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Historical Background of the Demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’

Vikas Kumar
EDITORIAL

Ominous Portents

While attention is riveted on domestic issues like the State Assembly elections in Bihar, Jharkhand and Haryana as well as the likely contours of the Union Budget the Finance Minister is to present in Parliament early next week, the distressing news from Nepal offers little hope of an early restoration of civil liberties in that country despite pressures mounted from several states including India which declared suspension of military aid to the Royal Nepal Army. At the same time there are encouraging developments on the India-Pakistan front, with New Delhi’s flexible approach being instrumental in reaching the agreement to launch the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service from April 7.

Against the backdrop of these events certain dangerous moves by the sole superpower in the wake of the tsunami tragedy have become a matter of legitimate concern. Analysts have not failed to note that the United States, while declaring its intention to effectively combat the tsunami disaster, is seeking to spread its influence and reinforce its presence in strategically important areas which were previously inaccessible to it. For this purpose Washington has decided to deploy and maintain multi-thousand military contingents as well as equipment in the Indian Ocean region for a substantially long period on the pretext of employing them in ‘humanitarian operations’. Already the US has tested its military equipment and technologies in Iraq. It was no accident that US Marines Lieutenant General Rusty Blackman, the former Chief of Staff of the International Land Forces in Iraq, happened to head a rescue operation in South and South-East Asia.

With such a scenario evolving in the coming days, the Americans could impose their full control over the strategically important oil-rich Indonesian province of Aceh in Sumatra and the eastern part of Sri Lanka. The economic package promised to Colombo and the support extended to help settle the Sri Lankan Government’s persisting armed conflict with the Tamil separatists definitely unveil opportunities for the US to establish its permanent presence near India’s southern borders. On the other side Washington has begun to forge stronger military cooperation with Jakarta expecting to take control of the Straits of Malacca in due course.

Experts are also of the opinion that while highlighting the ecological problems in the region Washington could use the issue of nuclear power plants in the vicinity of the tsunami zone to organise largescale propaganda in order to impose so-called “international control” over New Delhi’s nuclear programme in Baghdad and Tehran.

India’s rapidly improving relations with the US notwithstanding, it must be realised that the United States could through such means lay its hands on powerful levers for pressuring India, as it certainly would in the case of Indonesia. In this way the strategic balance of forces in this area could be vastly changed in favour of the US.

These are ominous portents indeed. To offset these designs (well within the realm of realisation), what is imperative is to underscore the need for the United Nations to undertake all international missions for such humanitarian causes instead of leaving these tasks to any one country (or a coalition of countries), howsoever strong and omnipotent.

February 23

S.C.

On other pages...

3 Warming Glove, Belching Cattle and Breathing Humans
Kunal Ghosh

5 Employment Guarantee Scheme: Success Depends on Making it Dynamic
Arun Kumar

7 Rediscovery of Achyut Patwardhan
Madhu Dandavate

10 MUSINGS: The Last Person Standing
Som Bongal

11 Communal Unity: More Questions than Answers
Amar Farooqui

15 Historical Background of the Demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’
Vikas Kumar

19 Sex Choice as Advertisement, Rape as Infatuation?: Corporate Vultures?
Suhash Gatade

21 Last Train For Laloo
Sahdev Kumar

23 The American Juggernaut: An Un-welcome Bolt from the Blue
Manav Deepak

25 BOOK REVIEW: Valuable Addition to Women’s Studies
Krishna Mazumdar

28 IMPRESSIONS: Rethinking Modern Medicine: Art of Healing
Avijit Pathak

30 From N.C.‘s Writings

29 Correcting the Focus

31 Chronology of Events (February 13-19, 2005)

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Six Months</th>
<th>One Year</th>
<th>Two Years</th>
<th>Three Years</th>
<th>Life Subscription*</th>
<th>Air Mail (Annual)</th>
<th>Surface Mail (Annual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Rs 225</td>
<td>Rs 400</td>
<td>Rs 750</td>
<td>Rs 850</td>
<td>Rs 3000</td>
<td>Asia $ 75</td>
<td>All Countries $ 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Rs 450</td>
<td>Rs 800</td>
<td>Rs 1000</td>
<td>Rs 1000</td>
<td>Rs 4000</td>
<td>Europe $ 90</td>
<td>America $ 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Historical Background of the Demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’

VIKAS KUMAR

On February 3, 2005 after a month-long stay in Nagaland the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Issac-Muivah faction) [NSCN (IM)] leadership resumed discussions with the Central Government in New Delhi to resolve the problem of insurgency in Nagaland. On this occasion Thuingaleng Muivah, the NSCN (IM)’s General Secretary, reiterated his demand for the merger of all “Naga-dominated” regions in the North-East [The Hindu 2005].

