September 24, 2005

The Naga Question in India: Outsider's Response to Vashum's Paper: Part II

Kunal Ghosh
Vikas Kumar

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vikas_kumar/21/
Naga Question in India—II
OUTSIDERS’ REPLY TO VASHUM’S PAPER
KUNAL GHOSH and VIKAS KUMAR

The authors have, in the following piece, sought to reply to the points made in R. Vashum’s “Poverty of Knowledge and its Ramifications on Indigenous Peoples—Part II” (Mainstream, July 9, 2005). The previous issue (Mainstream, September 17, 2005) carried an article by the authors under the same title—“Naga Question in India”—and it was a reply to Vashum’s “Poverty of Knowledge and its Ramifications on Indigenous Peoples” (Mainstream, July 9, 2005). Vashum’s two-part article—that appeared in the Mainstream issues of July 9 and July 16 this year—was a reply to the same authors’ “Partition of Manipur, Greater Nagaland and Contrived Tangkhul-Naga Identity: Role of Script and Lingua Franca” which was published in Mainstream (May 7, 2005).

This article is in reply to Vashum’s (2005) paper, ‘Poverty of Knowledge and its Ramifications on Indigenous Peoples—Part II’ (Mainstream, July 15-21). He wrote this as a rejoinder mainly to a paper of ours (Ghosh and Kumar 2005). Our earlier two-part paper on Naga identity (Ghosh and Kumar 2004) is also in his line of fire. We choose to ignore his repetitive charges that we are outsiders, prejudiced and ignorant and have no right to write on the Naga question. We note his frank and transparent espousal of the separatist cause. Vashum’s article is addressed as much as to the Indian scholar/policy-maker as to the secessionist constituency in Nagaland and Manipur. In the first half of the article he describes the ultimate aim of the Naga separatist movement, that is, an independent state comprising of territories from both India and Myanmar (Burma). We were rather taken aback by this frank and unabashed approach, and soon realised that his purpose is to keep this ultimate goal squarely in focus before the Naga youth. In the second and concluding half of the article he sounds sweetly compromising and hints at a solution within the Indian Constitution, provided of course that “Naga territories” of different contiguous States such as Assam, Manipur, etc., are united with the present State of Nagaland. He does not even mention any of the central arguments of our papers, such as,

[1] Christianity is too recent in Nagaland—the vast majority were converted well after independence—to be among the roots of Naga identity. In fact, Christianity has suppressed original Naga festivals, music, oral tradition of songs, dancing, feasting, customs etc. It has suppressed the original Naga faith which is very close to Donyipolo’ Yelam of Arunachal Pradesh, and [2] as given in their manifesto, the vision of the NSCN (I-M) is that of a theocratic State centred around Christianity. The manifesto of the earlier separatist organisation, Naga National Council led by A.Z. Phizo, had Protestant Christianity and original Naga faith in its scheme of things. In the 1940s and 1950s the strength of the Naga faith in terms of population percentage was considerable, and now has dwindled to insignificance.

We had argued that a theocratic State is not compatible with the secular ethos of India. Vashum skirts all these important issues and focuses on peripheral issues and resorts to innuendoes. In page 15, col. 1, he says that the Nagas “have been in their present settlement (called Nagalim—land of the Nagas) since time immemorial”. Their own folklores do not support this theory. For instance, the Tangkhul folklores tell us that they originated in Myanmar—we referred to this in Part I of our reply. (Ghosh and Kumar 2005c, also see Arokianathan 1982). Different tribes came in different waves of migration in modern history from South-East Asia. In fact, the separatist ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) makes the theory that Ahoms came from outside India, a cornerstone of their propaganda. Kukis in Manipur live cheek-by-jowl with the Tangkhuls and have as much claim to those hilly tracts. Kukis too came from Burma. Both Tangkhuls and Kukis led a nomadic existence even after coming into India. The word Nagalim is of new coinage, much after the NSCN was born.

