

# **PROBLEM IN NORTHEAST INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF NAGALAND**

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## **Introduction**

The northeastern region of India has forever been a mosaic of the most conflicting images with the involvement of no less than 100 armed rebel groups of varying intensity. The contiguous “seven sisters” namely the states of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh<sup>(1)</sup> have a significant tribal population and very low infrastructure with a hilly and difficult terrain. Each state has a unique and diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, economic and political heritage of its own. Even the topography of each is different from the other.

In the last two decades, violence and bloodshed have been perpetrated in the Northeast region because of the in-fighting between the states over the issues of ethnicity, inadequate resources and inaccessibility. These factors have adversely affected the process of development in the Northeast. The Indian Government’s ad hoc policies and its failure to provide necessities of life and

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liberty to the Northeastern people resulted in public dissatisfaction and alienation of this region. A growing sense of exploitation and lack of alternative means of empowerment led to the growth of militancy. Therefore, demands of these insurgent groups vary from secession to autonomy to the right to self-determination, and a myriad of ethnic groupings bawl for special rights and the protection of their unique identity. In short, irredentism is the *raison d'être* of all the nationalist, sub-nationalist or autonomy movements in India. The problems of insurgency and political violence have adversely affected the nation-building process of Indian federation.

This study essentially aims to explore the Naga insurgency in the greater regional perspective, its contemporary status in detail together with future trends and options. The Naga insurgency, over half a century old, is the first and the longest of the secessionist-turned-insurgency movements in South Asia (1954-2010). It is meant to achieve a sovereign Nagaland. At the heart of the Naga movement lies the question of its “unique” identity — Nagas as a separate nation. When their demand for the right to self-determination was not granted by the Indian state, they opted for the politics of secessionism to attain the objective of Naga nation-state.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section gives a theoretical understanding of the ethnic conflicts. The second gives a background to the Naga political movement, factional strife and insurgency. The third highlights the role of external factors (neighbouring countries bordering India's Northeast region) in Nagaland. The last section covers the current status of insurgency in Nagaland and the Indian government's efforts to deal with it. It also provides fresh insights and some recommendations for Nagaland's future.

## **1. Theoretical perspective of ethnic conflicts & insurgencies**

Every insurgency is defined by the culture, history, and political context in which it takes place. In order to understand the dynamics of the ever erupting conflicts in the Northeast, which have their roots in ethnic diversity, it is important to look into the history of ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflicts are not a new phenomenon in the societies of the Third World countries that are essentially multi-ethnic. Not that they are specific to the Third World only. Even developed nations like Spain, Ireland and Canada, have experienced ethnic conflicts.<sup>(2)</sup>

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, many new independent states emerged on the world map. The leaders of these states thought that allegiance to the nation-state would precede the loyalties to tribal or ethnic identities. However, this didn't turn out to be the case. Before independence, unity against external colonial powers overwhelmed tribal and ethnic identities of most of the people. After independence, most of these multi-ethnic countries tried to implement "one-nation-one-state" western style of government which didn't fully encompass the realities of their respective subjects. During this process, one or more ethnic subjects which became dominant tried to absorb the minority groups. However, with the rise of educated middle class among the dominated factions, resistance to pressures of national integration increased. Thus, in most of these countries, the governments' integrative policies transformed the ethnic conflicts into insurgencies or autonomy movements.<sup>(3)</sup>

India, among others, is one such state facing a number of insurgencies especially in its Northeastern region. It is important to note that like terrorism, insurgency is multi-dimensional, with a commonly agreed definition still in its formative phase. Insurgency is often understood as political legitimacy crisis — as a struggle between a non-ruling faction and the ruling power. In this struggle,

the non-ruling party deliberately operationalizes its political resources and violence to raze or sustain the roots of legitimacy of those political aspects that are revered by one or the other warring side. Hence, the risks and stakes involved in the struggle direct the warring parties towards protracted conflicts. This is a phenomenon most significant to the Third World where the disparities between political and cultural boundaries are most evident.<sup>(4)</sup>

According to Walter C. Ladwig:

An insurgency can be said to have both root causes and proximate causes. Root causes are the elements that make a population susceptible or amenable to the idea of taking up arms to wage a political struggle, while the proximate cause provides the avenue for the actual emergence of armed violence. Potential root causes can vary widely from underdevelopment to political ideology, to greed, to ethnic grievance. However, a growing body of academic literature identifies a lack of local governance and administrative authority as the key proximate cause of the emergence of insurgent violence. This is particularly troublesome in rural areas or rough terrain such as mountains, swamps and jungles where poor communication or transportation infrastructure may limit the government's reach.<sup>(5)</sup>

The case of Nagaland, if seen in this context, fits in as a perfect case of a nation beset with insurgency — a rough and hilly terrain, a largely marginalized and deprived Christian population who view themselves as ethnically and linguistically separate from those around them.

