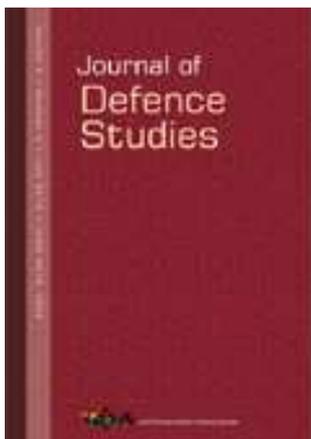


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The Quest for Nagalim

Fault Lines and Challenges

*Pradeep Singh Chhonkar**

The Naga quest for independence is one of the longest-running struggles in the Indian subcontinent. Despite numerous attempts made in the past towards resolving the conflict, it continues to remain elusive on account of various fault lines. The signing of a 'Framework Agreement' between the National Socialist Council of Nagalim–Issak and Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Government of India in August 2015 was one such attempt. However, the views of various stakeholders remain fragmented as the details of the agreement have not been disclosed in the public domain. Existent challenges and changing aspirations of the Naga populace necessitate a different approach towards resolving the Naga conflict.

The Naga insurgency is one of the oldest political issues in the country, dating back to the first decade of India's independence. From the very outset, the Government of India (GoI) [continuously] made attempts towards resolving the issue, even before formal independence was achieved. Given the apprehensions expressed by the Naga Club¹ and the Naga National Council (NNC)² to the British administration of possible Indian political and cultural domination of Naga areas post-Independence, the Indian interim government engaged the NNC early on and arrived at the Nine Point Agreement. However, the agreement failed on account of differing perceptions on the ninth point of the agreement: 'The Nagas interpreted it as giving them a right to independence once

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the interim period of 10 years was over, whereas the Indian government insisted it implied only the right to suggest administrative changes within the country's laws.³

Another significant attempt was the signing of a Sixteen Point Agreement in July 1960 between the Naga Peoples' Convention and the Union government. Under it, the Parliament passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1962 and formed the state of Nagaland on 1 December 1963. However, this development did not quell the Naga separatist movement under Angami Phizo,⁴ who demanded nothing short of Naga independence. With statehood the inter-tribal rivalry escalated, as also the confrontation between the pro-separatists and pro-statehood groups.⁵ Another attempt was made with signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975; this agreement was dismissed by the Naga nationalist faction and the Naga National Assembly as an act of capitulation to the 'enemy'.

Fresh attempts to resolve the Naga issue were made in the mid-1990s when then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao cut the first turf by meeting with Issak Chishi Swu and Th. Muivah in Paris on 15 June 1995. The subsequent ceasefire with National Socialist Council of Nagalim–Issak and Muivah (NSCN-IM) came into force in August 1997. However, such peace initiatives by the Indian government were seen as mere attempt towards achieving a temporary lull in violent activities by the insurgents rather than finding long-term solutions. This is mainly because the government could not come up with inclusive peace processes involving different stakeholders.

This article attempts to deconstruct the long-standing Naga issue, beginning with a detailed discussion of the fault lines within Naga society and politics before moving on to discussing the various approaches to resolving the Naga insurgency. It also analyses in depth the various challenges facing a workable and acceptable resolution of the issue. The article concludes by making a case for a consensus-based approach without any political biases and vested interests in addressing the issue.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND MAJOR FAULT LINES

Numerous fault lines have played a destabilising role in the attempts to garner a comprehensive resolution roadmap to the Naga conflict. These fault lines cannot be termed as reasons for failure as they are essentially contextual, based on the dynamics that prevailed at a given point in time, including the historical baggage which has to be dealt with in its existing format. However, there were certain crucial opportunities that were

missed primarily due to the ignorance of decision makers. It is important that these fault lines are highlighted to generate an understanding that would be required to deal with resultant fallouts and challenges related to the Naga issue.

Tribalism, Localism and Factionalism

The Nagas were not a unified race under the British India. The term 'Naga' was mainly founded during the British times; the 'Naga' tribes were earlier called by different names such as Angami, Ao, Konyak, Lotha, Mao, Sema, Chakro, Kheza, Sangtam and Chang. These tribes had limited interaction '...and the only possible form of contact was through the practice of head-hunting.'⁶ Though the concept of Naga identity has gained prominence after India's independence, the Nagas still retain strong tribal affinities and remain Angami, Sema, Konyak, or Tangkhul first. The Nagas are polyglot; they speak dozens of mutually unintelligible languages. The physical features differ even from one household to another in a village. The intra-Naga differences in their social structure, village polity, dress, hair style, tattooing, setting of the village, housing pattern, etc., are also significant. The mode of agriculture, sowing of seed and harvesting too is not identical. The origin of various tribes is different as their migration has taken place almost from every direction.⁷ Love for native village (or localism) and the primacy of tribalism have majorly impeded the efforts towards Naga nationalism. Furthermore, the entire Naga insurgency has been dominated by inter-tribal rivalry and a struggle for hegemony.⁸

