.

19 David R. Syiemlich, “The Crown Colony Plants: The British and the Hill Areas of North - East India, 1945-46”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Volume 59, 1998, p. 693.

copy of this note to Professor Reginald Coupland, who then developed it further and used it in his famous volumes entitled, *The Constitutional Problem in India*.²⁰ The Crown Colony Plan, also referred to as Coupland Plan,²¹ was abandoned by the year 1946 due to its ill-timing and late conception, but it left a deep impression on the imagination of those who had already started talking about separate Naga nationalism.²²

THE EARLY MANIFESTATIONS OF NAGA SUB-NATIONALISM

The idea of separate Naga nationhood started taking shape as early as 1918 with the establishment of the Naga Club.²³ This club was founded by 20 Nagas, who came across the ideas of nationalism while serving in the French *Labour Corps* in the European battlefields during the First World War, and felt the need for politically organising themselves on ethnic lines.²⁴ The Naga Club pushed forward the idea of a separate Naga nation and soon became a popular organisation among Nagas, drawing members from across Naga tribes, such as the Angami, Ao, Konyak, Lotha, Rengma, Sema, and Yimchunger, etc.²⁵ The expression of distinct Naga nationalism, separate from the rest of India, found place in a memorandum presented by the Naga Club to the Simon Commission in 1929.²⁶

The Second World War had brought the peril to the doorstep of the Nagas and proved to be crucial in forging unity among various Naga tribes, who had hitherto been fighting with each other.²⁷ It was against this background that the Naga Club was

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 V. B. Ganesan, op.cit.

23 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 45.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ved Prakash, op. cit. p. 1928.

succeeded by a new political organization, the Naga National Council (NNC), in 1946.²⁸ The NNC had evolved out of the democratically elected Naga Hills District Tribal Council, but later became famous for its secessionist demands under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo.

Phizo was known for his radical stand on separate Naga nationalism. It was under his leadership that nine members of the NNC declared Naga independence on August 14, 1947, a day before India became Independent.²⁹ Phizo was successful in spreading the word about Naga independence and mobilising support for secessionism.³⁰ A number of Nagas belonging to Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland on the Indian, side as well as from the Naga dominated districts of Myanmar, continue to celebrate this day to commemorate Naga independence, till date.³¹

THE END OF BRITISH COLONIALISM: IMPACTS ON THE NAGAS

The British did not see any wisdom in interfering in the affairs of the hill tribes beyond a point, due to several reasons. One was that these tribes were notorious for carrying out violent raids on adjacent villages and the custom of headhunting, and thus the British maintained a safe distance from them through policies such as the inner line.³² Secondly, the hill areas of

28 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 45.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Jimmy Leivon, "Manipur: Nagas celebrate Independence Day, hoist 'Naga National Flag' across the state", *The Indian Express*, August 14, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/manipur/manipur-nagas-celebrate-independence-day-hoist-naga-national-flag-across-the-state-5905839/>; Prasanta Mazumdar, "Students to celebrate Naga I-Day on August 14, hoist own 'national flag'", *The New Indian Express*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/aug/13/students-to-celebrate-naga-i-day-on-august-14-hoist-own-national-flag-2018432.html>.

32 Robert Reid, op. cit., p. 244.

the North East in general, with an exception of the Jaintia Hills, were considered uneconomical and deficit areas by the British.³³ Thirdly, the British were satisfied with the work that the American Baptist Mission had carried out among these hill tribes in the educational and medical spheres, besides working for their general wellbeing and upliftment, and thus did not consider it urgent to modernise these tribes.³⁴ And fourthly, barring the initial skirmishes between some Naga tribes and the British, their relationship had remained mostly peaceful and the Nagas in general maintained loyalty to the British.³⁵ In fact, except for putting a ban on the practice of headhunting and inter-village squabbles, the British administration did not concern itself much about the methods and practices that were operational in the management of the internal affairs of the Nagas.³⁶