The root causes of insurgency and political conflicts are best evaluated by the “Relative-Deprivation Theory,” an extended version of ‘Frustration-Aggression Theory’, developed by John Dollard, in 1939.<sup>(6)</sup>

The relative-deprivation theory explains that the socio-economic dimension of political violence is rooted in a sense of deprivation or injustice. Wilkinson, in this regard, argues: “Collective rage and violence are not necessarily a rumination of individual frustrations but may, in large part, be a function of changing ideologies, beliefs and historical conditions which so materially affect social conceptions of justice and legitimacy.”<sup>(7)</sup>

An outstanding attribute of insurgency-driven conflicts is the power asymmetry between the warring parties. In most cases, the legitimate sovereign government’s access to vast resources to prosecute the war and subdue the rebels manifests its superiority. Furthermore, the role of leaders able to manoeuvre political and military assistance and external support, is an integral part in determining the outcome of insurgencies — an aspect most significant in case of Northeast India.

Northeast India stands out as one of the most volatile regions of the world. Archana Upadhyay, in her latest work, *India’s Fragile Borderlands*, has outlined several features specific to Northeastern conflicts:

First, barring a few exceptions, most of the states of the region have experienced long drawn violent uprisings, seeking either secession from the Indian Union or greater autonomy within the Union. Second, conflict in some manifestation or the other is visible in each state of the region. Besides discord between the states and the central government, disputes of varying intensity and nature are known to exist among constituent states of the

region, between one tribe and another, between tribal groups and between indigenous groups, and ‘outsiders’, who have moved in from other parts of India and from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal. And lastly, the influence of the student organizations in almost every state is paramount.<sup>(8)</sup>

## **2. Insurgency in Nagaland: A brief background**

The Northeastern region is linked to the Indian mainland by a 21-kilometre long land corridor passing through Siliguri in the eastern state of West Bengal, called the ‘chicken’s neck.’ Nearly “the entire boundary of the region is an international border: China to the north, Bangladesh to the southwest, Bhutan to the Northeast, and Myanmar to the east.”<sup>(9)</sup>

The factors behind the ethnic conflicts and insurgencies in the Northeast can be traced back to the history of the exploitative and discriminatory administrative policies of the British. Colonial powers world over left their colonies a legacy of unending confusion and chaos, in the shape of arbitrary demarcation of boundaries in view of their administrative and military advantage, regardless of the history, wishes and sentiments of the local populace. Similar was the case with post-independence India where people in different states were irate with sourness and wild hopes. The successive Indian government being preoccupied with the problem of preventing further balkanization and the task for assimilating 562 princely states, failed to realize the consequences of the new political stirring in tribal society. In the years after independence, hasty makeshifts followed from time to time with the parliament carving out new states under political pressure or out of political convenience.<sup>(10)</sup> Such arrangements proved to be a source of discontent for many ethnic groups who saw in them a negation of their rightful place.

Many changes were imposed on the tribal masses, which were incompatible with their self-governing character and diverse systems and because of their non-participation in the freedom movement. Even though they had accepted these changes, they had not expected their future political identity to become part of Indian nationalism. Therefore, even with provision in the Indian Constitution for maintenance of their customs and traditions, various groups, unsatisfied with the governmental measures, sought independent existence outside India. Paradoxically, those who for preserving their independent identity had stood up for years against the British before their subjugation were now in the vanguard of secessionist demands to protect their religio-cultural identity.<sup>(11)</sup>

The British entered the Naga region with an expeditionary might in the early 1830s. In 1866, the Naga Hills were raised to the status of a separate district but the British took almost five decades to consolidate their control over the Nagas. By the beginning of the 20th century the Naga Hills had formed an integral part of British India.<sup>(12)</sup> After the annexation of Naga territories, all the competing sub-tribes of Naga group came under a united administrative control of the British power.