Every Naga tribe has a unique political organisation of its own. Various types of political systems are found among the Nagas—ranging from the pure democracy of the Angami to the autocratic rule of the Ahngs (tribal chiefs) of the Konyaks, from the gerontocracy (Tatar) of the Aos to the semi-republics of the Zeliangrongs. There are considerable variations in mortuary rites and beliefs after death. While the Tangkhuls, Zeliangrongs, Angamis, Chakhesangs and others bury their dead, the Konyaks and the Aos expose their dead. In their racial makeup, there are elements ranging from Mongoloid to the Caucasoid (of the Aryan types) and Negrito (curly hairs of Angamis). Their traditional religion has variety of diverse beliefs and customs, including rituals and mode of worship. Even with the coming of Christianity, there are several denominations among different Christian groups although the majority of the Nagas follow the Baptist denomination; at the same time, some

tribes, such as the Zeliangrongs, still include followers of their traditional religion.

Rani Gaidinliu, one of the leading Naga revivalist and freedom fighters from Manipur, had opposed the attempts by NNC to spread Naga nationalism based on Christianity and Western culture in the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur in 1947. Her nationalist ideas for the Nagas of Manipur clashed with the Naga nationalism of Nagaland inspired by the NNC. Despite tacit legitimisation of Naga nationalistic territorial assertions with the extension of the 1964 ceasefire between the Naga rebels and the Indian government to the areas of Ukhrul, Mao and Tamenglong, some prominent Naga leaders under the banner of All Tribal Delegation went to Delhi in May 1970 to demand statehood for Manipur and chose to remain with the state of Manipur instead of acceding to Nagaland.

The question of unification had puzzled the Nagas of Manipur as the Christian Nagas, mainly under the influence of NNC and later NSCN-IM, were in favour of Naga unification, whereas the non-Christian Nagas and a section of the politically active Christian Nagas outside the influence of NSCN-IM were in favour of status quo. Thus, the Naga nationalism in Manipur was divided.

Tribal differences and internal fissures were the major factors resulting in the NNC split in 1980. In October 1967, the Naga National Tribal Parliament witnessed a revolt by Kaito Sema (from the Sema tribe), the then Defence Minister of the revolutionary Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN), against Zapu Phizo (from the Angami tribe), over the growing Chinese connection of the latter, as the NNC cadres were being sent for training to China without the consent of Kaito. Matters further worsened when a fellow Sema tribesman of Kaito, Scato Swu was replaced by G. Mhiasiu (a Phizo loyalist) as the President of FGN. The appointment of Mowu Angami from the Angami tribe as the 'Naga Army' Chief further accentuated the fissures. Th. Muivah, the General Secretary of NSCN-IM, had also asserted that the NNC structure was based on tribal differences, with Angami cadres occupying the highest rungs of the power ladder.⁹

Similarly, the split within the NSCN in 1988 that led to the formation of the NSCN-IM and National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khaplant (NSCN-K) was mainly the result of differences along the tribal fault lines. While the NSCN-IM was primarily dominated by the Naga tribes from western, central and southern Nagaland and Manipur—with its

top leadership mainly comprising of Tangkhul Nagas—the NSCN-K was dominant over northern and eastern Nagaland and the Naga-inhabited areas of Myanmar. While Khaplang described Muivah as a Tangkhul and not a Naga, Muivah, in turn, termed Khaplang as being of Myanmar origin.¹⁰ The formation of National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Unification (NSCN-U), National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khitovi and Neokpao (NSCN-KN) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Reformation (NSCN-R) in later years has also been the aftermath of internal fissures within NSCN-IM and NSCN-K on tribal lines and leadership issues.

Conflict with other Dominant Ethnic Groups

Although ethnic dissent exists in all the states affected by the Naga insurgency, the differences are more profound in the state of Manipur, which is mainly inhabited by Meitei, Naga and Kuki ethnic groups. The harmonious existence of these groups is being threatened as the interests of one group clash with the other. The divergent political aspirations of these ethnic groups are fed by a belief that adequate political power is a necessary precondition for retaining their cultural identity and for all-round development.¹¹ This is the main driving force behind the assertions of ethnic identity by the different groups.

The territorial aspirations of the Nagas has resulted in an anti-Meitei feeling as the resolute stance of the Meiteis for a united Manipur is often seen as one of the major obstacles to the goal of Naga unification. The idea of Nagalim, as envisioned by the NSCN-IM, includes the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. There are various alternatives and subsets to the framework of a united Naga territory as appreciated by NSCN-IM. One of the alternatives is integration of Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur into Nagaland; the other is to form a 'Southern Nagaland' comprising the Naga-inhabited districts of Manipur. On the other hand, the major Meitei insurgent groups, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, aspire to make Manipur independent and, therefore, will not accept Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur going to Nagaland. The territory of the state of Manipur, thus, assumes tremendous significance as a primary fault line that precludes an inclusive solution to the Naga issue.