Towards the end of the British rule in India, anxieties about the future of the Nagas led to a declaration by some leaders of the NNC in June 1947, under the Phizo's direction, that, "The Naga Hills would cease to be a part of India with the departure of the British."³⁷ Responding to this declaration, the British Indian Government reached a Nine Point Agreement with the secretary of the NNC, Theyiechüthie Sakhrie, in June 1947.³⁸ The pact was known as the Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord, after the name of the then Governor of Assam, Sir Muhammad Saleh Akbar Hydari, who represented the British Indian Government in this agreement. This accord contained provisions of giving

33 David R. Syiemlieh, op. cit. 693.

34 Robert Reid, op. cit., p. 244.

35 Ibid, p. 244 and 247.

36 Ved Prakash, op. cit., p. 1987.

37 Dinker Rao Mankekar, *On the slippery slope in Nagaland*, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1967, p. 39, quoted in Ved Prakash, op. cit., p. 1929.

38 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 47.

extensive and autonomous legislative, executive and judicial rights to the Nagas.³⁹ Moreover, it subjected the enforcement of many central and provincial legislations to the explicit consent of the ‘Naga Council’.⁴⁰ It is worth noting here that while the text of the accord read “Naga Council”, the Nagas interpreted it as “Naga National Council”, which later became another bone of contention between the government and the NNC.⁴¹ The agreement further stipulated that the administrative divisions ought to be modified in order to bring back into the Naga Hills District all the forests, that were transferred to the Sibsagar and Nowgong districts in the past.⁴² Further, it called for bringing all the Nagas under one common administrative unit, whenever it becomes possible.⁴³

Nevertheless, the most disputed clause of this agreement stated that, at the end of a period of 10 years, the NNC will be asked whether it required this agreement to be extended further, or a new agreement forged. This provision subsequently proved to be the bone of contention between the NNC and the Government of India (GOI), because the leaders of NNC construed it as independence from India on the completion of 10 years of this agreement, whereas the Government of India, interpreted it as a mandate to draft a new agreement after 10 years, if the present one fails to address the issues surrounding

39 “The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord, 1947”, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, 1947, https://www.satp.org/satporgrtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/documents/papers/nagaland_9point.htm.

40 Ibid.

41 Rita Manchanda and Tapan Kumar Bose, “Constructing the Naga Nation”, in Rita Manchanda, Tapan Kumar Bose, and Sajal Nag eds., *Bridging State and Nation: Peace Accords in India’s Northeast*, Volume II of SAGE Series in Human Rights Audits of Peace Processes, SAGE Publications, New Delhi, 2015, p. 57.

42 “The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord, 1947”, op. cit.

43 Ibid.

the Nagas.⁴⁴ While the officials of the government believed that this agreement, in no case provided for secession of the Naga areas from India, Phizo outrightly rejected this agreement on the same grounds.⁴⁵ It was because of these ambiguities and confusions that the Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord could not be implemented and, in contrast with the provisions of this agreement that promised self- government rights to the Nagas, a much more limited structure of autonomous councils was delivered to them under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.⁴⁶

The NNC's resentment was founded on the apprehensions of those vast changes that were about to occur after the independence of India. Unlike the colonial rulers, who were content to have left the tribal areas of NER to themselves, independent India made every attempt to assimilate this entire region into its post-colonial project of nation building.⁴⁷ The NNC, under the leadership of Phizo, organised a Naga plebiscite in May 1951, and on its basis, claimed the support of nearly 99.9 per cent of the participating voters for the cause of Naga independence.⁴⁸ On the day of this plebiscite, Phizo delivered a speech in which he stressed the aim of a 'Separate Sovereign State of Nagaland', but at the same time he also said that this was to be achieved "in a democratic way through constitutional means."⁴⁹

44 Kaka D. Iralu, *Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears*, Iralu, Kohima, 2000, p. 183, quoted in Rita Manchanda and Tapan Kumar Bose, op. cit., p. 57; B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Konark Publisher, 2004, p. 88, quoted in Rita Manchanda and Tapan Kumar Bose, op. cit., p. 57.

45 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 48.

46 Rita Manchanda and Tapan Kumar Bose, op. cit., p. 57.

47 Subir Bhaumik, "Insurgencies in India's Northeast: Conflict, Co-option & Change", *East-West Center*, 2007, p. 1.

48 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 45-46.

