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History of the Naga Conflict: Looking Back in Time | Chinmay Bendre, K. Gireesan, Neelam Pandit

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The British left India with numerous conflicts to deal with. The Naga insurgency is one such conflict. The Nagas have long demanded nationhood for their people. For them, people from India, and Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) are akin to foreigners. They constituted a threat to the Naga people and their territories and their culture. This gave rise to a sense of resentment among the Nagas and led to the creation of an underground federal Government and federal Army. The first anti-national activities appeared at this point on the national scene. The seclusion that came along with the partition of the sub-continent resulted in large-scale violence and instability in the Naga Hills and Tuensang region. A need was thus felt in the mid-1950s to establish close links with the people in the region and win their support for the cause of nation-building. As the State is poised to move into its 60th year of formation on the 1st of December 2022, we look back in time to understand the history of the Naga conflict.

Who are the Naga Tribes?

The Yajurveda is the first source to mention the Nagas. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid community and speak Tibeto-Burman dialects (Alemchiba 1970). The Nagas are organized into several tribes, 6 sub-tribes, and clans. They speak their separate languages, follow diverse customs, and also have varied customs, cuisine, and culture. The Nagas also practiced kinship polity and were largely isolated from the world until the 20th century. The British Government followed the policy of 'least interference' although the missionaries established social ties with the Nagas. Their tribal village government, land system, customary laws, social conventions, and communal organizations were left untouched and the British declared territories held by them as 'backward areas' in their self-interest. The result was the creation of an 'inner line' in 1873 by the Lieutenant Governor of Assam under the aegis of the Bengal-Eastern Frontier Regulations. Though the Nagas were culturally and socially diverse tribes, the use of the English language and Christianity gave them a common national identity.

Roots of the crisis:

Following the seizure of the Naga Hills and Assam by the British in 1881, the disagreement between the Naga tribes and the British–India government grew rapidly. Over the years, a political forum called the ‘Naga club’ was established in Kohima in 1918 to further the interests of the Naga people. The members of this group met the Simon Commission in 1929 on their arrival in India and argued for excluding Naga Hills from the reform proposal. The result was that Naga Hills continued to be administered by the Assam administration.

The 2nd World War led to the creation of the Naga Hills Tribal Council in April 1945. In April 1946, it was re–launched as National Naga Council (NNC) at Wokha to look after the social and political well–being of the Nagas (Verrier 1961). The members of the NNC came from elite backgrounds and represented 29 tribes amongst themselves. Their objective was to unite all Naga tribes in the region and place them under Assam province in free India. Their demand for autonomy was favourable to the Congress party. Thus, the Naga crisis, at least for time being, was averted.

Age of Angami Zapu Phizo:

The emergence of an extremist leader Angami Zapu Phizo on the centre stage changed the equation of the Naga–India relationship. He demanded separate nationhood for the Naga Hills people and proclaimed Naga Hills as a nation on 14th August 1947 (Zahan 2022). Phizo also denounced the Indian Independence on 15th August 1947 and his proclamation marked the beginning of a new struggle. The referendum of May 1951, the boycott of the General Elections in 1952, and the establishment of a parallel government in 1956 are some of the key developments to comprehend and analyse the socio–political unrest in Nagaland.

NNCs Struggle for Nagaland:

The NNC members, particularly, Phizo disagreed with the terms of the Hydari Accord that said that the Nagas can make suitable changes to the administrative structure after 10 years after the enforcement of the accord. In 1951, as a result of his disagreement with the accord, Phizo organized a ‘referendum’ in which the Nagas overwhelmingly voted in support of Naga nationhood (Kashyap, 2015). They also abstained from participating in the First general elections and Prime Minister Nehru was mocked and wooed on his visit to the region on 30 March 1953.

Although largely sensitive to the people and their aspirations, the violence that grew with time had to be quelled. To this end, the government established nine check posts in the Naga Hills, and the Assam Disturbed Areas Act of 1955 was passed to facilitate the functioning of Army battalions in cities such as Kohima and Mokokchung in 1956.

The NNC responded by establishing the Federal Government of Nagaland on 22 March 1956. They also raised their flag, an underground parliament known as 'Tatar Hoho', and a private military called Naga Home Guard (NHG) with the help of the Burmese Communist party (Alemchiba 1970).