The differing systems of landownership further reinforce the accentuated ethnic divide between the Meiteis and the Nagas in Manipur. Besides the Meiteis and Nagas, the Kukis comprise the third largest group in Manipur. The Naga aspirations for a unified Naga territory in Manipur directly challenges the livelihood and security of the Kukis. This threat perception by the Kukis has led to the emergence of Kuki nationalism. The Nagas also see the Kukis as an obstacle to their long-cherished objective of unification. The territorial claims of the Kukis include the districts of Churachandpur, Pherzwal, Chandel, Sadar Hills and some portions of Tegnoupal, Tamenglong, Noney, Senapati and Ukhrul, whereas the Nagas claim the districts of Tamenglong, Noney, Senapati, Ukhrul, Kamjong, Chandel, Tegnoupal and portions of Jiribam. The Kukis and Nagas, therefore, have conflicting territorial interests over most of the hill districts of the state, except Churachandpur and Pherzwal.¹²

The Zeme Nagas have a sizeable population in the North Cachar Hills (NC Hills) district of Assam. They also form part of the Nagalim project of the NSCN-IM. However, the Dimasas also inhabit NC Hills and they have been demanding a separate Dimasa homeland—the ‘Dimaraji Kingdom’—comprising the Dimasa-inhabited areas of NC Hills, Karbi Anglong, parts of Nowgaon district in Assam and parts of Dimapur district of Nagaland. If the vision of Nagalim assumes shape, then it may possibly invite violent reaction from the Dimasas. The Naga tribes of Arunachal Pradesh also have been demanding a separate autonomous region under the Patkai Autonomous Council as they are not wanting to be part of either Arunachal Pradesh or any new arrangement under the NSCN-IM leadership. This will surely result in a situation of ethnic violence and volatility in the entire region.¹³

Missed Opportunities

In the formative years of post-independent India, crucial opportunities were missed primarily due to the ignorance of the Indian leadership about the Nagas.¹⁴ The arbitrary division of the Naga territory, formed purely for administrative convenience by the British, complicated the problem for the new Indian state, leaving the Naga independence issue one step backward in the post-independence era.¹⁵

Looking back on the developments from 1946 to 1950, a few questions arise:

1. When the Constituent Assembly was in session and a subcommittee had visited Kohima, was it right for the governor to interfere on the issue or did he have the authority to hold discussion and come to an agreement or an understanding? If he had not interfered and not carried out discussion and sat tight in Shillong, and waited for Constituent Assembly to decide, what would have been the developments in Naga Hills district?
2. The ninth point could not have been amended as desired by the extremists as the government could not have agreed to it. But if there was a genuine attempt at implementing the first eight points, could the extremists have been overruled by the majority and a workable solution reached?
3. If the transfer of forests back to Naga Hills was implemented at the psychological moment, would it have helped the majority to overcome the extremist ideas of the minority?
4. Would the removal of Phizo from the scene, as contemplated by Pawsey (Political Officer, Tuensang, in 1952), changed the course of events? Should Phizo have been trusted by the adviser to the governor?¹⁶

Whatever the 'ifs' of history, the majority of the Nagas would made the Nine Point Agreement work if the NNC was given powers which the district council was to get, and a sincere attempt made to build up the moderate leadership. But the GoI and the administrators slowly but steadily, and perhaps unconsciously, handed over the Naga Hills into the hands of Phizo.¹⁷

The first stirrings of trouble in the Naga Hills began when Phizo persuaded the NNC to hold a 'plebiscite' on the issue of Naga independence in May 1951. Thousands of Nagas supported the move and the NNC claimed that over 90 per cent of the population was for independence. However, it is uncertain as to how many of the signatories were actually aware of the difference between autonomy for Nagas within the Indian Union and complete separation as an independent sovereign state. Moreover, the 'plebiscite' was restricted to the Naga Hills district alone and other Naga inhabited areas including Tuensang were not covered.¹⁸ Tuensang, which had a population of 1.5 lakh as against 2 lakh in the Naga Hills district, was untouched at the time of plebiscite as it was not a part of the Naga Hills district at the time. Thus, the claim that over 90 per cent of the Nagas voted for independence is factually incorrect.

Also, no Indian political leader of consequence had visited the Naga Hills and the people were left out of the movement for independence completely. On the other hand, after independence, India had to grapple with the problem of refugees and Assam was directly affected. The problem of a few lakh in the hills of Assam (Naga Hills district) had no priority. But it was only when the NNC President Phizo started his plebiscite that the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee woke up from its slumber.

