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April 17, 2004

# NSCN (IM) and the Roots of Naga Identity: Religion and Language: Part II

Kunal Ghosh  
Vikas Kumar



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## Massive Sanctimonious Humbug Exposed

At one level India is *really* shining—the manner in which the Supreme Court ordered fresh investigation and trial into the Best Bakery case is a shining example of judicial intervention to ensure justice in a case involving rape and murder on communal lines when the executive in charge of the concerned State had gone out of its way to protect and shield the guilty. Given the environment of hate and prejudice prevailing in Gujarat the Apex Court had no hesitation in opting for retrial outside the State, a decision which has been commended by everyone shocked beyond measure not only by the horrendous happenings in Gujarat of 2002 (among which the Best Bakery incident occupied pride of place) but also, and more alarmingly, by the systematic way in which the anti-Muslim frenzy whipped up at the time of the post-Godhra riots has been sought to be preserved to this day under the

aegis of the Narendra Modi dispensation. Indeed the judiciary is the only institution in the country one can look up to for guaranteeing justice when that justice itself is under siege in these troubled times. And what a verdict it is! One cannot agree more with what Apex Court has observed in its memorable judgment:

The modern day Neroes were looking elsewhere when innocent children and helpless women were burning and were probably deliberating how the perpetrators of the crime could be protected.

Yes, indeed India is shining because of the Apex Court of the land which has also exposed through its ruling in the Best Bakery case that in Gujarat the “justice system was literally allowed to be abused, misused and mutilated by subterfuge”. This bold and courageous stand of the Supreme Court is a matter of pride for every patriotic Indian who has refused to sell one’s conscience at the altar of Narendra Modi’s *Hindutva* which with all his verbal acrobatics (on *Rajdharna* et al.) our great Prime Minister in essence upholds in the company of his charioteer deputy in government.

However, if India is shining because of the judiciary those engaged in the BJP’s ‘Shining India’ campaign are the very people who have no desire to take the necessary follow-up steps after the Supreme Court verdict. The continuance of Narendra Modi as the Gujarat CM, especially after such a damning indictment, is an affront to the secular democracy enshrined in our Constitution. This plain and simple truth the Vajpayee dispensation is unable—or rather deliberately refuses—to accept. Even now, after the SC judgment, it does not want to enforce accountability in Gujarat by giving Modi the order of the boot. And thereby the NDA Government is allowing the prevailing atmosphere of deep suspicion, hatred and mistrust to persist in that State. If this is what Modi calls Gujarati ‘*asmita*’ (or pride) one would have to squarely ask him and all his patrons and supporters in the *Sangh Parivar* if such ‘*asmita*’ is at all compatible with Indian culture. But then their narrow and sectarian ‘culture’

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# *NSCN-IM and the Roots of Naga Identity: Religion and Language—II*

KUNAL GHOSH and VIKAS KUMAR

*This is the concluding part of a two-part article. The first part, dealing with religion, appeared in Mainstream (April 10, 2004). The following part is devoted to the issue of language.* —Editor

Religion and language are the two most important ingredients of a community's identity. In the first part of this two-part article on the roots of Naga identity we discussed the religious facet of Naga identity and saw that the claim about Christianity being a part of the roots of Naga identity is not true. In fact, the reality is that Nagaland still has a substantial non-Christian population. Though Christianity has been in Nagaland since the nineteenth century it remained the religion of a minority till 1947. In the present article (Part II) we will examine the linguistic dimension of the Naga identity.

## **Background**

THE Naga tribes do not have a common language and there are about 60 spoken dialects. In some areas dialects vary even from village to village. The languages all belong to the Sino-Tibetan (to be more precise Tibeto-Burman) family. Inter-tribal conversation is generally carried on through a language which is an admixture of broken Assamese and commonly understood tribal words and expressions and is called Nagamese. Many Nagas have also become acquainted with Hindi and English [*Britannica* 1986, pp. 132-3] The Kacharis, a Dimapur based indigenous non-Naga group, speak a variant of Nagamese. English is the official language of the State. In fact, in linguistic terms Nagaland is unique among the Indian states in many respects. It has an English element in its name and it is the only State to recognise English as an official language. [*Gazetteer* 1998, p. 593] However, Nagamese remains the most preferred medium for inter-group communication in Nagaland (44.4 per cent people prefer Nagamese while only 34.3 per cent prefer English for the purpose).