49 Ibid, p. 46.

THE ENTRY OF VIOLENCE AND THE BEGINNING OF THE PEACE PROCESS

The Naga movement had remained more or less peaceful in the 1940s and early 1950s, but things took a turn for the worse in 1954, when Phizo announced the establishment of the People's Sovereign Republic of Free Nagaland and formed an underground Naga army.⁵⁰ In 1955, a meeting of the NNC was convened by Phizo in his native village, Khonoma, where the comparatively moderate leaders of the council like Theyiechüthie Sakhrie and Jasokie Zinyü *aka* John Bosco Jasokie, resigned over their differences with Phizo.⁵¹ Sakhrie was assassinated in January 1956 by the extremists in NNC.⁵² Other dissenters had to seek refuge and protection from the government.⁵³ The departure of moderate elements from NNC resulted in the rise of violence in the Naga Hills.

Amid disturbances, the government deployed the Assam Rifles in the Naga Hills and enforced the Assam Disturbed Areas Act of 1955.⁵⁴ Undeterred by these measures, Phizo formed an underground government in March 1956, known as Naga Federal Government (NFG) and its military wing Naga Federal Army (NFA).⁵⁵ In response to the worsening situation in the Naga areas, the Government of India deployed the Indian Army in the affected areas as a counter-insurgency measure, in April 1956.⁵⁶ The military crackdown was followed by Phizo's

50 Ibid, p. 48.

51 Thepfulhouvi Solo, "Who convened Naga people convention?", *Nagaland Post*, 24 March, 2020, <https://www.nagalandpost.com/who-convened-naga-people-convention/213614.html>.

52 Ved Prakash, *op. cit.*, p. 1931.

53 Ranabir Samaddar, *The Politics of Dialogue: Living Under the Geopolitical Histories of War and Peace*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 171-173.

54 Namrata Goswami, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

55 Pradeep Kumar Rai, *Insurgency in North-East India: A Case Study of Assam*, Ph.D Thesis, 2010, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, p. 63.

56 Namrata Goswami, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

escape to erstwhile East Pakistan, and from there to London.⁵⁷ From London he continued to support the secessionist movement in Nagaland until he died in exile on April 30, 1990.

Caught in the crossfire between the Indian Army and NFA, the civilians of the Naga Hills were subjected to collateral damage, unintended civilian deaths, and human rights violation at the hands of armed forces personnel, which led to local resentment, putting pressure upon the government as well as NNC to come to terms with each other.⁵⁸ More and more moderate Nagas came forward, willing to work out a solution, which gave birth to a non-violent Naga People's Convention (NPC).⁵⁹ It was largely due to the peaceful recommendations of the NPC that a separate Naga Hills-Tuensang Area District was created in 1957.⁶⁰ Amid the changes in the political scenario, a Sixteen Point Agreement was arrived at between the NPC and the Government of India, through which the latter conceded the demands for the formation of a full-fledged state of Nagaland within the Indian Union.⁶¹ Eventually statehood was accorded to Nagaland in 1963. Meanwhile, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) of 1958 was implemented in Assam and Manipur in order to stop disturbances.

57 Kyoko Inoue, "Integration of North-east: the state formation process", in Murayama M., Kyoko Inoue, S Hazarika eds., *Sub-Regional relations in the Eastern South Asia – with special focus on India's North Eastern region*, Research programme series No. 133, IDE-JETRO, 2005, p. 25, https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Download/Jrp/pdf/133_3.pdf.

58 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 43, 48-49.

59 Ved Prakash, op. cit., p. 1932.

60 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 44.

61 "The Sixteen Point Agreement arrived at between the Naga Peoples' Convention and the Government of India in July, 1960", Quoted in Y.D. Gundevia, *War and Peace in Nagaland*, Palit & Palit Publishers, New Delhi, 1975, p. 223.

It is noteworthy, here, that even after the formation of Nagaland, hundreds of thousands of Nagas living in nearby states, i.e., Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, besides a sizable number of Nagas living across the international border in Myanmar, were left out.⁶² This was why the creation of a separate state did not put an end to the Naga insurgency, even though it was followed by a ceasefire agreement between the government and the insurgents in 1964.