To put an end to the rising conflict, in August 1962, the Union government took a decisive step by conferring statehood to Nagaland via the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. The Government also declared the NNC and the federal government of Nagaland 'unlawful.' P Shily Ao became the state's first Chief Minister and declared the occasion "a day of rejoicing" and "the day to redeem our pledge" (Kotwal 2000). Some members of the NNC signed the 'Shillong Agreement' with the Union Government and agreed to accept the resolution of conflict within the bounds of the Indian Constitution, to forego violence, to hand over arms, and to enter into dialogue (Aram 1974). This arrangement, however, gave rise to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

National Socialist Council of Nagaland:

The NSCN was idealized by Isak Chishi Swu, SS Khaplang, and Thuingaleng Muivah. The trio wished to create the People's Republic of Nagaland based on Mao Zedong's ideology. With time, NSCN grew from an organization of 150 men to an organization of 3,000 men with access to a large array of sophisticated arms. By the 1990s, it was the most powerful underground organization in the Northeast region.

Following the attempts at eliminating Muivah and Tangkhul on 30 April 1988 on the suspicion of secretly starting negotiations with the Union Government, the NSCN was vertically split into 2 groups, Isak and Muivah's NSCN (NSCN-IM) and SS Khaplang's NSCN (NSCN-K). This split led to bloody violence between the two factions and possibly allowed the foreign governments to become stakeholders in the conflict (Kotwal 2000).

Global impact of the Naga crisis:

Until 1971, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the American intelligence agency, actively encouraged separatist operations in Nagaland. Beginning in the 1950s, the Americans provided the separatists with money, ammunition, and secret information. The CIA also provided instructions prepared in Washington. In his book, 'Confession of a Journalist,' journalist Dhruva Mazumdar claimed that the CIA paid him to report from North-eastern India on Indian Army movements and "barrack room gossip" (Kotwal 2000).

The Chinese objectives concerning Nagaland were clear from the fact that the Federal Government of Nagaland had a permanent mission in Beijing. As early as 1950, the Naga insurgents from the Naga, Meitei, and Mizo tribes who arrived in China were provided training and the Chinese greeted them as 'brothers. Erstwhile East Pakistan provided training to 2,500 Naga men and supplied them with arms and large sums of money. The idea was to reduce troops in Kashmir and engage them in the Northeast region by creating frequent tensions (Kotwal 2000).

Fallouts:

Efforts were made to restore calm in Naga Hills since the early 1960s with the formation of Nagaland. However, Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's meeting with T Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu in Paris on 15 June 1995 became a watershed event. The efforts have been listed below (Swami 2015).

- Naga-Akbar Hydari Agreement, June 1947:

Parties: NNC and the Governor of Assam

Agreement: "That the right of the Nagas to develop themselves according to their freely expressed wishes is recognized."

Expression: "The Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Government of the Indian Union will have a special responsibility for 10 years to ensure the observance of the agreement, at the end of this period the Naga 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 Naga people arrived at."

- 16-point Agreement with the Naga People's Convention, July 1960: Formation of Nagaland under the charge of the Ministry of External Affairs.

Agreement: "No Act or law passed by the Union Parliament affecting the following provisions shall have legal force in the Nagaland unless specially applied to it by a majority vote of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly:

- The Religious or Social Practices of the Nagas,
- The Customary Laws and Procedure,
- Civil and Criminal Justice so far as these concern decisions according to the Naga Customary Law."

Expression: "The Naga leaders expressed the view that other Nagas inhabiting contiguous areas should be enabled to join the new state. It was pointed out to them on behalf of the Government of India that Articles 3 and 4 of the Constitution provided for increasing the area of any state, but the Government of India couldn't make any commitment in this regard at this stage."

- Ceasefire Agreement, 1964:

Agreement: The Government of India welcomes the steps intended to bring about peace in Nagaland and with this object in view... they will depute representatives, with whom will be associated the representatives of the Government of Nagaland, to take part in talks with leaders of the underground. To facilitate these talks and taking note of the letter of August 10, 1964... it has been ordered that with effect from September 6, 1964, and for a period thereafter of one month at present, the security forces will not undertake:

- Jungle operations;
- The raiding of camps of the underground;
- Patrolling beyond one thousand yards of Security posts;
- Searching for villages;
- Aerial action;
- Arrests; and
- Imposition of labour by way of punishment.

Expression: "Operations will be suspended as above on the understanding that the underground has accepted that during this period they will refrain from:

- Sniping and ambushing;
- Imposition of fines;
- Kidnapping and recruiting;
- Sabotage activities;

- Raiding and firing on Security posts, towns, and administrative centers; and
- Moving with arms or in uniform in towns, villages, and administrative centers, wherever there are Security posts and approaching within one thousand yards of Security posts.”
- Shillong Agreement, 1975:

Parties: Underground Leaders and Nagaland Governor

Agreement: “The representatives of the underground organizations conveyed their decision, of their own volition, to accept, without condition, the Constitution of India. It was agreed that the arms, now underground, would be brought out and deposited at appointed places. Details for giving the effect of this agreement will be worked out between them and representatives of the Government, the security forces, and members of the Liaison Committee.”