Two years ago (January 2003) when the NSCN (IM) leadership was in New Delhi for discussion on substantive issues with the Central Government, all political parties explicitly disapproved re-drawing of the North-East map by tampering with the territorial integrity of existing States. However, S. C. Jamir, the then Chief Minister of Nagaland, contrary to the position of the Congress High Command, expressed his support for the merger of North Manipur with Nagaland if the Nagas of Manipur desired so. [The Hindu 2003a] The Congress High Command chose not to issue any clarification in this regard [The Hindu 2003b] although Jamir contradicted its declared policy. Interestingly, Jamir had earlier labelled the Tangkhul-dominated NSCN (I-M) as ‘outsiders’. [Thapar and Karmakar 2001] Similarly, in August 2003, Dr Hokishe Sema, the Nagaland BJP Legislative Party leader, expressed his support for ‘Greater Nagaland’. However, the BJP spokesperson in New Delhi clearly expressed the Bharatiya Janata Party’s commitment not to disturb the map of the region. [The Hindu 2003d] Later during his Nagaland visit (October 2003) the then Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, virtually ruled out the demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’ saying that there was no political consensus for changing boundaries of States in the North-East. [rediff.com, 2003] Vajpayee’s stand on this contentious issue was hailed in Manipur (The Hindu 2003e) and evoked serious doubt among the NSCN (IM) top brass regarding the government’s commitment to a negotiated settlement. [The Statesman 2003]

It is pertinent to point out that the change of government after the recent Lok Sabha elections (2004) has not altered the consensus among the major political parties on this issue. The Congress-led ruling United Progressive Alliance has committed itself to upholding “the territorial integrity of existing States” in the North-East. [The Hindu 2004a] And the BJP, the erstwhile ruling party, has reiterated its stand that modification of existing boundaries cannot be imposed. [The Hindu 2004b]

Over the years, the demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’ has had a destabilising impact on the delicate social edifice and political stability in the States bordering upon Nagaland. During the previous visit of the NSCN (IM) leadership to India passions ran high in the States bordering Nagaland, especially Manipur, where the United Committee of Manipur (UCM) threatened to launch a secessionist movement and the Central Government received self-immolation threats. An all-party delegation from Manipur, led by the Chief Minister, rushed to New Delhi and demanded a ‘constitutional amendment to preserve its territorial integrity, as it existed on October 15, 1949’. [The Hindu 2003] In this article I intend to discuss the historical evolution of the demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’ in view of the prevailing confusion and its potential to jeopardise communal harmony in the whole of the North-East.

Greater Nagaland

From the days of the Naga Club, there has been a demand, in one or the other form, for merger of all Naga territories into one political and administrative unit. However, the expression ‘Greater Nagaland’ came into vogue in the late 1980s [Hazarika 1995, p. 243], when the NSCN called for unification of the Naga-inhabited regions of India and Myanmar. ‘Greater Nagaland’ is also known as Nagalim. (Aoling—land) Nagalim came into usage in the late 1990s. Then in 1999 the NSCN (IM) substituted the word Nagalim in ‘National Socialist Council of Nagalim (IM)’ with Nagalim. [Nag 2002, p. 308]

Starting from the forests of Sibsagar and Nowgong (presently Nagaon), today the Indian part of ‘Greater Nagaland’ encompasses at least parts or whole of four districts of Arunachal Pradesh (Tirap, Lohit,
Dibang Valley and Changlang), eight districts of Assam (Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi Anglong (part of erstwhile Nowgong), Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Cachar and NC Hills) and four districts of Manipur (Senapati, Ukhrul, Tamenglong and Chandel). (Refer www.angelfire.com/mo/Nagaland—the website of NSCN IM)

‘Greater Nagaland’ includes 120,000 sq km (in between the longitudes 93 degrees E and 97 degrees E and the latitudes 23.5 degrees N and 28.3 degrees N) with a population of 35 lakhs, whereas the present constitutional State of Nagaland has an area of only 16,579 sq km with a population of about 16 lakhs. [Kojiam 2001]

Pre-Independence Phase (Upto August 14, 1947)

The first significant document in this context is the Naga Memorandum to the Simon Commission (January 10, 1929), which raised the issue of Naga communities outside the Naga Hills district:

Our country within the administered areas consists of more than eight regions quite different from one another, with quite different languages which cannot be understood by each other, and there are more regions outside the administered area which are not known at present. [NSUD 1996, Appendix III]

It is not clear whether ‘more regions’ mentioned correspond to the Tuensang Frontier Division of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) that was merged with the Naga Hills under the Naga Hills-Tuensang Area Act, 1957, of Parliament [p. 596, Vol.II, District Gazetteers of India] or to some other regions contiguous to the Naga Hills. It needs to be noted that the Manipuri-Nagas, like Tangkhalus, were not associated with this memorandum.