A Peace Mission, that was formed in 1964 to negotiate with the recalcitrant factions of NNC, had to be dissolved in 1967 when it reached a deadlock, after six rounds of talks with the insurgents.⁶³ Continuous violations of the ceasefire led to the banning of the NNC, NFG, and NFA in 1972, under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) of 1967.⁶⁴ The counter-insurgency measures taken by the security forces brought the insurgents again to the negotiating platform, which paved the way for the Shillong Accord of 1975, between the Indian Government and the Naga rebels.⁶⁵ However, Phizo himself never approved this accord, despite the fact that his own brother Kevi Yalie was one of its signatories.⁶⁶

According to the terms of the Shillong Accord, the Naga rebels were required to unconditionally accept the Constitution of India, and surrender their arms.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this accord could provide only short-term respite.⁶⁸ The hardliners of NNC declared this agreement a sellout and derided the moderate

62 Rita Manchanda and Tapan Kumar Bose, op. cit., p. 58.

63 Pradeep Kumar Rai, op. cit., p. 65.

64 Ibid, p 65.

65 Ibid.

66 Shantanu Nandan Sharma, "We have never seen peace & a normal life: Adinno", *The Morung Express*, September 2, 2015, https://issuu.com/morung_express/docs/september_2nd_2015/5.

67 Ibid.

68 K.K. Sinha, op. cit., p. 30.

NNC members as “accordists”.⁶⁹ Disappointed with the NNC, these hardliners formed a new underground organisation by the name of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) under the leadership of Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chishi Swu and S.S. Khaplang, in 1980.⁷⁰

Later, sharp differences developed between Muivah and Khaplang over clan rivalries within NSCN, which led to a split in 1988, giving birth to the NSCN faction led by Isak and Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Khaplang-led faction (NSCN-K).⁷¹ NSCN-IM has been in ceasefire agreement with the Union Government since 1997, and NSCN-K followed suit in 2001.⁷² However, violence continued in the form of fratricidal killings and clan wars, which gave birth to several other insurgent outfits with limited areas of influence.⁷³

THE CURRENT STATUS OF NAGA PEACE PROCESS

The Naga Peace Process reached a milestone on August 3, 2015, when Isak and Muivah signed a Framework Peace Agreement with the Indian Government, on behalf of NSCN-IM.⁷⁴ However, the Naga Peace Process involves several other insurgent outfits besides NSCN-IM.⁷⁵ One of the most influential factions of NSCN is the NSCN-K, which unilaterally

69 Subir Bhaumik, op. cit., p. 1; Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 49, and Pradeep Kumar Rai, op. cit., p. 5.

70 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 49.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid, pp. 49-50.

74 Amitabh Sinha and Praveen Swami, “PM Narendra Modi announces historic peace deal with Naga insurgents”, *The Indian Express*, August 4, 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/govt-signs-peace-accord-with-nscnim-pm-narendra-modi-says-historic/>.

75 Sudeep Chakravarti, “Rebel Muivah’s ill health and the Naga peace process”, *Livemint*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/OyMkLr87Vf4t3RvNp51Lol/Rebel-Muivahs-ill-health-and-the-Naga-peace-process.html>.

abrogated its ceasefire agreement with the government in 2015 and, unlike the IM faction, no agreement has been possible with the Khaplang faction even after the demise of S.S. Khaplang in 2017.⁷⁶

In November 2017, another development took place when six different factions of NSCN and NNC came together under the banner of the Naga Nationalist Political Groups (NNPGs) and initiated negotiations with the Union Government.⁷⁷ The negotiations were expanded further, when another faction of the NSCN, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khango (NSCN-Khango), joined the talks in 2019.⁷⁸

However, despite several rounds of negotiations, the situation in Nagaland became tense again in 2020, when a heated exchange took place between the Naga groups and the then Governor of Nagaland, R.N. Ravi, who was also acting as the interlocutor in this matter on behalf of the Union Government. This was for the first time after the peace agreement of August 3, 2015, that NSCN-IM ‘general secretary’ Muivah asserted, in August 2020, that the demand for separate a flag, separate constitution and greater Nagalim, could not be relinquished.⁷⁹ While the NNPGs maintained good relations with R.N. Ravi and agreed to continue their dialogue with the Union Government, NSCN-IM’s insistence on a separate flag and constitution proved to be a major stumbling block for arrival at any final solution to the Naga issue.⁸⁰

76 Ibid.

77 Pushpita Das, op. cit., p. 4.

78 Ibid.

79 “Nagaland: Shanti Warta Ko Lekar Badha Tanaw, Wartakaar Ne Rajya Sarkar Ko Fatkara”, *The Wire*, August 16, 2020, <https://thewirehindi.com/135284/nagaland-naga-peace-talks-neiphui-rio-rn-ravi/>.