On page 15, col. 2, para 1, Vashum says: “... the British did not interfere with the affairs of the Nagas.” Nothing is further from the truth. The British started using religion as an instrument of political policy; they surmised correctly that if they interfered with religion in these remote areas, there would be no reaction in the heartland. On the other hand they would have a loyal body of Christianised tribes in these sensitive borderlands. Their conversion was considered by colonial officials as a means to

Dr Kunal Ghosh is a Professor, Department of Aerospace Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Vikas Kumar is an Engineer working at the Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, Tiruchirappalli.
turn them into “a valuable counterpoise to the vast non-Christian population of the plains”. (Laitham 1859) The Baptists of the southern United States were (and still are) known for their religious zeal. They supported slavery and were firmly with the Confederates who wanted to secede and ignite the American civil war in the nineteenth century. The British colonial administrators were mostly Anglicans mixed with a few Methodists etc. They did some diabolical planning. Instead of their own kind, they chose to invite and promote the American Baptists in the Indian North-East. Also they brought in the Inner Line Regulation to disrupt the ongoing centuries’ long relationship between the plainsmen and hill tribes. The Baptists, in turn, interfered with, apart from the native religion, with the festivals, music, dance, customs and social life of the tribes in every conceivable way. Many of these interventions were tremendously beneficent, for instance, health care, literacy and education. But many more were not. As the Indian independence movement gathered momentum in the 1920s, a section of the Naga elite started demanding continuation of British rule in their area. Some British officers put forth the idea of a “Crown Colony” between Burma and India comprising of Christianised tribes from both the countries, under a plan called Coupland Plan. (Nag 2002, p. 337) However, the time for this idea had not arrived in the 1940s. Conversion proceeded apace after independence and by the end of the 1960s it touched 66.76 per cent of the population of Nagaland. (District Gazettes 1998) By the 1991 census more than 90 per cent of the Nagaland population became Christian. The future Nagaland of Vashum’s vision, as outlined in his paper, comprises of territories from India and Burma, has English as the official language and also as the lingua franca from the class room to the marketplace while all native lingua francas such as Naga and Manipuri are marginalised, and Christianity as the religion of the theocratic state. His vision looks much like the Crown Colony of the Coupland Plan, albeit with some important differences. It would not be a colony of the British Crown; it would be nominally independent but in reality a client state of the United States with strong institutional links with the southern Baptists of that country.

On page 16, col. 2, para 3, Vashum contradicts himself by saying: “It was only the British who interfered in some parts of Naga areas.” Again in the context of Naga relationship with the Meiteis, he blames the British for helping “chauvinism of the better organised Manipuri/Meitei kingdom”. (See p. 17, c.r., 2, para 3 of Vashum’s paper)

In the section ‘Indo-Naga Peace Process’ (p. 15, col. 2) Vashum describes Rev Michael Scott as a tall personality, “basically a peace advocate and human rights activist from the United Kingdom”. Vashum avoids calling him a Protestant missionary, although that is what he basically was. Scott was expelled from India by the Indira Gandhi Government in the late 1960s, a fact Vashum chose to ignore. In this connection we draw attention to another Protestant missionary, Rev John Thwaites, who had been active in North Bengal and was expelled in 2001. His imprisonment, trial and expulsion were the result of smooth cooperation between two otherwise antagonistic governments, the Central Government of the BJP-led NDA and the West Bengal Government of the CPI-M led Left Front. (Ghosh 2002) The facts of both the cases, of Scott and Thwaites, were kept under wraps. The papers of the Scott case should now be available on demand from the government since 30 years have passed. We wish our Humanities professionals were more interested in such subjects as Scott and his deeds than topics that are relevant to and fashionable in the West.

On page 16, col. 1, para 4, Vashum describes the Shillong Accord of 1975 as a “frustrated and unwise attempt”. This accord was signed by several NNC representatives including Kevi Yallay, a brother of A.Z. Phizo, and Zimic Ramyo, while Phizo was in London, old and infirm. (Ghosh Subir 2001, pp. 216-17) The NNC accepted a solution under the Indian Constitution. Article 371A was used to confer a special status on Nagaland which meant that ‘no Act of Parliament shall apply to Nagaland in relation to religious and social practice of the Nagas, etc.’ (Ghosh and Kumar 2004, Part I, p. 11) No sooner than the ink dried on the Accord, a dissident group of the NNC condemned it and formed the NSCN to continue with the insurgency. If the government wishes to sign another peace accord, this time with the NSCN(I-M), it would have to concede partition of Manipur. The separatists would ‘pocket’ the concession, engineer another split and create another organisation, and that organisation would continue with the insurgency, in a repeat of 1975.