In 1952, Phizo, while remaining underground, continued to direct the activities of NNC in Naga Hills and secretly extended it to the Tuensang Frontier Division. The Political Officer, Tuensang, realised that these activities would have repercussions on the situation in the Tuensang Frontier Division and that sooner or later the NNC ideology would slowly spread into the contiguous area. As a result, as early as 1952, a draft regulation was sent to the GoI to enable the political officer to prevent entry into and expel from the division any undesirable person. However, the regulation came into force only from February 1955, and it was too late to be effective. In the later part of 1952, it was reported that villagers of Tuensang were attending NNC meetings organised by workers in the Naga Hills district. While Phizo's gangs were following a policy of violence, a large number of tribal people from different parts of Tuensang Frontier Division had assembled in Tuensang on 27 March 1955 to pay their respect to the governor. This, possibly, was another missed opportunity that could have effectively exploited simmering discontent against the extremists.

In September 1953, the NNC and other overground leaders looked after Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the then President of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, extremely well during his visit to Naga tribal areas. Chaliha in his report spoke feelingly about the kindness and hospitality shown to him by the Nagas. Later, in 1964, Chaliha formed part of a peace mission, and got the government and NNC to sign an agreement to suspend operations. Thus, one man establishing contact with the Nagas achieved so much, in such a short time. If only the lesson was learnt and there was more frequent contact and understanding of the Nagas by the people in Assam state and other parts of India, history could have taken a different course. Contact, cordiality, friendliness and understanding would have been the first steps towards compromise, confidence and final solution of the problem.

The NNC members who had signed the peace agreement, despite their moderate stance, had divisions over their political goal. There were moderate leaders who supported the idea of 'Independent Nagaland' based on Naga uniqueness. This made them vulnerable to the hardliners, which resulted in failure of the agreement as the entity with which the agreement was made was itself divided over the issue. The Indian military's use of limited force to counter extremist violence in Naga areas, which sometimes had the 'double effect' of killing non-combatants in the line of fire, also led to loss of support for the peace agreements in Naga society.¹⁹

As the tribals were used to their own unique way of life, the efforts undertaken by the Indian government to draw them into the mainstream were looked upon as infringement of their independence and culture. These apprehensions further worsened the situation with ordinary Nagas perceiving the moves towards national integration as forced Indianisation thus becoming fearful of losing their distinct identity. The outcome of such apprehensions was unrest and disturbance, which then evolved into insurgency.²⁰

Constitutional Issues

The central issue during the talks between the GoI and the NSCN-IM has been the 'sovereignty' of the Naga people. The GoI maintains that there is enough scope to ensure a completely autonomous existence for the Naga people within the ambit of the Constitution of India. The NSCN-IM has been expressing reservations about this approach and suggesting changes in the Constitution to ensure full autonomy for the Nagas. The Naga deal apparently is not making headway because the government in Manipur is opposed to the idea of granting autonomy to the Naga-inhabited hill areas under the Sixth Schedule.

CURRENT APPROACH TO THE NAGA INSURGENCY

Framework Agreement between NSCN-IM and the GoI

A Framework Agreement was signed between the GoI and the NSCN-IM on 3 August 2015. Though the initial hype for early settlement has withered away, there is no doubt that the peace initiative holds much vigour and optimism as compared to the past initiatives as most of the Naga insurgent factions have been included in the ongoing talks, except

NSCN-K, which withdrew from the ceasefire agreement in 2015. The agreement affects four states and approximately 35 Naga and other ethnic tribes inhabiting the traditional Naga areas, also including the settlers from Bengal and Bihar.²¹ The contents of the agreement are, however, not in the public domain, which has led to differing perceptions amongst the various stakeholders.

The Framework Agreement set three crucial parameters for the detailed settlement. First, it recognised that the Naga 'history and situation' was unique—implying that the solution to the Naga issue would also have to be unique. It, therefore, cannot be based on or be similar to the Centre's relationship with any other existing state of the Union. Second, it proposed that sovereign powers would be shared between the Centre and the Nagas through a division of competencies, that is, through renegotiating the Union, State and Concurrent Lists of competencies of the Indian Constitution in view of the Naga demands. Third, the two sides would strive for a mutually acceptable and peaceful settlement, recognising the complexities and difficulties of each other. This meant that just as GoI was trying to understand the Nagas, so would the Nagas try to appreciate the political difficulties of the government in trying to meet their aspirations. It was within this framework that the two sides agreed to work out the details of a permanent arrangement.²²

While terms of the accord are shrouded in secrecy, it has been indicated that there will be no modification to state boundaries; however 'cultural integration of Nagas will be facilitated through special measures and provide for the financial and administrative autonomy of the Naga-dominated areas in other states'.²³

According to Naga sources close to the negotiations, four points of agreement have been reached:

One, a Pan Naga Hoho (essentially, a supreme Naga Council cutting across Naga-inhabited states) will be created as a statutory apex body with legislative, budgetary and negotiating powers. This will be an elected body and govern the Nagas eventually.