Expression: “It was agreed that the representatives of the underground organizations should have reasonable time to formulate other issues for discussion for final settlement.”

- Naga Peace Accord, 2015:

Parties: Government of India and NSCN–IM.

Agreement: The framework agreement was signed in August 2015, after NSCN–IM agreed on a settlement within the Indian federation with a “special status.”

Impact on the Naga Society & Economy:

The Naga insurgency has persisted for more than 70 years. Numerous people lost their lives, and the civil unrest left the State with a socially disturbed and economically isolated population. As a result, Nagaland was unable to realize its full economic potential. The State GDP for FY 2019–20 stood at INR. 31,23,478 (GoNL 2021). It was placed at the 30th position by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, thus, indicating a low contribution to the National economy. Besides, the state failed to attract private industry and investments. Start-ups and Business activities remained non-existent at best. Unemployment was severe despite higher literacy levels. And, the state’s resources remain underdeveloped. One significant aspect of this failure was a large-scale talent exodus to other parts of India such as Delhi, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu during the last few decades.

Stalled Peace Accord:

On August 3, 2015, the Indian government and the NSCN-IM signed a historic Peace Agreement. It took 80 rounds of negotiations over a period of 18 years, starting in 1997, to get this agreement. The agreement known as the "Naga Peace Accord" was touted to resolve the dispute to the complete satisfaction of all Naga factions. Subsequently, RN Ravi, a former officer of the Intelligence Bureau was asked to serve as the Union Government's interlocutor with the NSCN-IM. For the sake of advancing the peace process, he was also appointed as the Governor of Nagaland from 2019 to 2021. However, most of the responsibility for the deadlocked peace effort would fall on.

The key contention throughout the years has been regarding the interpretation of the Framework Agreement. The interlocutor has been accused of distorting the "original agreement" and endangering the "trust" by fomenting factionalism inside the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), specifically the NSCN-IM. The NSCN-IM has pushed for a "shared sovereignty" based approach towards finding a settlement. On the other hand, the Union Government has stressed that the conflicts must be resolved within the constraints of the Constitution (Talukdar 2020). Since the impasse could not be resolved, the NSCN-IM released the agreement's original copy to the public in August 2020 in retaliation.

Another contentious issue arose when the NSCN-IM accused the interlocutor of misleading the Parliamentary Standing Committee. "In 2015, the GoI reached an understanding with the NSCN (IM) which agreed for settlement within Indian Federation with special status. The Interlocutor informed the committee that this was a departure from their earlier position of 'with India', not 'within India' and the GoI called it Framework Agreement and signed it" (Pisharoty 2020). By doing so, the interlocutor earned the ire of the NSCN-IM as well as the other NNPG members.

The NSCN-IM also accused the interlocutor of deleting certain words from the framework agreement. In a press release on August 11, 2020, the NSCN-IM claimed that the deletion of the word "new" from the phrase "new relationship" has significant political consequences. The NSCN-IM has viewed this move as a clear indication that the long-pending demand of the Nagas for a separate flag and a constitution will not be tolerated (Pisharoty

2020).

The difference over the creation of a pan Naga Hoho and the Naga Regional Territorial Councils (NRTCs) became another irritant between the Union Government and the NSCN-IM. In an interview to the Nagaland Post, Ravi said that “Pan Naga entity was mutually agreed to be a cultural body with no political role or executive authority. However, after October 31, 2019, when the contentious issues were settled, the NSCN-IM is asking for the proposed Pan Naga entity to have political and executive influence over the Nagaland government. This is not acceptable to the Government of India. Reopening settled issues is the delaying tactics of NSCN-IM” (Talukdar 2020). The peace process has thus been significantly delayed as a result of all the aforementioned disputes and disagreements.

AK Mishra, another retired officer from the IB, was designated as the successor to RN Ravi. It is known that Mishra has been engaged in organising several closed door meetings with the NSCN (IM) and other groups in finding a permanent solution to the Naga conflict.

Way forward:

The Government will need to resolve a maze of challenging issues to bring about peace in Nagaland. The lingering problems of the Peace Agreement, 2015 must be rectified on priority. The discussion appears to have been hampered by contentious matters like the adoption of a cultural flag and a Naga constitution. The Centre would need to take an unbiased stance in any effort to find a way out of the current mess. The Government cannot afford to appear to be siding with one group over another. All subterranean factions, even those over the ground, must be included for any significant result; otherwise, a piecemeal peace dialogue won't result in an acceptable political resolution. More autonomy for the State, real economic growth, rapid infrastructure development, new trade routes, less central funding, and some pressure on armed groups to accept the peace offer are all necessary for a long-term solution.

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