*Dr Kunal Ghosh is the Head and Professor, Department of Aerospace Engineering, IIT, Kanpur. Vikas Kumar is an Engineer, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, Trichy. He is available on vikasprithvipur1@rediffmail.com*

[Khubchandani 2002]

The languages of numerically dominant Ao, Sema, Konyak and Angami Naga tribes are the major Naga languages spoken in the State. None of the Naga languages has a script of its own. Hindi, Bengali, Nepali and Assamese are the major scheduled languages spoken in Nagaland. A large fraction of Nagas—more than the national average—is bilingual. [Census of India, 1991]

The multitude of Naga tribes interact in Nagamese, 'a pidgin language, a cheerful, rough and ready lingua franca for the hill peoples and their plains counterparts, to communicate, however, crudely with each other'. [Hazarika 1995, p. 88] Nagamese is used widely in the public domain in the State, including the proceedings of the State Assembly, local public broadcasting, mixed congregations etc. Though English is the official medium of education Nagamese is the language of communication in classrooms.

## **Evolution of Nagamese**

NAGAMESE evolved over centuries of interaction within the Naga tribes on the one hand and between the Naga tribes and the Ahom Assam on the other. This process of exchange led to the evolution of Nagamese as a shared linguistic medium—a cultural bond—in the Naga Hills and the adjoining plains of Assam. Angami Zapo Phizo, one of the founding fathers of the separatist movement, considered it to be a 'link between Assam and Nagaland' [Hazarika 1995, p. 88] Others have hailed it as 'a living example of Naga-Assamese socio-economic relationship'. [Nag 2002, p. 40] Forms of Nagamese have been known to exist for at least over three centuries. The interaction between the Naga Hills and adjoining Brahmaputra Valley was multifaceted and encompassed trade (Nag 2002, Misra 1998, Hazarika 1995), religion and culture (Hazarika 1995, Nag 2002) and politics (Nag 2002).



The character of the aforementioned interaction that was instrumental in the process of evolution of Nagamese deserves a closer look so that we can appreciate the depth of the relationship between the plains of Assam and the Naga Hills. This interaction has had a strong influence on Naga identity. Nag (2002) says:

The Nagas that migrated to the plains did not speak Naga languages. The seven Sema villages at Margherita of Dibrugarh district, Latumgaon and Ligiri-Pukhiri Gaon (Konyak) at Sibsagar are notable in this respect. Linguistically these Nagas have merged with the plains people of Assam. Similarly during the Mughal and Burmese invasions many Assamese who took refuge in the Naga villages (in Mokokchung and Kohima districts) were also assimilated with the Nagas. Such contacts and socio-economic intercourse enabled the Nagas to speak in broken Assamese which served as the medium of communication between the Nagas and the plainsmen. During British rule the Assamese language was introduced in the schools of Nagaland; this further helped to spread the Assamese language in Nagaland which soon emerged as a pidginised language. Since each Naga tribe had its own distinct language which was unintelligible to others, they used this language in communicating amongst themselves. [p. 39]

Even after the proclamation of the Inner Line Regulation Act (1873), purportedly for 'safeguarding' the tribal culture, the interaction between Naga dialects and Assamese continued as the Naga Hills were a part of Assam where Assamese was the official language. The Naga interlocutors, known as Dobhashis (distortion of the word "dobhashi" which literally means "bilingual"; it is a word that descended from Sanskrit roots), who were the communication channel between the colonial Government and the Nagas, were conversant in Assamese. They interpreted the Naga Customary Law for the British Courts. [Nag 2002, pp. 55, 60 and 61] Nehru in his letter (August 1, 1946) to Sakhris had pointed out that most Nagas knew 'some Assamese already', which made Assamese one of the candidates for the choice of the common language for Nagas. [Nag 2002, p. 125]

So, one should not be amazed that 'Nisheli', the first Nagamese play, based on a Sema folk story, to be staged at the National Theatre Festival, was directed by Rabjita Gogoi, an Assamese. [Mizzima News 2002] People-to-people contacts normally outlive the government regulations and artificial boundaries erected to throttle them. The resilience of inter-people contacts is the only hope for harmony in the region. And it is this source of hope that the separatists want to destroy by attacking symbols of shared heritage, like Nagamese.

### Divisive Language Policy of the Church

The Church has promoted education in the whole of the North-East and Nagaland is not an exception to this. Starting from the late nineteenth century the Church has been in the forefront of spreading the light of education in the State. The high literacy rate in this terrorism-torn State speaks volumes about the success of the Church in the field of education. However, their language and religious policy has had a devastating impact on the Naga society because it created a wedge between the Nagas themselves—Christians and non-Christians—and more so between them and the plains people. Instead of supporting the cause of the shared linguistic medium the Church has always emphasised the primacy of English over the native languages in Nagaland. The rationale behind the stress on English is fairly obvious: it means severance of all connections with the heartland of India in general and the neighbouring regions in particular.

