

Naga Movement and Conflict Situation in North East India

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Abstract: *Ethnicity plays an important role on territorial politics and also in the self-determination movement in North East India. The paper delves into the complexities of Nagas movement for self-determination that has been left unresolved by the colonial rulers, and the challenges faced by the post-colonial state in addressing the contemporary realities.*

Keyword: *Ethnic Conflict, Post-Colonial State, Naga Peace Process, Territorial Integrity*

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I. Introduction

The post-colonial states are often premised in the idea that nation-state preceded nationalism. Therefore, post-colonial states were mostly established with strong elements of socialism in order to fortify the nation state. Post-colonial states often experienced the contestation and conflict of territory among the different ethnic groups or communities. Largely, the colonial rulers recognized the territorial boundaries of the new states corresponding to the former colonial provinces. The colonial rulers did not favour any separatist or secessionist movement from the different conflicting groups. Community conflicts or ethnic conflict in post-colonial states were left to the political leaders of the new nation-states. As a result, ethnic conflict and political conflict continued to escalate even after decolonization as new political leaders took control of the new nation-states, and as such it reached its peak in the 1990s. The Naga-Kuki conflict (1992), Meitei-Pangal conflict (1993), and Paite-Kuki conflict (1997-98) occurred in the 1990s in North East India. There are possibilities of resurfacing such clashes if such conflicts are not addressed in the larger interest of the nation. Therefore, colonial rule often had devastating consequences for the smaller ethnic and tribal communities where they did not encounter centrally organized polities. They mostly took the responsibility that these smaller ethnic and tribal communities were organized politically for their administrative convenience. Colonial administrators, who often turned into anthropologist, were assigned the task of identifying and understanding different ethnic communities and tribal groups as a basis for indirect rule.

North East India is comprised of various heterogeneous cultures inhabited by different ethnic communities with distinctive historical experiences. During the colonial rule, the North East region has been governed separately by the British administration as they were geographically isolated and culturally distinct from mainland India. The colonial policy of divide and rule exacerbated inter community feuds and the claims and assertion of ethnic identity therefore became more profound. Gangmumei Kamei observed that ethnicity had been employed by the British for administrative convenience, while the tribal elites employed it for building up an expanded identity formation (Kamei 2008: 68). However, the colonial administration did not directly intervene in the socio-cultural life of the tribal communities. Their policies were exclusively maintained towards administration and dispensing of justice. Therefore, the British followed the non-interference policy in order to keep the tribals like the Nagas free to govern themselves in the internal matters.

Different ethnic groups were stratified for administrative convenience and sometimes, invented or constructed. The departure of the British colonial rule left the ethnic question unresolved in North East India, particularly minority ethnic groups and also left its simmering scars, fears and antagonism. The fear of being dominated by one ethnic group over another ethnic group has become a phenomenon in post-colonial North East India which in fact resulted in the demand for self-determination and autonomy movement based on ethnic lines. However, post-colonial states often subscribed to the foundation of strong state in order to contain various elements, especially groups from secession.

II. The Naga Movement

Ethnic conflict and ethnic situation is a pervasive and prominent dimension of political and social conflict in most of the countries as they are 'conceived to be particularly conducive to large-scale violence' (Humphreys & Daniel et.al 2002: 2). The post independent India witnessed the creation of different states in North East India. These states were created because of the strong demand coming from different ethnic communities. Besides, various administrative autonomy such as the Sixth Scheduled, autonomous districts council and territorial councils were introduced to meet the demands of the different ethnic communities. Such administrative autonomy aims to provide some space for retaining and nurturing the socio-cultural identities of the different ethnic communities, however it also aims in integrating them into the mainstream. The demand for more autonomy and self-determination with territorially defined boundaries became more volatile in contemporary North East India. Different ethnic communities are of the view that an adequate share of power and politics of difference is necessary for sustaining and safeguarding their socio-cultural identities and political aspirations in a highly globalized world (Biswas & Suklabaidya 2008: 11). However, the main contention has been over land and territory which might be considered as an incommensurable claim.

The post-colonial Indian state witnessed the rise for demand of self-determination in North East India. This in fact resulted in the growth of various armed groups with the agenda of promoting their own identity politics with territorial claims. Such demands and ethnic assertions considerably affect the relations of different communities. The Naga-Kuki conflict (1992), Meitei-Muslim conflict (1993), Paite-Kuki conflict (1997-98), Karbi-Kuki conflict and Dimasa-Hmar conflict (2003) are some of the ethnic conflicts that have been escalated in the region. There has been often the vulnerability of resurfacing such clashes among the different ethnic groups. Such ethnic conflicts are seen merely as a break-down of law and order by the Indian state. Sanjib Baruah observed that a radical rethinking of policies is necessary on the part of the Indian state in order to handle the ethnic conflict rather than merely engaging in counter-insurgency measures. (Baruah 2002: 4181).