Insurgency in Nagaland is the one which is ethnically organised. The first problem of insurgency surfaced in Nagaland (which remained divided between Assam and the Northeast Frontier Agency) in the early fifties, albeit the aspiration of Nagas not to join India after the partition had been expressed earlier in 1926 to the British administration. In 1929, the Naga Club, an organization of 20 Naga tribes, presented a memorandum to the Simon Commission. The memorandum clearly articulated sovereign status for Nagaland containing both sides of the hilly border region between India and

Burma – “i.e. the Northeast Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and Burma’s Sagaing Division and Kachin state.”<sup>(13)</sup> Conscious of the inter-clan enmity of the Nagas, the colonial rulers did not respond favourably to their demand. This claim for a sovereign Nagaland is staunchly being held by the Nagas till today.

The British rulers who were fully cognizant of the Naga pride and independent nature had kept the Naga Hills away from the mainland and administered it as an “Excluded Area with an Inner Line Regulation.”<sup>(14)</sup> According to this system, no ‘outsider’ could enter these areas without a valid permit from the district authorities. The British policy of segregating the Northeast tribes and their tribal lands from the rest of India created a ‘frontier within a frontier’, which increased the economic, social and cultural differences between the hill tribes and people of the plains in Northeast India. The hill tribes continued with their traditional way of life. This sense of autonomy even during the British rule stirred the desire for independence among various tribes of the Northeast.<sup>(15)</sup>

#### **(a) Complex ethnicity patterns**

Complex ethnicity patterns and identity politics dominate India’s Northeastern region. R. Upadhyay notes that prior to the British rule, the people of the Northeast region with a definite territory, their ideas of kinship and distinct tradition remained impervious to the influence of ‘Sanskritisation’ for centuries and conserved their individuality. Most of the Northeastern states remained under the realm of some princely kingdoms like “Ahom, Manipur, Tripura and Khasis. However, Nagas and Mizos” continued to rebuff any form of influence and stayed an incessant source of trouble for their rulers.<sup>(16)</sup>

The present state of Nagaland consists of seven administrative districts, occupied by 17 major tribes along with 20 other sub-tribes. The major tribes include “Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, Thangkhul, Konyak, Rengma, and Mao. Each tribe and sub-tribe speaks a different language, though all these belong to the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages.”<sup>(17)</sup>

A study into the history shows the Nagas as proud, fiercely independent and daring people with prolonged signs of wars with Naga and non-Naga neighbours. Despite the fact that the notion of ‘Naga identity’ has gained greater impetus over the decades, love for tribe and village still comprise the central position in the life of Naga people. As BG Verghese notes, “Localism and tribalism are among the chief problems that have dogged Naga efforts at nation building or the concept of ‘Naganess or Nagaland.’”<sup>(18)</sup> The expansion of ethnic identity has influenced political institutions and social movements immensely. Furthermore, demography of this region plays a major role in socio-political-ethnic landscape.

Influence of the Christian missionaries during the British rule was a catalyst in the socio-religious transformation of the region. With Christianity as a binding force, rise in education level and an emergence of a middle class, people started branching outside their region. This factor intensified the identity consciousness and the idea of a distinct Naga community. The policy makers and social reformers of mainland India did not pay much heed to these developments in Nagaland. Furthermore, the leaders of freedom movement, owing to lack of an understanding with the hill people, fell short of infusing among them any nationalistic sentiments towards India.<sup>(19)</sup> Hence, the absence of socio-cultural interaction with the people inhabiting the plains of India added to the Naga cultural and religious resistance.

Economics is one of the most important factors in the establishment of a nation-state. It plays a key role in reducing the ethnic and tribal loyalties and creating national loyalties and vice versa. In the case of Northeast India, the basic ingredients of economic interaction, such as freer movement of goods, open markets, uniform laws and a central government were absent.<sup>(20)</sup> Therefore, the hill people could not take advantage from the accelerating economic industrialization taking place outside their region.

Yet another factor responsible for the present-day political, economic and ethnic upheaval in the Northeast is the presence of a large number of illegal immigrants from bordering countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar (Burma) and Nepal. This crisis, too, has its origins in the colonial past. Before the British advent in this region, there was no problem of indigenous versus outsiders. The problem of this migration further escalated after the partition in 1947 that disrupted, and continues to perturb the present demographic equations. It was soon followed by the Chinese takeover of Tibet and the coagulation of the previously 'soft borders' with Burma,<sup>(21)</sup> choking the region in the Easterly direction as well.

The pursuit for greater political space between the dominant ethnic groups is an outstanding characteristic of the conflict dynamics in the Northeast. The struggle has created further ethnic rivalries between the dominant and minority classes living within the same society. In reaction to the hegemony of the dominant groups over the smaller ones, umpteen smaller conflicts have emerged.