The Christian missionaries, 'who came there in the nineteenth century to preach the gospel and win converts', Hazarika (2000) says, 'helped push the use of English and that of the Roman script'. [p. 35] Indeed, the missionaries have since their arrival foisted is Roman script on the dialects of the Christianised tribes in the North-East, like Khasis, Garos and Mizos, which did not have their own scripts. Similarly, the Roman script was introduced for the Naga languages. In fact, very few communities in the North-East—unlike the Singhpos, Monpas and Sherdukpanis of Arunachal Pradesh [p. 19, Bhattacharjee 2002], Meiteis of Manipur and the Assamese of Brahmaputra Valley—had a script of their own. Traditionally the Assamese/Bengali script was used for the dialects that didn't have their own script—Jaintia, Bodo and Tripuri. Interestingly, for years the Tripuri and Bodo society have been witnessing bloodshed carried out by Christian terrorist outfits, like the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), fighting for 'the Independent Holy Land of Tripura', and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, fighting for 'Independent Bodoland', in favour of a Church-inspired campaign for replacing the existing scripts by the Roman script for the Kokbarak and Bodo languages. [Ghosh 1999, 2000] Ghosh (2000) perceives these two cases as essentially the manifestation of the same process and draws attention towards the

tendency among Abrahamic religions of different denominations to foist the script of their Holy Book on the languages



unrelated to their scriptures. The Jews foisted the Hebrew script on German and created a language called Yiddish. The Muslims foisted Arabic on an Indian language to create Urdu. The Catholic part of erstwhile Yugoslavia used the Roman script whereas the Orthodox part used the Cyrillic script for the same language called Serbo-Croat.

And Ghosh (1997) further says:

the Muslims (of Bosnia), sandwiched as they are between the two adversaries, have used both scripts in past but now show increasing preference for the Arabic script.

Returning to the case of Naga dialects/languages for which the Roman script has been in place for years now. Given the 'strong Assamese base' [Hazarika 1995, p. 152] of Nagamese it would have been better to write it in the Assamese script with which the Nagas were quite familiar. An example would help in understanding the point that Nagamese has an Assamese base.

Nagamese: *Moin theng mari Kohima loijam.*

Assamese: *Moin Kohima loi khurj karheejam*

English: I plan to walk to Kohima. [Hazarika 1995, p. 88]

The fear that the use of the Assamese script would ultimately marginalise Nagamese and other languages of Nagaland is unfounded in the light of the fact that several languages using one script, with minor regional variations, have coexisted for centuries in Europe. Similarly, in the Indian subcontinent Marathi, Hindi and Nepali use the same script. So, what is the real motive of introducing the Roman script for languages in Nagaland? The answer lies in the Linguistic Exclusion Principle enunciated by Ghosh (1994); to create a linguistic barrier between the Nagas and the Assamese; to gradually replace words of Assamese origin by English words; to work towards an extremely Anglicised version of Nagamese which would promote Naga separatist identity; to supplant all languages/dialects in Nagaland by English in the long run. All this in spite of the fact that the Roman script is not so suitable since Nagamese uses more consonants than there are in the Roman alphabet.

### The Educated Naga and the Language Question

THE educated Nagas seem to be ranged against their own linguistic heritage. They cannot do without Nagamese and yet they hold it in utter contempt. Little do they realise that this amounts to a form of self-hate, which surely has serious sociological implications for the Naga society. The following excerpt from Khubchandani (2002) elaborates this linguistic dichotomy further.

The use of Nagamese is much more intense as the lingua franca among different groups of uneducated Nagas, over 65 per cent. Among educated Nagas the most preferred language for inter-group communication is English 62 per cent, Nagamese 24, other Naga languages 10, and Hindi merely 5 per cent.

In spite of such intense use of Nagamese for inter-group communication in all oral situations, a majority of respondents recorded quite reverse attitudes towards the promotion of Nagamese language as such: 66 per cent do not like the language but accept it as a "useful tool" for communicating with others. Many Naga groups show strong resentment to the suggestion of sending their own children to learn Nagamese in school. If Nagamese as a subject is to be introduced in school at all, 93 per cent favour it as an optional subject and 92 per cent would like it to be taught in Roman script (and not in Assamese—addition ours—or Devanagari). Some of the contradictory responses in the Survey lead us to reflect over the issues of the 'real' versus the 'apparent' reality in human behaviour. It, no doubt, presents a striking contrast of reality and its negation.