The Loyal Must Not Be Abandoned

Many Nagas are loyal to India and many of their soldiers have died in the Kargil war with Pakistan. The Kukis revolted against the British during World War I. During World War II many of them joined the Indian National Army (INA) of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. There are more than 150 Kuki INA veterans who are alive and enjoy a pension from the
Government of India. Kukis are not so well armed and organised as the Tangkhuls who get patronage from the American Baptists. The government must not rush into accords one after another. We should realise that there is no end in sight, and the window for further insurgency is being kept open. Under the circumstances another accord and partition of Manipur would amount to abandoning the loyal.

Methodology of Secession in North-East India

Through a series of articles (Ghosh 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Ghosh and Kumar 2004, 2005a, 2005b) we have been exposing the methodology of secession in the North-East. It seems that Vashum is uncomfortable about this and comes out protesting as a ‘native’ against ‘outsiders’ interference. Here we give a summary of the methodology, as we see it, of secession and let the learned reader be the ultimate judge.

We have only an incomplete and sketchy description of what happened in Nagaland and Manipur Hill tracts. However, we have a clear and more complete picture of the events in Tripura, North Bengal and Bodoland. We piece together a methodology of secession by drawing from all the five. The missionary enters a remote hilly terrain at grave risk to himself, giving up all comforts of life in an advanced Western country. He takes the light of modernity to ‘backward’ tribal people. He spreads health care and education and earns their confidence. He then preaches Christianity and starts a process of conversion. Now conversion does not mean only accepting Christ and his teachings, which is an additive process, in the sense that some new thoughts are added to the existing repertoire; conversion also means giving up wholesale previously held beliefs, respect for the forefathers’ saints, customs and practices, and this is a subtractive process, promotion of which is not allowed by the Indian Constitution. The missionary, of course, is supported in his mission by strong financial and logistic help from the West and worldwide network.

1. Initially conversion proceeds slowly. When about 20 to 30 per cent of the people are converted, several things happen simultaneously or in quick succession. A new ‘national’ identity is forged, political demands are raised and a movement is launched for self-determination. A “nation-state” within or without India is demanded by carving out a particular territory. (2) Simultaneously a linguistic element is injected into the movement, which serves to cut a common cultural bond with the neighbouring non-tribal community, Assamese or Bengali or Manipuri-Meitei. Religion (Christianity) is kept in the background, and language and/or linguistics are brought to the foreground. The Church comes to the fore in demanding introduction of Roman script, ostensibly a non-religious linguistic issue. (3) After some time an insurgency is started. All these, of course, take a fair amount of advanced preparation in the form of creating overground and underground organisations, arms training and language cultivation. (4) The insurgency creates an atmosphere of insecurity. Journalists cannot visit, bureaucrats are denied access and the flow of information stops. What is most diabolical is that in such a situation, behind the ‘iron curtain’ of insurgency, communities in remote areas are coerced to embrace Christianity or be expelled. Some ethnic cleansing takes place. (5) The insurgents set up camps in neighbouring countries, Bangladesh or Bhutan or Myanmar. The government negotiates ceasefires, signs accords, grants Statehood or special autonomous status. Sometimes the insurgency dies down, but in the borderlands of Nagaland and Manipur it has never really ceased so far.

We shall now substantiate what is stated above by citing concrete examples. In Tripura we have the evidence of nascent nationality in the names of organisations such as the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) and National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT). In Bodoland we have the National Democratic Force of Bodoland (NDFB). In North Bengal we have a new ‘national’ identity called Kamtapuri and a guerrilla organisation, the Kamtapuri Liberation Organisation (KLO). In Nagaland we had the now-defunct Naga National Council (NNC). In Nagaland and Manipur Hills we now have the two factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

In Tripura the traditional Bengali script for the tribal language, Kokborok, is sought to be banned and a Roman script introduced. In Bodoland the traditional Assamese script is banned, Roman demanded and eventually Devangari introduced; but a strong demand for the Roman continues. In North Bengal recognition of the Rajbongshi dialect is demanded as an altogether separate language. In Nagaland and Manipur Hills the Roman script was introduced very early to supplant the Indian-origin scripts, and there has been a long-standing policy of marginalising traditional lingua francas, Nagamese and Manipuri.