#### **(b) From political movement to insurgency**

In 1946, a fragment of educated Naga youth articulated their reservations against the merger of Naga territory with the Indian Union. When the British

intention of exit from the subcontinent became apparent, this Naga group started demanding a separate nation for Nagas as also the secession of their territories. Consequently, they renewed the Naga Club into a political organisation known as Naga National Council (NNC) — a representative body of all Naga tribes, in March 1946 with Imti Aliba Ao as its first president.<sup>(22)</sup>

In June 1947, the NNC signed a “Nine-Point Agreement” with the Indian government represented by Assam’s governor Sir Akbar Hydari. The agreement, also known as Hydari Agreement, provided for a review of the political status of the Naga Hills after every ten years — which the Nagas interpreted as one that gave them “the right to be independent after the expiry of the Agreement.” Nonetheless, when the Naga leaders realized that the Indian Constituent Assembly intended to change the provisions of the agreement, they took up the case to Mahatma Gandhi who is said to have promised the Nagas that “they would not be included in India against their wishes.”<sup>(23)</sup>

However, Jawaharlal Nehru had a different approach in this regard. In 1946, as Congress president, he wrote to T. Sakhrie, a leading member of the NNC:

Naga territory in eastern Assam is much too small to stand by itself, politically or economically. It lies between two huge countries, India and China, and part of it consists of rather backward people who require considerable help... Therefore, this Naga territory must form part of India and of Assam with which it has developed such close association.<sup>(24)</sup>

With the independence of India on 15 August 1947, the Nagas, in accordance with the Hydari Agreement, became part of the Indian Union. The events that followed the partition of the subcontinent aggravated tensions

between the government and the Naga leaders. Nagas continued to hold that Clause 9 of the agreement granted them the right of freedom. On the other hand, the Government of India argued that the “Six Schedule”<sup>(25)</sup> provision of the Indian Constitution permitted the tribal minorities to establish autonomous district councils aimed at providing them with greater autonomy. Therefore, the Indian government insisted that Clause 9 of the Hydari Agreement was inapplicable to Nagas.

A dichotomy of interests was thus the outcome. The Naga insurgency we see today is rooted in the Naga Movement engineered by NNC leader, Angami Zapu Phizo. Nagas’ first contact with the outside world came through the British when the tribals joined them to fight in the Second World War.<sup>(26)</sup> This experience developed their basic fighting skills. The weapons provided by the British and those left after the withdrawal of the Japanese army provided them with the material basis for waging their struggle.

In May 1951, when India rebuffed the NNC demand to hold a plebiscite in Naga Hills, the NNC proceeded with a 'referendum' the same year without any agreement from the Government of India and claimed to have got overwhelming support — 99 per cent — in favour of sovereignty.<sup>(27)</sup> Phizo went to New Delhi and requested prime minister, Nehru to meet their demand for a sovereign Nagaland. The request obviously was rejected. A dejected Phizo on his return started mobilizing the different rival sub-tribes of Nagas with the slogan of “Naga nationalism.”<sup>(28)</sup> He marshalled his people as freedom fighters for emancipation of their territories from Indian occupation and boycotted the first general election in Naga Hills. Phizo created a secretive government known as Naga Federal Government (NFG) in 1954 coupled with a Naga federal army of around 15,000 armed guerrillas.<sup>(29)</sup> Following the deployment of the Indian

army in Nagaland, Phizo flew to former East Pakistan and later to London with the help of a Baptist Christian missionary, Rev. Michael Scott, in June 1960.<sup>(30)</sup>

In the face of the spurt in violence, the Indian government set up a single Naga administrative unit under Indian rule in the year 1957. Nevertheless, Nagas responded strongly to the centre's initiative and resorted to a disruption campaign. Reacting, the Indian government made Nagaland an autonomous state within India under the external affairs ministry in 1960, with its formal inauguration as the 16th state of the Indian Union on 1 December 1963. However, the Naga separatists persisted with their demand for having an independent and single administrative unit consisting of all the Naga-inhabited areas extended to several Northeastern states like Assam and Manipur.<sup>(31)</sup>

### **(c) Agreements between rebels and the govt**

Following a long history of insurgency punctuated with talks and ceasefire agreements the government of India, in 1972, declared NNC an unlawful organization and enforced a ban on it along with some other militant outfits under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The state government's harsh measures against the insurgents forced them to come to the negotiation table. Some of the rebel leaders who had joined political parties facilitated the dialogue. As a result, on 11 November, 1975, the Shillong Accord was signed, ending hostilities between the government and the Naga factions.<sup>(32)</sup>