### Separatists and the Language Question

It is strange that the separatists, who swear by the preservation of the Naga heritage, have, right from the dawn of separatist movement in the State, neglected the promotion of the local languages. The underground government adopted a Constitution (Yezabo) in 1956 written in English. The Part VII of that Constitution which deals with the language issue reads as following:

The Official Language throughout Nagaland shall be English and all official business of the Government shall be transacted in English. (Other languages shall be used as a medium of common understanding.) [Ref NSUD 1996, Appendix 1—The Yezabo of Nagaland.]

Apart from meaningless token gestures, like calling the Constitution by the name 'Yezabo' [Nag 2002, p. 323] or substituting the word Nagaland (in 1999) in 'Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-IM' with Nagalim [Nag 2002, p. 308] (Ao: *limah*—land), the separatist outfits have toed the line of the Church and neglected the native tongues of Nagaland. Unlike other places of India, the Bible has not been translated into any of the local dialects or Nagamese. In fact, Sakhrie and Phizo of the Naga National Council (NNC) had solicited the Mizo Union's support for independent Nagaland and asked the Mizo Union's Vanlawma to declare the Lushai Hills independent. They also offered the merger of the Naga and Lushai Hills to form one independent country 'whose official language could be the Mizo language'. [Nag 2002, p. 127] So much for their love for Naga linguistic heritage.



## Conclusion

In the last article we saw that the Church and the separatists have together attempted to put Christianity among the "roots" of Naga culture by incessant propaganda and have succeeded to a large extent to install this falsity. Here we see a similar attempt at redefining the linguistic horizons in the State. Is there a link between the attempts to change the two major components of Naga identity? Ghosh (1999) captures the underlying pattern in the following words:

There is a consensus among sociologists and anthropologists that religion and language are the two main identity markers of a community... Therefore, if religion can be tied up with language and linguistics, it would acquire a direct hold on nationality... Now, nationality and politics are intimately and naturally related, courtesy, the advent of nation-state all over the world. Hence, once religion is connected via language to nationality, it cannot anymore be separated from politics. Moreover, when two main identity markers of a community, that is, religion and language, are made to converge, the national feeling produced is likely to be extremely strong.

If the present trend continues Nagamese, the indigenous lingua franca of the Nagas, will die out. Sad will be the day when only English will rule. It is not too late as yet. The Nagas must come to terms with their ancestral lingua franca and end its present Cinderella existence. The State Government must reverse its attitude and adopt a policy to develop Nagamese and its literature. To start with, it must be taught in schools and colleges. Ideally it should be written in the most suitable script for it, which is the Assamese. However, it is quite likely that in their present Westernised mood the Naga people may not accept that script. Then let the Nagamese language and literature grow in the Roman script. The main point is that the Nagas should hold it dear and not in contempt.

In Nagaland the separatists and the Baptist Church have been acting in tandem to redefine the identity of Nagas. Their claim for separatism rests on the contrived changes they have together introduced in Nagaland to the detriment of the plural fabric of the Naga society. If not checked now later it may be too late. What is at stake is the existence of a multi-cultural civil society in Nagaland and, in fact, in the North-East as a whole since Nagaland in many respects is the trendsetter in the region. We end with the hope that the Central and State governments, and the people of Nagaland as well, will perceive the dangers of a theocratic State, no matter how Westernised and modern, and the

psychological/sociological dangers of hating their ancestral lingua franca; will stand hand in hand to further the cause of syncretic multi-culturalism in Nagaland and hold the beacon light for others in the region.

The Central Government is learnt to have recognised in principle that the Naga people have a 'unique history and situation in India'. [Kaur 2003] The breakthrough in negotiations, it seems, took place on the basis of this. But this should not, in the light of above discussion, be stretched to include Christianity and English among the roots of Naga people and isolation from Brahamaputra Valley as the norm all through their 'unique history'. ■

(Concluded)

## NOTE

### Major Languages of Nagaland (Census of India, 1991)

Ao	Sema	Kon- yuk	Ang- ami	Hindi	Bengali	Nepali	Assa- mese
14.00	12.60	11.40	8.00*	3.36	3.17	2.67	1.09
per cent	per cent	per cent	per cent	per cent	per cent	per cent	per cent

\* Approximate

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