When the Cabinet Mission Plan for a federal India was being debated the Naga National Congress (NNC) passed a resolution (June 19, 1946) which expressed that the NNC stood ‘for the solidarity of the Naga tribes including those of the un-administered areas’. The resolution also demanded separate electorate, due safeguards and autonomy within Assam. [Nag 2002, p. 106] Another NNC resolution (February 20, 1947) that was submitted to His Majesty’s Government (UK) and the Government of India is silent on the issue of uniting Naga territories. [Nag 2002, pp. 129-131] Similarly, the issue of unification of all Naga-inhabited areas did not find mention in the demands put forward by the NNC to the Gopinath Bordoloi Advisory Committee, constituted under the Constituent Assembly to deliberate upon the administration of tribal areas, which visited Kohima on May 27, 1947 to discuss the matter with Nagas. [Nag 2002, pp. 161-2]

The next significant document is the Nine-Point Agreement (June 27-29, 1947) between Sir Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam, and the NNC in which one finds explicit mention of the demand for unification of all Naga-inhabited regions. The relevant 6th point reads as follows;

Boundary:
That present administrative divisions should be modified so as to (1) bring back into Naga Hills District all the forests transferred to the Sibsagar and Nowgong Districts in the past, and (2) bring under one unified administrative unit, as far as possible, all Nagas. [NSUD 1996, Appendix III; Ghosh 2001, Appendix III]

In need to be pointed out that the tribes which constitute ‘all Nagas’ are not listed in the Agreement. Kojiam (2001) points out that only the Nagas of the Naga Hills district and NEFA signed the Agreement. None of the Manipuri-based Naga tribes was party to this Agreement. Also, it is clear that the NNC had wanted the unification of forests of Sibsagar and Nowgong alone. Later on, the NSCN (IM), an offshoot of the NNC, claimed the right of Nagas on whole districts. Further the 8th point of the Nine-Point Agreement declared that both the parties agreed that ‘the Chin Hills Regulations and the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations will remain in force’. These archaic colonial Regulations, purportedly enacted to protect the tribal identity, had hardly anything to do with the tribal identity. A reading of the Regulations reveals that they were enacted to control the trade in forest products in the tribal regions. [Ghosh and Kumar 2004] However, all separatists have stressed the indispensability of these Regulations, as we shall see in later sections.

Post-Independence Phase (August 15, 1947 onwards)

The first major post-Independence (1947) document that throws light on the issue is the ‘Yehzabo (Constitution) of Nagaland’, adopted in 1962 by the underground Federal Government of Nagaland formed at the initiative of NNC. In this article I have referred to the March 6, 1971 version of the Yehzabo. Part-I of the Yehzabo that deals with demarcation of territory of Nagaland does not define the territory in geographical terms. It talks in terms of ‘all the territories inhabited by the indigenous Naga Tribes’. [NSUD 1996, Appendix I] Similarly, Part-II of the Yehzabo that deals with ‘Citizenship and Rights of Citizens’ is also vague on this issue. It does not list the names of Naga tribes that are eligible for citizenship. [NSUD 1996,
Appendix J

The Sixteen-Point Agreement (July 1960) between the Government of India and the Naga People’s Convention, signed after the merger of the Tuensang Frontier Division of NEFA with the Naga Hills, is equally ambiguous about the details of contiguous areas that qualified as Naga areas. It also repeats the ritual of stressing the indispensable character of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 [Point 16]. The 12th and 13th Points of the Sixteen Point Agreement record the desire of the Naga negotiators for merger of reserve forests and contiguous areas inhabited by the Nagas and the Centre’s equally frank non-committal position. The 13th Point reads as follows:

Consolidation of Contiguous Naga Areas:
The delegation wished the following to be placed on record:
The Naga leaders expressed the wish for the contiguous areas to join the new State. It was pointed out to them on behalf of the Government of India that Articles 3 and 4 of the Constitution of India provided for increasing the area of any State, but that it was not possible for the Government to make any commitment in this regard at this stage. [NSUD 1996, Appendix IV; Ghosh 2001, Appendix III]

The Sixteen-Point Agreement of July 1960 was rejected by the hardliners who continued their struggle. However, a few years later they agreed for a ceasefire to give Jaya Prakash Narayan’s Nagaland Peace Mission a chance. The other members of the Mission included B.P. Chaliha, the CM of Assam, and Reverend M. Scott, a British Missionary. The ‘Terms of Agreement for Ceasefire or Cessation of Hostilities in Nagaland’ (September 6, 1964) does not deal with the issue of merger of contiguous territories. It addresses the question of territory in vague terms like ‘throughout Nagaland’. [NSUD 1996,Appendix V] The Nagaland Peace Mission’s Proposals (December 20, 1964) begins with a brief discussion on the position of the government and insurgents. But there is no mention of the demand for unification of Naga territories. [NSUD 1996, Appendix VI]