The accord was however, rejected by more hardcore leaders in NNC like Isak Chisi Swu, Muivah and Khaplang. Phizo's failure in taking a clear stand over the accord and his continued silence disappointed the three leaders. Therefore, they left NNC and formed a new party, Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) in February 1980, with Isak Chisi, K.K. Khaplang and T. Muivah as chairman, vice-president and general secretary, respectively. The

main purpose of the NSCN was to establish a “Greater Nagaland.” Maintaining their demand for sovereignty, they stepped up the Naga militancy and also supported other insurgent groups in the region. However, in 1988, ethnic divisions led to a split within NSCN into two groups — one led by Isak and Muivah called NSCN (IM) and another by Khaplang named NSCN (K). This split was a glaring example of how ‘intra-state’ and ‘intra-ethnic’ tribal rivalries dominate much of insurgent politics in Nagaland.<sup>(33)</sup>

Since the split, the rift has made Nagaland a battleground between the two groups — NSCN (IM) headed by Isak Swu and Muivah, and NSCN (K) under the leadership of Khaplang. Each group has far-reaching influence in their respective areas and tribes. Today, parallel 'governments' are running in Nagaland by NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), FGN (Federal Government of Nagaland) initially formed by Phizo and the democratically elected government established in the state.

Despite the fact that NSCN (IM) continues to struggle for a sovereign Nagaland, a ceasefire agreement between the Indian government and NSCN (IM) leaders in 1997 enabled both sides to advance a dialogue process. The process, though inconsistent, somehow pushed the two parties to continue peace negotiations by extending the agreement. In 2001, the government of India also established a formal ceasefire agreement with NSCN (K).<sup>(34)</sup>

Another meeting between the NSCN (IM) and the central leaders in New Delhi in November 2004 and again in February 2005 proved to be futile in bringing any final solution to the problem. Indian government’s commitment with the Naga insurgents to extend the cease-fire agreement to the “Naga inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and foreign territory of Burma” created a huge uproar among the peoples and the governments of

respective states. They feared that by such extension, the Indian government might yield to the demand of “Greater Nagaland”, including all these areas. This would also promote inter-state ethnic conflict in the region.<sup>(35)</sup>

Extension of the cease-fire agreement was one of the reasons of recent upsurge of violence in Manipur. Absence of the Khaplang group at peace negotiations has already annoyed the numerically largest Konyak sub-tribes whose significant presence in Indian Territory will remain a constant problem if they are not taken into confidence.<sup>(36)</sup>

Despite signing the peace agreement with the government of India, the fight between the two groups to gain political leverage still continues. Furthermore, the ethnic rivalries between the tribesmen have worsened the situation in Nagaland. The activities of the students’ organizations, in this case, the Naga Students Federation has created greater hatred for ‘outsiders’ in the state.

### **3. External factors**

India's Northeast is surrounded by China, Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar). Since its inception, in 1947 India has been having hostile relations with all its neighbours. The impact of these troubled relations has had tremendous repercussions for India's Northeast, which has become a competing ground for multiple ethno-territorial identities. India has for long been extremely critical of the involvement of the foreign elements in its Northeast, for actively aiding smuggling of arms and drugs and providing operational assistance to various insurgent groups in the Northeast.

#### **a) China**

The 1962 Indo-China war altered the course of Sino-Indian relations and led to increased Chinese involvement in the region. According to the Indian

news sources, insurgent groups in Assam and Nagaland have received huge arms consignments from China.<sup>(37)</sup> Furthermore, Naga insurgents have strengthened this link by establishing liaison offices in the Yunan province of China and in Lhasa (Tibet). Naga insurgents are also believed to have established contacts with Yunanese military intelligence.<sup>(38)</sup>

#### **b) Pakistan**

The former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was seen as one of the major supporters of the Naga movement. India claims that "Pakistan was the first nation to offer moral and material assistance" to new ethno-nationalist movements like Naga Nationalist Council. Pakistan has been alleged to support "under a joint command" various separatist outfits in Northeast India.<sup>(39)</sup>

India believes that Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, has been quite instrumental in backing the Northeast rebels particularly in Nagaland and Assam and assisting jihadi outfits in the region.<sup>(40)</sup> India also claims that Pakistan has been providing logistical support like fake visas and documents, delivery of weapons and financial backing to the existing and emerging insurgency groups in the Northeast.<sup>(41)</sup>