Two, pending the integration of the Naga areas outside Nagaland into a single administrative unit, Regional Autonomous District Councils (RADCs) will be created for the Naga-inhabited districts of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. These will come under the Pan Naga Hoho.

Three, the Indian Parliament will enact a Special Naga Law which will be incorporated in the Indian Constitution. The Special

Naga Law will contain the division of competencies—subjects in the State, Union and Concurrent Lists of the Indian Constitution—between the Centre and the Nagas. In this way, what the NSCN (IM) calls the Naga Constitution will become an integral part of the Indian Constitution.

Four, all natural resources found in the Naga areas—below the ground and on the surface—will belong to the Nagas. They will have the full right to exploit them except in cases where they feel that they need to partner with the central government and its entities. In such cases, joint venture agreements will be signed for exploration and exploitation of resources.²⁴

Developments Post-Signing of the Agreement

The NSCN-IM has been able to galvanise broad consensus amongst the Naga political and social entities with respect to its ongoing negotiations with the GoI. Prominent Naga social bodies, including the Naga Hoho, Naga Student Federation, Naga Mothers Association, Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights and United Naga Council—most of whom were already amenable to the NSCN-IM's idea of a settlement for the Nagas—have given their consent to the process. There are continuous efforts by the outfit to re-establish its clout and dominance in the claimed areas of Nagalim, including the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The organisation is making full use of its military strength, financial prowess and strong support bases in western Nagaland and Manipur.

Response of Other Naga Entities

Other Naga factions have responded variously to the ongoing peace negotiations between the GoI and NSCN-IM. The NSCN-K has rejected any form of engagement with the GoI and is continuing with its acts of violence.

Six Naga factions, including NSCN-KN and NSCN-R, and four factions of the NNC conjoined and formed a conglomerate known as Working Committee of the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) in the aftermath of signing of the Framework Agreement. The Working Committee too has been holding talks with GoI on the Naga issue with a presumption that the issue of territorial integration of the Nagas does not hold relevance in the present situation. They are demanding a separate solution for the Nagas of Nagaland, which could further be extended to other Naga-inhabited areas as well. The Manipur-based Zeliangrong

United Front (ZUF) and the Manipur Naga People's Front (MNPF) have expressed their disagreements with the current format of negotiations.

Likewise, some of the prominent Naga civil society organisations, including the Eastern Naga Peoples' Organisation (ENPO), Naga Tribes Council (NTC) and Against Corruption and Unabated Taxation (ACAUT), have all emphasised on an inclusive solution with all the stakeholders on board in the framework of the talks. The NSCN-IM's expanding dominance in Longding, Tirap and Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh has elicited sharp reactions from the local bodies in these districts, which are currently not willing to be part of the proposed arrangement.

CHALLENGES

The success of the Framework Agreement would be measured by the degree of inclusivity and acceptance of the deal once it is concluded. Despite numerous efforts and initiatives aimed at resolving the Naga issue, there remain considerable challenges that need to be taken into account while carving out an acceptable and comprehensive solution to the whole issue. The Naga issue not only pertains to the Nagas but also impacts the whole region, including Naga-inhabited areas of Myanmar.

The GoI has made considerable progress in bringing divergent stakeholders on board in support of the ongoing peace process, besides the continuation of talks with NSCN-IM. However, there remain a number of unsettled issues which could hinder the ongoing peace process. These include: the issue of integration of contiguous Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in view of the demand for territorial unification of 'Nagalim'; the demand for a separate 'Frontier State' by the tribes of eastern Nagaland; differences amongst the 'Naga political groups' whose support is essential for any accord to succeed; and visible cracks in Naga society over the non-inclusion of all stakeholders in the pursuit of an acceptable and comprehensive political solution. A solution for Nagas, therefore, has to be looked in its entirety, taking into account other regional dynamics and challenges as well.

Nagalim: Territorial Challenge

The NSCN-IM's Greater Nagalim demand is based on the territorial unification of all Naga-inhabited areas in Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. Hence, any resolution based on territorial changes will not be acceptable to these states as was demonstrated

by the violent protests in Manipur in 2001.²⁵ The Indian government cannot grant parts of Manipur to Nagaland as Nagalim because there are other non-Naga tribes that inhabit the hills and have long been resisting Naga domination in the hill areas. It also cannot seize territories of other countries and turn them into Nagalim. So, this demand remains unmet²⁶ and has become a challenge for the government to deal with.