80 “No Breakthrough Likely In Naga Peace Talks Before Christmas: Rio”, *Outlook*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/no-breakthrough-likely-in-naga-peace-talks-before-christmas-rio-news-246461>.

Meanwhile, extortions and unlawful taxation by Naga ultras continued to disrupt the constitutional order and development process in the states affected by the Naga insurgency.⁸¹

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 organisations, such as the Naga Hoho, Naga Student Federation, Naga Mother's Association, Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, and the United Naga Council.⁸² The NNPGs, on the other hand, comprise various rebel groups that have splintered from NSCN-IM.⁸³ Both, the NSCN-IM and the NNPGs have been at odds with each other, and the former believes that the formation of NNPGs gives the government an opportunity to exploit the tribal divisions already existing in the Naga community.

Following the appointment of former Intelligence Bureau (IB) Special Director Akshaya 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 on track in 2021. Eventually, in September, 2022, when the peace talks resumed between the Union Government and the NSCN-IM, the issues of separate flag and constitution of the Nagas were discussed.⁸⁴ Around the same time, the NNPGs

81 "Post deal, extortion by Naga rebels should end: Manipur parties seek guarantee from Centre", *The Hindu*, op. cit.; Pushpita Das, op. cit., p. 10.

82 Rouhin Deb and Adyasa Ananya Das, "A Tumultuous Journey of the Naga Peace Process", *Cornell Policy Review*, 2021, p.1, <https://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/a-tumultuous-journey-of-the-naga-peace-process/?pdf=5994>.

83 Ibid.

84 Wasbir Hussain, "Naga Peace Talks: NNPGs to meet interlocutor AK Mishra on Saturday", *Northeast Live*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo7j3unQ0AI&t=165s>.

also met the new interlocutor, and discussed their concerns about the peace process. They wanted that their agreed position as well as that of the NSCN-IM be merged, to form a part of the common draft of the accord that the government of India would be preparing.⁸⁵ While expressing satisfaction with the progress of the talks and being optimistic about the possibility of an early solution, the coordinator of the NNPGs, Alezo Venuh, stated, “on our part, we are ready to sign the agreement at any time but the situation so far has not arrived.”⁸⁶

A SHARED FUTURE?

Nearly a century has passed since the earliest manifestations of the Naga sub-nationalist aspirations. This eventful epoch has witnessed the emergence and growth of a violent Naga nationalist movement, on the one hand, and an experiment with numerous strategies by the Indian state to restore peace in the conflict-ridden states of NER, on the other. The history of the Naga peace process is marked by numerous ups and downs. Every time an agreement was reached, it generated hopes among the stakeholders for a lasting peace, be it the Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord of 1947, the Sixteen Point Agreement of 1960, the Shillong Accord of 1975, or the Indo-Naga Ceasefire Agreement of 1997. However, the past is witness to the reality that these agreements proved ill-equipped to creating a lasting solution. The case of the Peace Agreement of 2015 has been no less dramatic. In spite of several rounds of negotiations between the Union Government and the Naga representatives, no final solution has been possible so far.

85 Ibid.

86 “NNPG leaders meet govt interlocutor, say expecting permanent solution soon”, *ETV Bharat*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.etvbharat.com/english/national/bharat/nnpg-leaders-meet-interlocutor-say-expecting-permanent-solution-soon/na20220930225022439439902>.

It is a positive sign that the NSCN-IM and the NNPGS came together in October 2022, to issue a joint statement in which they agreed to overcome their past differences with each other and to direct their endeavours towards a shared future.⁸⁷ The appointment of A.K. Mishra as the new interlocutor by the Union Government has also gone well within the fold of NSCN-IM, which had become vocally opposed the previous incumbent. However, past experiences suggest that any long term and fruitful conclusion of the Naga peace process requires addressing some of the more prominent obstacles on this path.