#### **c) Bangladesh**

Indians believe Bangladesh is also actively involved in aiding the insurgency. India has accused that the border areas of Bangladesh have provided the Northeast insurgent groups with safe havens. These rebel groups are engaged in arms shipment in transit to India through these safe havens. India's Border Security Force (BSF) has charged that Naga insurgents have created shelter points at Salopi, an area adjacent to Mizoram-Bangladesh-Myanmar border area and also in the Bandarban area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.<sup>(42)</sup>

India alleges that Bangladesh's security establishment, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), works hand in hand with the Pakistani ISI to prop up miscreants in the Northeast in the form of "financial assistance" and "ideological indoctrination."<sup>(43)</sup>

#### **d) Burma (Myanmar)**

Nagaland shares a 258-kilometre-long international border with Myanmar.<sup>(44)</sup> There have been historical-cultural linkages between different groups in Burma and Northeast India. Rebel groups, particularly in Nagaland, have long been backed up and schooled by the "Kachins of North Burma". This assistance has provided the Northeast insurgents a gateway to the arms market in Cambodia and to Burma's "Golden Triangle", known as one of the largest opium producing regions of the world.<sup>(45)</sup>

The Sagaing region of Myanmar is known to be one of the main Naga-inhabited areas, where Eastern Naga Regional Council (ENRC), also one of the proponents of "Greater Nagaland" besides NNC, is quite active. The ENRC helped NNC establish its contact with one of the Burmese rebel group KIA and also in reaching China to expand its network.<sup>(46)</sup>

In the Northeast region, Nagas have been the most active in establishing links with the neighbouring countries and gaining their support to run their insurgent activities. Therefore, both factions of NSCN are the most heavily armed groups in the region. Indians also allege that besides Pakistan, China, Bangladesh and Burma, the Nagas had close relations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelem (LTTE), in Sri Lanka.<sup>(47)</sup> They have also successfully established contacts with other rebel groups and militant organizations in Nepal, Bhutan and Thailand. NSCN (IM) has numerous support centres in the

“Netherlands, Thailand, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, South Korea, Australia, England, Philippines, Sweden, Belgium and US” as well.<sup>(48)</sup>

India, since the beginning of these insurgencies, has feared the trans-border linkages that these groups have. In addition, the element of strategic alliance among them has fostered criminality and insurgency politics making the conflict dynamics all the more complex. The most significant feature of this strategic alliance is the birth of a ‘terrorist economic network’ backed by an intricate nexus between armed rebel outfits and organized criminal groups, whose activities sabotage and destroy the legitimate economy of the entire region.

#### **4. (a) A complex present situation**

Like terrorism, each insurgency has its own nature and dynamics with no universally acceptable formula to resolve it. The outcome of any insurgency largely depends on the response of the incumbent government. In most cases, it is seen that governmental reactions to insurgencies are mainly an amalgamation of ad-hoc policies based on emotional judgments and misperceptions.

In the case of Northeast India, the absence of space for political participation is one of the major reasons of disruption in the region. The political structure of the region is such that fallouts of a conflict in one state have a direct bearing on the life and politics of the other. Nagaland is one of the most important Northeastern states; however, it is important to look at the ongoing insurgency in a larger regional perspective.

The ever-increasing violence, the geographical proximity of the region with the neighbouring countries and its porous borders have long remained issues of great concern for the Indian government. Therefore, it has placed a heavy military set-up in the region while adopting different counter-insurgency

measures during varying situations. Measures such as the “Armed Force Special Act (1958), the National Security Act (1980), The Disturbed Areas Act (1976), and the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (TADA, 1985), have been part of the counter-insurgency operations in the region.” The Indian army has regularly been assisted in its operations by “paramilitary forces such as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Forces (BSF); the Assam Rifles, and the various intelligence bureaus and the police forces of each state of the region.”<sup>(49)</sup>

However, these governmental measures to combat insurgency have largely been reactionary rather than conciliatory. The fact of the matter, as pointed out by many observers, is that the Nagas never got the kind of sustained and understanding engagement from India for long. An effective counter-insurgency plan should include the mechanisms that address the political, economic and social grievances of the people according to their existing societal and political set-ups rather than against it.<sup>(50)</sup>

Nonetheless, Indian government’s counter-insurgency strategy so far has largely lacked vision and a well thought-out plan for the region under study. The fear of the “domino effect” restrains the state government from extending greater concessions to the insurgents. On the contrary, extensive use of force leading to massive violence is the major source of survival and communication for the insurgents.