Demand for Separate Region/State by Naga Bodies

The ENPO along with six Naga tribes, including the Chang, Konyak, Sangtam, Khamniungan, Yimchungru and Phom, is demanding creation of a new state to be carved out of Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire and Longleng districts of eastern Nagaland as well as Longding, Tirap and Changlang districts of adjoining Arunachal Pradesh, which have a dominant Naga population. Similarly, the Zeliangrong community which is concentrated in the hill district of Tamenglong in the state of Manipur, and in neighbouring Assam and Nagaland, has also been demanding a separate state. The leaders of Zeliangrong tribal as well as socio-political organisations are currently supporting the ongoing peace talks between the GoI and the NSCN-IM. However, the aspirations of a separate Zeliangrong region still persist. The demands for separate state/region could very well pose hurdle to the peace negotiations post conclusion of talks, if not during the ongoing negotiations.

Degeneration of Naga Insurgency

One of the major drivers of any insurgent movement is ideological belief and hope of success. No movement can sustain itself for prolonged period without ideological belief. Greater Nagalim and a single administrative governance for all Nagas is the driving force for the continued struggle of the Nagas.²⁷ However, the Naga movement seems to have lost its original goals and ideological stand on the basis of which it was initially established. The leaders and cadres now seem to be motivated by the more materialistic benefits coming out of the conflict. As it stands today, most of the Naga insurgent groups are no more than extortion and crime syndicates. It will not be incorrect to state that it has become an industry which is a bigger challenge to handle given the circumstances. They have more money and resources to derail the resolution to carry on with their agenda.²⁸

No ethnic group or section of society is prepared to compromise or accede to the others concerns. The bond between various ethnic groups

stands shredded and replaced by mistrust. This fog of mistrust has led to crisis of confidence and identity among the various ethnic groups. And though the armed struggle has been contained by the Security Forces (SF), the political establishment has failed to cease the initiative. Aspirations of the people are also rising but the system has not been able to deliver politically or economically.²⁹ Civil society groups, too, are divided on the Naga issue.³⁰ Organisations like Naga Students Federation and Naga Women's Union wholeheartedly support the ideology propagated by NSCN-IM, whereas ENPO, NTC and the Central Naga Tribal Council (CNTC) demand greater inclusiveness in the format of ongoing peace negotiations.

Armed Cadres or Military Wing Intact in spite of Ceasefire and Suspension of Operations (SoO)

The pipeline of resources and cadres is neither drying up nor are society and the government making concerted efforts to block or disrupt it. Armed cadres of the insurgent groups, without exception of being under ceasefire or otherwise, are intact and fully under the control of their leaders. A glaring example of the same is that in spite of the ceasefire with NSCN-IM, the group still has a strength of approximately 5,000 cadres.³¹ Any strong action by the government against their interests are likely to be resisted militarily. This remains a constant threat to peace in the region.

The accord, in all probabilities, may give rise to splinter groups as there would be dissenting forces in both the cases of successful conclusion as well as failure of the ongoing peace process. There is enough scope for this dissenting segment to actively pursue its pro-separatist agenda due to the availability of moral and material support from a various state/non-state actors operating in the region. Some of them may even join/take assistance from active Indian insurgent groups like NSCN-K/United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA). The Tangkhul Naga cadres from Ukhrul also have the option of joining the Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRF), a breakaway faction of the NSCN-IM. Such realignments may take place for ensuring the security and survival of the cadres and their families.³²

The Indo-Myanmar border areas are a suitable safe haven for regrouping and training. Insurgency cannot be sustained if the supply of weapons and ammunition is not available. The region is in close proximity to the illegal arms markets of Southeast Asia. Chinese and

East European weapon smugglers are in a position to deliver the weapons by sea and even close to Indo-Myanmar borders at a cost. Armed struggle gets legitimacy from mass support and international support overtly or covertly. Cross-border linkages give impetus to the insurgency ideologically as well as materially. As and when the movement appears to be heading towards collapse, it is invariably sustained by international support and bases across the international border.

Nexus between Insurgents and the Political Parties

Politics has played a far greater role in destabilising the region. Insurgent groups have been used, raised and protected by political parties to settle scores or to come to power. This has created a scenario of a win-win situation for politicians as well as underground organisations. The political aspirations which triggered the insurgent movements initially have become irrelevant today. Presently, the manipulation of ethnic groups by the politicians and bureaucrats is helping in keeping the pot boiling. In fact, the political leadership has contributed more to the creation and nurturing of the insurgency than its resolution.³³