Despite the Indian state having to organize and re-organize the territorial boundaries by creating new states and autonomous district councils in North East, there have been frequent claims and counterclaims of certain territories by various communities. The Kuki-Naga conflict of 1992 has been largely the conflict over land and territory. Each group claimed its exclusive territory for self-determination by asserting their ethnic identity. The Kuki-Naga conflict could have been short lived; however, 'the complacency and perplexity of the state-machinery and their failure to contain the clashes in its initial phase were responsible for worsening the conflict to such a mammoth proportion' (Singh 2008: 10). The Naga's expanded identity assertion which cuts across territorial boundaries of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland in India has been the contentious issue in most part of the North East. The Nagas struggle for self-determination has been considered by other ethnic groups and communities as a hurdle for maintaining peaceful co-existence in the region, and particularly in Manipur.

The Naga movement is perhaps the most contentious issue in India. The Nagas political imaginings began from their first encounter with the colonial British in 1832 (Venuh 2005: 30). In 1918, the Naga Club was formed, and the Naga club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 and demanded for the exclusion of the Naga areas from the proposed reforms and pressed for self-determination (Yuono 1974: 126). The memorandum has been considered as the first political expression of the Nagas to live together as a distinct entity in the predisposition of the modern nation state building. In 1947 the Naga struggle took a different turn with India's independence whereby the first general election of new India was proposed. Despite the protest from the Nagas, the Government of India held its first general election in 1952. The Nagas boycotted the general election. Therefore, conflict ensued in Naga areas. This resulted in the loss of lives and miseries, and many Nagas joined the rebel groups.

The formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946 has been a landmark in the political annals of the Nagas as it became the first politically established form of underground organization. Therefore, the NNC became the organization which expressed and modulated a sense of nationhood among the Nagas. The NNC has been largely responsible for consolidating the Nagas and made into a people's movement after the independence of India (Ao 2002: 47). The demand of the NNC for independence escalated into violence and militarization in the Naga Hills, resulting in the loss of lives and sufferings. Therefore, in order to bring peace in the Naga Hills, the Naga church leaders took the peace initiative (Zhimomi 2004: 67). In 1963, the state of Nagaland was formed by the Government of India. However, the NNC continued to press their demand for independence. In 1980, the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed under the leadership of Isak Chisi Swu, Th. Muivah and S.S. Khaplang.

The signing of the cease fire agreement between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM on 1st August, 1997, and the Framework Agreement signed on 3rd August, 2015 has been a landmark. There has been protest

and strong opposition from communities such as the Meiteis and Kukis particularly in Manipur. The Meiteis has been apprehensive that the Naga peace process is likely to disturb the territorial and administrative integrity of Manipur. The Kukis also demanded that their demand for separate homeland should be settled before signing the Naga accord. The Naga peace process has the potential to flare up ethnic conflict in North East India. For an instance, the June 14, 2001 Bangkok Declaration, extending the ceasefire without territorial limits to all the Naga-inhabited areas in North East India led to the outbreak of the June 18th Uprising 2001 in Manipur by the Meiteis resulting in the loss of lives, and destruction of public properties.

In the present peace process, the Meiteis who constituted the majority in the state feared that the Naga peace process would disturb the territorial and administrative boundaries of Manipur as the Nagas has been claiming a large portion as their inhabited areas and ancestral land. The strong opposition from the Meiteis toward the Naga movement has been one of the biggest obstacles in the present peace process. Seeking opportunities of accommodating the Nagas of Manipur, the United Naga Council (UNC), an apex civil society organization of the Nagas in Manipur demanded for an 'alternative arrangement' for the Nagas of Manipur to the Government of India. The UNC demand for 'alternative arrangement' suggests that their demand has been within the political landscape of the Naga movement. The UNC demanded administrative autonomy for the Nagas of Manipur without infringing the territorial boundaries of Manipur. However, the Meiteis and the Kukis strongly opposed the demand of the UNC fearing that changing administrative boundaries would eventually lead to the disintegration of the state territorial integrity. The UNC demand has not been successful as the Naga peace process demands the inclusiveness of all Nagas as reiterated by the Government of India. The success of the Naga peace process demands the inclusiveness of all Naga tribes and insurgent groups on the one hand, and the protection of Manipur territorial integrity on the other hand. The complexities and challenges of the nature of peace process require political will and wisdom of the all the stakeholders.

III. Conclusion

Despite the fact that Naga movement facilitates collective action for promoting the interest of the Nagas, however, it has been also responsible for escalating conflict from the Nagas themselves, and from the other communities. Ethnicity has been employed by the British and the tribal elites during the colonial rule. The colonial rule utilized it for administrative convenience, while the tribal elites utilized it for expanded identity formation. Despite the fact that the post-colonial state has been organized within the framework of liberal democracy that promotes individual rights, there has been a growing political significance of ethnicity in North East India. There has been an attempt by civil society organizations to promote peace and tolerance by engaging people to people dialogue within the various ethnic communities for fostering peace and development. Despite the fact that the Meiteis has been strongly opposing the Naga peace talk, there has been an attempt to redefine and maintain the bond of brotherhood with the Nagas particularly after the signing of the Framework Agreement in 2015. However, the Naga peace accord if concluded is likely to redefine the ethnic relations in the North East and particularly in the state of Manipur.

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