Peace talks between the Indian government and NSCN (IM) are underway since 1997. The cease-fire agreement between the government and the NSCN (K) in 2001 was another major step towards peace. The peace dialogues between the Indian government and the NSCN (IM) has mostly taken place outside India.

With the present political situation in Nagaland, peace still seems to be a far cry. The creation of “groups within groups” have further complicated the situation. These groups hardly see eye to eye with one another. The people are tired of decades of violence, which has thrived because of the inclusion of a large number of disillusioned youth from rural areas. Most of these young people that come from poor backgrounds are effectively indoctrinated. They keep on fighting for these groups without exactly knowing the cause.

Furthermore, the exiting diversity within Nagas themselves has been a greater source of conflict. This diversity somewhat invalidates the spirit behind the demand of a Greater Nagalim. In 2007, as a result of the intense competition between the two factions of NSCN, a third armed insurgent group — The Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Unification), or NSCN (U) — has emerged. The NSCN-U was formed as a result of a ‘truce agreement’ signed between senior activists of both IM and K factions on 23 November 2007 in Dimapur district. However, the NSCN-IM leadership did not recognize the truce agreement. Since then, the NSCN-U is at loggerheads with the IM faction with full backing of the NSCN-K. As a result, the level of violence and conflict in Nagaland has intensified, jeopardizing the likelihood of a durable peace.<sup>(51)</sup>

The Semas, one of the significant Naga tribes, is largely dominant in the Unification faction. The creation of NSCN (U) reflects further social divide in Nagaland along ethno-tribal lines.

Due to the infighting of these factions, extortion activities in Nagaland have accelerated in the past few years. The militant groups have effectively knitted a network of ‘tax collectors’ in all the 1317 villages of the state, who at gunpoint have been collecting tax from the common people, business establishments and even government departments. Regrettably, both the central

and the state governments have not taken any action so far against this 'tax collection' by the militants.<sup>(52)</sup>

Despite the 13-year-old ceasefire with the NSCN-IM and the nine-year-old truce with NSCN-K, the present state of affairs in Nagaland remains volatile. However, the level of insurgency-related fatalities has decreased after 2008. Between July 1992 and July 2010, at least 2,337 insurgency-related fatalities have been recorded in Nagaland. The number of civilian fatalities, however, fell from 70 in 2008 to 16 in 2009.<sup>(53)</sup>

Extension of the existing indefinite ceasefire with the NSCN IM and K factions remains central to the government's conflict management policy in Nagaland. Despite several rounds of meetings between the NSCN IM and New Delhi, little breakthrough could be achieved over the question of Nagalim.

Some observers have rightly pointed out the fact that the future of Nagaland will largely rest upon two key questions – sovereignty and territoriality.<sup>(54)</sup> The concept of a 'Greater Nagalim', the key demand of NSCN (IM), would mean including a number of areas of neighbouring parts of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, which will be totally unacceptable to these states. Already, enough tensions have surfaced among them over the issue of incorporating territories for a 'Greater Nagaland.'<sup>(55)</sup>

In March 2010, an NSCN-IM delegation, led by its chairman Isak Chisi Swu and general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah, met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Union Home Minister P Chidambaram in New Delhi. The Naga leaders also commenced a series of meetings with R.S Pandey, the interlocutor for Naga peace talks, during their stay in New Delhi. The NSCN (IM) delegation put forth 30 demands, which included sovereignty for Nagaland, and

unification of all Naga-dominated areas of neighbouring states.<sup>(56)</sup> However, these demands were ruled out by the central government.

In June 2010, in a similar development, peace talks between the Indian government and NSCN (IM) were held for the first time in Nagaland at Kohima, where the issue of Nagalim was discussed. Once again, the government at New Delhi emphatically rejected the possibility of any change in boundaries without the consent of all the political parties.<sup>(57)</sup>

On the issue of talks with the rebels, the Indian government has held to its position that it is ready to negotiate with any rebel, insurgent or terrorist group provided it shuns violence and presents its demands within the framework of the Indian Constitution. However, as far as the issue of sovereignty is concerned, the Indian government would never consider anything that would open a new Pandora's box of secessionist demands in other parts of India. Therefore, the idea of a separate Nagaland, apparently, would remain a dream. This is a reality now understood by majority of the Nagas as well. The fact that over the years, Nagas have taken part in the elections conducted by the Indian government in 2003 and 2008 is a clear manifestation of the changing situation in Nagaland.