Components of Modern Instability

Proliferation of weapons, drug trafficking, circulation of counterfeit currency, presence of crime syndicates and corruption are essential features that define the modern unstable environment. The Northeast region is home to all the above components due to poverty, poor governance, corruption, political polarisation, external or proxy support to separatist movements, proliferation of black money and drugs and weapons trafficking. As long as there are weapons in the hands of the insurgents, a lasting peace is unlikely in the North-East. Disarming one group will make the other groups stronger. Such an environment makes it an ideal breeding ground for insurgency.³⁴

With Whom to Negotiate

Another major hindrance to the peace process in Nagaland is the existence of more than one organisation, each claiming to be representative of the Naga people.³⁵ The NSCN-IM leadership has shown no flexible attitude for a negotiated settlement as it has always claimed itself as the sole representative on the Naga issue.³⁶ The parties to conflict are so numerous that the government is unsure who to and who not to talk to. The government has also started parallel talks with the newly formed

Working Committee comprising of six Naga factions. Even the masses do not know who represents them in an earnest manner. Almost all insurgent groups now have an agenda of their own and a situation has come where the popular narrative of Naga nationalism is unclear as different factions propagate different ideologies. The Working Committee has been seeking a separate solution for the Nagas of Nagaland, whereas the ENPO is demanding a separate state of Frontier Nagaland comprising the eastern districts of the present state of Nagaland.

Lack of Sincerity in Resolving the Conflict

The stakeholders—the government, the underground organisations, masses and the democratically elected representatives—are also at times beneficiaries of this conflict. Thus, they play by the ear and respond to the situation in the way it suits them. Economic packages, Autonomous District Council (ADC) elections and projection of viewpoints of a particular community more often than not are perceived to be motivated. The perceived lack of sincerity on part of the government has been mainly reflected through unnecessary delays in detailing of interlocutors, unaccountability of finances and lack of development by elected representatives. Surrender, SoO and even the ceasefire is being used by the insurgents to circumvent the law and continue with their activities. An organisation may have come over ground and signed an SoO but, at the same time, another shadow organisation may continue with its activities under the same leadership or via accomplices. The only difference is that after coming over ground they run their empire overtly. The demands keep shifting and the stance is always flexible.

Both at the centre and state levels, the policies appear to be inconsistent, an example of which was the proposed visit of Muivah to Somdal, Ukhurul, in 2010, wherein the Central government granted him permission for the same, whereas the State government opposed the visit to his ancestral village. Similarly, the election of the ADC was considered an imposition/state oppression by the Naga tribes against their will. It ultimately resulted in complete boycott of the ADC elections and its functioning, as a result of which the institution of ADC stands defunct.³⁷

Though there have been efforts towards conflict management and conflict resolution at different stages and levels, the same has been far from satisfactory and can at best be described as piecemeal, incoherent and incomplete.³⁸ The government has taken different stands against different insurgent groups. Soft peddling against one and using an iron

fist with other has been the feature of fighting insurgency in the region. This is creating more suspicion in the minds of people and the SF, and is attributed to the fact that such moves are either related to vote bank politics or have financial implications.³⁹

Insurgent and separatist movements are thriving on unemployment since there are no other avenues available to local youth. The irony is that no major efforts are being made to engage these youth in constructive activities.⁴⁰ The educational institutes in rural sector are adversely affected by the instability. Government educational institutes, both schools and colleges, are unable to provide even basic educational facilities. All over the Naga areas, the only source of education are private and missionary schools. Until or unless the education sector is improved, the region is unlikely to achieve economic empowerment.

The traditional Naga attitude towards property was one of 'renunciation'. The Feasts of Merit, which bestowed distinction on their donors, were intended to show the virtues of distributing wealth over its possession. While the Feasts of Merit are still in vogue, the attitude towards property has changed. Acquisitiveness is now dominant, and the traditional institution of communal ownership of property is cracking.⁴¹ This has led to divisions in the Naga society which have percolated down to the Naga socio-political psyche over the years.

Prevailing Insecurity

There are residual risks that can destabilise dramatic gains made by the SF. In spite of the ceasefire with Naga insurgent groups, a number of violent incidents have been reported in the affected areas.⁴² Internally displaced people are yet to be rehabilitated. Similarly, the economic blockades, extortion at gun point and kidnapping of people from rival ethnic groups make it extremely difficult for the masses to feel completely secure, even in their homes. Suspicion continues to remain and more often than not even criminal incidents relating to law and order are attributed to rival insurgent groups.