The first document where Manipur is explicitly mentioned was the ‘Supplementary Agreement to the Shillong Accord (January 5, 1976)’, which deals with the modalities of deposition of arms at agreed locations in Nagaland by January 25, 1976 and shipment of the same to the Chedema Peace Camp in accordance with Clause II of the Shillong Accord (November 11, 1975). The 4th Point of the Supplementary Agreement reads as follows:

Similar arrangement at agreed place/places will be made in Manipur with concurrence of the Manipur Government. [NSUD 1996, Appendix VII; Ghosh 2001, Appendix III]

Like the Sixteen-Point Agreement the Shillong Accord was also denounced as an outright sell-out by hardliners leading to yet another split. However, this split was a watershed in the course of secessionism in the State because with this the leadership of the underground organisations passed largely into the hands of ‘outsiders’—Nagas who hailed from other States/countries (like Thuingaleng Muivyah—a Tangkhul from Ukhrul district of Manipur—and Robert Khaplang—a Myanmarese Hemi Naga). They broke away from Phizo’s NNC and floated a new outfit, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). The NSCN Manifesto [Hazarika 1995, Appendix J] talks vaguely about the ‘sovereign right of the Naga People over every inch of Nagaland’ but does not spell it in geographical or demographic terms. The NSCN split into two factions in the late 1980s—one led by Khaplang and the other by Muivyah. They have their support bases among different tribes.

That the issue of ‘Greater Nagaland’ is an emotional issue for the ‘outsider’ Naga leadership is evident from the statements of Muivyah, the General Secretary of the NSCN (IM). Interestingly, colleague Swu, who belongs to the present State of Nagaland and is presently the Chairman of the NSCN (IM), has maintained a low profile on this question. After the highly controversial ‘ceasefire without territorial limits’ (June 14, 2001) Muivyah was quoted as saying:

The ceasefire is a ceasefire and at the moment it has nothing to do with territories ... Eventually it will be decided according to history. [rediff.com 2001]

It needs to be noted that the NSCN (IM)’s version of Nagaland’s ‘unique history’, during which the Nagas lived in splendid isolation from the neighbouring Brahmaputra and Manipur Valleys, is at variance with the real history. The identity of any group of people is largely defined by their religion and language—written and spoken. There has been consistent propaganda to include Christianity, English and Roman script among the roots of Naga identity. Vested interests are unilaterally foisting an artificial identity on Nagas by altering the altering the language and religion of Nagas to bolster their claim for ‘Greater Nagaland’. Ghosh and Kumar (2004 and 2005) have discussed the disastrous impact of such attempts to alter the Naga identity.

People’s Response to NSCN (IM)’s Skewed Reasoning

During his January 2003 visit to India Muivyah summed up the NSCN (IM)’s position in the following words:

There is no greater or lesser Nagaland. It is the place of our
natural habitation... We are asking for nothing more or nothing less than that... For example, I was born in Ukhrul (in Manipur) and my forefathers were also born there. It is not the land of Meiteis... The greatest question is that the destiny of the Naga people must be left to themselves. [Hindustan Times 2003]

Muivah’s skewed and over-simplistic reasoning evoked quite a few interesting responses from the North-Eastern readers of The Hindu, a national English daily. Here are some items. In one Letter to the Editor, Thounaojam Kenedy (17.01.03) asked:

If I were born in New Delhi and since the days of my great grandfather our family has been staying in Delhi, can I claim that area of Delhi as part of Manipur?

Another letter by Trotsky Kukigaramba in (25.01.03) aptly expressed the feeling of non-Naga tribal natives of Manipur Hills in the following words:

If part of the Manipur hills are ceded to Nagaland, the Kukis will find themselves in a situation similar to that of the Hindus in present-day Pakistan.

Conclusion

Starting from the 1940s onwards various Naga organisations have raised the issue of merger of all Naga-inhabited areas into one administrative unit. However, none of the agreements gives the specifics, for instance, the names of the tribes that constitute Nagaland or specific territories. This leaves a scope for escalating the demand in future. The history of demands and agreements shows that the territorial domain of the ‘Greater Nagaland’ demand is always increasing.

I end with the hope that the government will take into account the history, present ground realities and the wishes of the people of the North-East before committing itself to the NSCN (IM) on this issue. The secretive manner in which the negotiations with the NSCN (IM) are being held does not instil confidence in the people. The government has to address the issue of lack of credibility because that can trigger a serious crisis in the region. It is desirable that the matter is discussed threadbare in Parliament and the concerned State Assemblies. Ultimately the people of these States should be engaged in the peace process if lasting peace and communal harmony are the aims of the ongoing dialogue with the NSCN (IM) leadership.

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e. October 31: PM’s stand on ‘greater Nagaland’ hailed in Manipur.

The Hindu (2004):


b. ‘Modification of boundaries cannot be imposed’, December 12.