First, the idea of Naga nationalism is inherently problematic because of the existence of numerous divisions among the different tribes and clans within the Nagas. There are clan rivalries among many of the sub-tribes of the Nagas that are spread across Nagaland, Assam, and Manipur in India, as well as certain areas of neighbouring Myanmar. The demand for a separate “Frontier Naga Territory” by Eastern Naga People’s Organisation (ENPO) is another such issue that exhibits the divisions among the Nagas.⁸⁸ The differences between NSCN-IM and the NNPGs have not yet been sorted out completely. It is, therefore, difficult for any government to arrive at any such agreement that would be acceptable to all Nagas.

Second, it will be difficult for any government to agree to NSCN-IM’s demand for a separate flag and constitution for the Nagas, particularly after having made changes in the

87 “Naga peace process: NSCN (IM), NNPGs agree to move forward over past divisions”, *Hindustan Times*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/naga-peace-process-nscn-im-nnpgs-agree-to-move-forward-over-past-divisions-101666190713921.html>.

88 Karishma Hasnat, “Naga peace talks set to resume, a dive into issues surrounding one of India’s oldest insurgencies”, *The Print*, June 28, 2023, <https://theprint.in/india/naga-peace-talks-set-to-resume-a-dive-into-issues-surrounding-one-of-indias-oldest-insurgencies/1645618/>.

Constitution of India to take away such symbols from the people of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.⁸⁹

Third, the demand for greater Nagalim, a proposed homeland for all Nagas, which not only includes parts of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, but also calls for carving out areas from Myanmar, has not yet been abandoned by NSCN-IM. There is no provision in the Constitution of India according to which this demand can ever be met by any government.

Fourth, a significant number of Nagas believe that they were never part of the Indian nation. Even the pro-peace negotiation Naga leaders have largely failed to curb such sentiments among their secessionist brethren.

And **finally**, there has been a practice of extortions and collection of illegal taxes by the cadres of NSCN-IM, which ensures them a voluminous income worth hundreds of crores of rupees. If the peace talks are successful, this illegal income will certainly come to an end. Many of the stakeholders in the Naga peace process do not want any disruption in this well-established system of illegal taxation and, therefore, they make every attempt to delay the completion of the peace process, so that they may continue taking advantages of the cloak of ceasefire for their illegal activities.

The ongoing dialogues have already suffered near-derailment in the past due to various reasons, ranging from the disruption caused by the outbreak of Covid-19 to NSCN-IM's insistence upon a separate Naga flag and constitution. Moreover, the poorly drafted wording of the Framework Peace Agreement of 2015 has created new problems, adding

89 Bharat Bhushan, "Will the New Year See the Dawn of Naga Peace?", *Deccan Herald*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/will-the-new-year-see-the-dawn-of-naga-peace-1170175.html>.

to the confusion over the idea of shared sovereignty. This agreement hopes that the dialogue process “will provide for an enduring inclusive new relationship of peaceful co-existence of two entities.”⁹⁰ Now, the NSCN-IM interprets the term “two entities” as two sovereign entities and demands prime ministerial level talks in a third country for the resolution of the Naga issue.⁹¹

In December 2022, when Muivah was in Delhi, with the expectation that he would meet the Prime Minister, he had to return disappointed after a long wait of six weeks.⁹² Just when things began to come back on track, the state assembly elections of Nagaland were announced for February 2023. This again put the dialogues on hold, as the major political actors from the state as well as from the centre became preoccupied with their electoral campaigns. It is noteworthy, that the state government plays the role of facilitator in the Naga peace process. While the peace process resumed in April 2023 with the holding of talks between centre’s interlocutor and the leaders of NSCN-IM, overcoming the obstacles in its path will remain as difficult as it has been in the long and convoluted history of conflict in Nagaland.

90 Ibid.

91 Narayan Bahadur, “Nagaland Year in Review: COVID-19, Naga peace talks dominate 2020”, *The Morung Express*, December 29, 2020, <https://morungexpress.com/year-in-review-covid-19-naga-peace-talks-dominate-2020>.

92 Bharat Bhushan, op. cit.