#### **(b) The way forward**

In spite of its claims, the central government has taken no proper initiatives to stop the internecine clashes between the warring factions of insurgents. The centre is of the view that these internal clashes are law and order issues to be dealt by the state government. On the other hand, the state government's Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio has claimed time and again that the 'Naga problem', primarily political in nature, is to be resolved between India

and Nagaland. However, if the central and state governments wish to resolve the conflict, they can no longer evade their respective responsibility.

In order to put an end to insurgency in Nagaland, the Indian government should chalk out an all-encompassing national counterinsurgency strategy, by taking into account its national and regional repercussions. The counterinsurgency policies are largely aimed at containment. There is a strong need to devise a multi-dimensional policy for Nagaland wherein the root causes of the problem are addressed. Crucial to resolving the Nagaland crisis is a “balanced proportion” of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power. Extensive and long-lasting use of hard power will only make the situation worse.

Over the years, a lot of economic packages have been announced for the region with a belief that these packages would add up to the social and economic uplift of the people. However, the truth is that the funds hardly ever reach the grassroots level. There is an urgent need to overhaul and redesign the whole system of planning and executing the economic packages for each state of the region.<sup>(58)</sup>

For Nagas, the most viable solution seems to be integration rather than disintegration, i.e. to accept maximum available state freedom within the Indian Federation and working out a structural political framework covering most of Nagas’ social and economic requirements. In this regard, the idea of Naga social and political connectedness holds great significance as elaborated by an observer:

“Connectedness... would mean the enabling processes that build trust, cooperation and associationalism. This can be understood at four different levels. The first being at the level of emotional and psychological connectivity with the rest of India. Second, at the level of inter-state ties within the region.

Third, at the level of value consensus that defines, shapes and regulates inter-group ties. And finally, at the level of integrative behaviour that would motivate people to come forward for greater common good.”<sup>(59)</sup>

The role of Naga civil society and local cultural and social groups and communities is central to a speedy recuperation of the state. The centre should work out future policies by involving the civil society groups to the maximum. The civil society, already active in Nagaland, is crucial in creating a democratic space in Naga society which has been seeing protracted conflict for decades now. The civil society will prove to be instrumental in facilitating the current political dialogue between the state and the rebel groups. The Church is another pivotal civil society actor in this context. More than 90 per cent of the two million Naga population are Christian. The church is the point of convergence for almost all the tribal and non-tribal identities in Nagaland. Therefore, it can encourage collective action for reconciliation in the state in the same manner as it did in July 1997 at the Atlanta Peace meeting, where the NSCN leadership accepted initiatives to start an “unconditional dialogue process.”

Additionally, the centre must mobilize media groups, nongovernmental organizations, local scholars, businessmen and artists as they can prove to be very effective tools against the violence being committed by state and non-state actors in Nagaland.

## **Conclusion**

India’s Northeast is a region of great differences and complexities. Uneven development, regional deprivation, internal colonialism, cultural oppression and lack of integration are some of the major root causes behind most of the conflicts and insurgencies in the region. The central government’s repetitive and botched institutional setups are hugely responsible for blocking

the process of positive change in the region. That is why the external forces have prevailed in fostering criminalization, drug and weapon culture in the region.

The Indian government has successfully conducted elections in Nagaland over the past few years, without facing major hiccups from the insurgent groups. The acquiescent acceptance of the democratic process by the Naga insurgents is indicative of the fact that every insurgency has a limited lifespan beyond which it starts losing its vigour and momentum. However, today Nagaland stands at a crossroads with a political environment that is changing but is extremely vulnerable to the decisions and actions of the key players involved. Even if the NSCN (IM) settles down for the option of greater autonomy within the Indian Federation, its determined stance on Greater Nagalim could easily overturn the whole peace process. Crucial in this regard is the fact that despite the changing situation in Nagaland, the positions taken by the leading rebel groups clearly resonate among major segments of the populace they claim to represent. The current political environment is so laden with suspicion and distrust that resolving differences between the competing insurgent outfits is the biggest challenge.

Nevertheless, the Government of India now needs to take “conclusive political measures” in the regional security perspective. Temporary compromises such as periodic extension of ceasefire are always susceptible to breakdown. At this juncture, the role of Naga civil society and local community groups is extremely important who by building pressure groups can push the government and various insurgents factions to end the stalemate. Fair and visible means of arbitration and negotiations not only with the rebels but also the

marginalized groups of Naga society are the only way to bring peace to Nagaland.

## Notes and References

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21. Verghese, op.cit, (ref.19), p.1.
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