Divergent Political Aspirations

Conflicts in a society emanate from the social, cultural, economic and religious insecurity. As the fault lines widen and trust deficit increases, the contours of conflict of interests emerge, which thereafter start gaining shape. This was the major cause of merger of a number of old Kuki tribes of Manipur into the Naga folds. There are numerous examples

of even smaller Naga tribes of Nagaland forming part of a larger tribal conglomerate mainly to reap political and developmental benefits. Grievances of masses further give new trajectory to the cause, which later turns into a movement, and may divide the society on religious, tribal and ethnic lines.⁴³

Impact of the Conflict

The overall mismanagement of the conflict has led to the people losing faith in governance, its polity and also the peace process. Prolonged peace negotiations have seemingly lost the desired sheen and impact. On the contrary, one of the fallouts of the conflict has been rampant corruption, which has led to poor governance and alienation of the masses from the mainstream. Political instability has undermined the role of democracy in the state and has fuelled apprehensions leading to separate agendas and demands by various factions and organisations. The society has been irreversibly changed due to trust deficit among the various ethnic groups. Continued low-level violence remains one of the biggest challenges to the resolution of the ongoing conflict.

CONCLUSION

A number of fault lines and challenges exist in the quest for creating a separate arrangement for the Nagas. All past attempts towards resolving the Naga issue have failed due to these fault lines. Ongoing attempts/ approach towards solving this issue also appear to be inadequate as most of the challenges have not been addressed. Perhaps the mindset for resolving the issue needs a transformation amidst changing aspirations of the Naga populace and an environment wherein there is no single armed Naga faction that can solely represent all Nagas.

Accords and agreements can only become a reality if the circumstances are ripe for conflict resolution. The history of Indo-Naga conflict shows that various past agreements broke down due to the different interpretations of the provisions by the parties at their convenience. In 1947 when the Nine Point Agreement was signed between the representative of the NNC and the Government of India, represented by the then Governor of Assam, Akbar Hyderi, there was misunderstanding on the interpretation of the last point, that is, the Period of Agreement.⁴⁴ More recently, the ideological support for the Naga cause is declining and the ethnic communities feel that the stalemate is largely due to the resistance of the self-serving leadership.⁴⁵

If the government fails to bring all the stakeholders to the negotiation table, it will be a road to nowhere.⁴⁶ Any new resultant revolutionary Naga movement emerging in the modern times is likely to be much more dangerous due to a large number of factors, including increased awareness in the time of globalisation, changing geopolitical scenario, greater availability of resources for sustaining any rebellion, and greater scope for international intervention in case of a violent struggle.

It, therefore, becomes extremely important that any resolution to the Naga issue must be based on consensus without any political biases and vested interests. A greater understanding of the whole issue, especially the tribal factor and changing aspirations of the civil society, needs to be developed in order to bring an acceptable and comprehensive solution to the vexed Naga problem. The present situation, where no single Naga armed group has complete popular backing, presents an opportunity for highlighting the importance of existing Naga socio-political organisations that could be encouraged to lead the process of negotiations. This goes beyond the current approach of handing over the control to the Naga armed groups as they have inadequate connection with the affected population and lack experience in governance; moreover, they generate a feeling of fear and apprehension amongst the people. The same may not happen if the process is led by a largely acceptable socio-political entity/alliance.

The tribal factor assumes extreme importance in the present Naga construct and, hence, it cannot be overlooked in any new arrangement for the Nagas. In fact, what could be workable is maximum decentralisation of powers to the tribal heads and village authorities with minimum centralisation at the apex level, which should mainly work towards facilitating governance and undertaking large development projects. Tribal/village authorities, once empowered, will not feel alienated even within the Naga construct. Such a solution would address the core grievance of various tribes with greater power to them. Otherwise, these divisions will prevail and there will always be a scope for disgruntlement and differences leading to discontent.

According to government estimates⁴⁷, the Khaplang faction commands an armed cadre of around 4,000 hardened insurgents. To underestimate Khaplang's influence, especially in the three districts of Nagaland bordering Myanmar and the two districts of Arunachal Pradesh, will be a miscalculation. The outfit's biggest strength is its support base on both sides of the border, which gives it the leverage to support

anti-India factions. There are two ways of dealing with the Khaplang faction: joint military operations with Myanmar, or negotiating with the outfit. The role of Myanmar in both these options is vital. Cross-border linkages could well be neutralised through diplomatic engagements and people-to-people contact, which would automatically develop once the tribal authorities are empowered.⁴⁸

Any arrangement thus worked out should lead to social and political harmony, economic prosperity and protection of the life and property of all tribes and citizens of the states. Furthermore, attempts must be made towards providing a secure and stable governance, post which the development will automatically follow.

NOTES

1. A large group of Nagas were sent as labourers and porters to France by the British government during World War I. These Nagas developed a sense of unity and agreed to work towards unity and friendship among the various Naga tribes. They, together with the British officials, formed the Naga Club in 1918. This Club essentially provided the socio-political foundation for the Naga movement.
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4. Angami Zapu Phizo (1904–90) was a Naga nationalist leader. Under his influence, the NNC inclined towards seeking secession from India through armed revolution. The Naga secessionist groups regard him as the 'Father of the Nagas'.
5. Singh, 'Revisiting the Naga Conflict', n. 3.
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