We do not need to give evidence that insurgency happened or is still happening in all five places mentioned above.

In Tripura forced conversions behind the ‘iron curtain’ of insurgency took place. Ample evidence of these trickled out and was given wide publicity by
national dailies such as *The Statesman, The Telegraph* etc. Bengalis in general and some tribals selectively were subject to violence and ethnic cleansing, in remote areas. In Bodoland, Santhals and Muslims were systematically attacked/expelled from the areas controlled by the BDFB and the Bodos were coerced to embrace Christianity. In North Bengal it never came to such a sorry pass, thanks to the prompt action by the Left Front Government. Rev Thwaites was expelled at this juncture. (Ghosh 2002) However, tens of CPI-M activists lost their life in the first wave of violence; the insurgency simmers but there is no evidence of forced conversion behind its splintered iron curtain. We find that in the period between mid-1940s and mid-1960s the insurgency inside Nagaland was at its peak. During this period (of the insurgency) the percentage of Christians jumped from being a minority to about 66 per cent. Judging by what happened in Tripura and Bodoland, and extrapolating backward in history, it would be safe to say that occurrence of coercion (for conversion) in this period in Nagaland is highly probable Armed guerrillas of the NNC and later NSCN were spreading primary education, collecting ‘taxes’ and promoting Christianity. (Nag 2002, p. 284) Did anybody in the interior have an option? We do not think so. The ‘iron curtain’ of insurgency was impenetrable in Nagaland and Manipur Hills, and no direct evidence of forced conversion trickled out during that period.

One word of caution is in order. The methodology described above does not apply to the separatist movements of the Brahmaputra and Manipur valleys. Here the extreme Left, in the garb of a nationlist, tried to promote a ‘national liberation’ struggle in the Leninist-Maoist model, but ended up resorting to terrorism.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Donyipolo has features similar to Hinduism-Buddhism, such as Sun and Moon worship, deathless soul and pantheism. *Encyclopedia Britannica* gives a map that clearly shows four routes to South-East Asia, taken by monks, three of them through the Naga territory and one through Manipur.

2. Even the Naga national anthem is in English. “God Bless My Nagaland!” is a very close adaptation of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”, popularly known as the second national anthem of the USA.

## REFERENCES


sands of them, showing out many of the ICS bosses. But it would be a slander to say that they were unruly. How little did they touch or damage? Had they been unruly, as somebody had reported to Gandhiji, the whole place would have been a wreck in no time.

They went there for they felt that it was one of their own leaders who had been installed as their Governor. And when the annoyed officials ran up to Rajaji to complain to him about the crowd swarming into the rooms, C.R., it is reported, replied: “But what can I do? It is their own property. How can I prevent them from seizing it?”

The sense of triumph, of pride that we have come to our own could be seen in the faces that entered the portals of the Government House. It is symptomatic of August 15 no doubt. For though there were restrictions and curtailments to real freedom in the elaborate plans of the Dominion Status, the people—the common humanity that teems our land—have taken this day to mean that that have won and no amount of restrictions will bar the way, just as no policeman could stop the surging crowd that broke into the Government House.

Outside, all over the city, houses seemed to have emptied out into the streets, lorries came in hundreds, each packed precariously beyond capacity; lorries packed with Hindus and Muslims, men and women. Streets were blocked and the people themselves volunteered to control traffic.

Rakhi Bandhan Again

LORRY-LOADS of Muslim National Guards crammed with Gandhi-capped young Hindu boys shouted themselves hoarse “Jai Hind”, “Hindu-Muslim ek ho”.

Somebody in Bhowanipore waved a League flag under a Tri-colour. What a sight and what a suspense. But the days of hate were over and all shouted together, “Hindu-Muslim ek ho!”

A batch of Hindu ladies went to Park Circus to participate in the flag hoisting. They tied rakhi (strings of brotherly solidarity made famous during Swadeshi days) round the wrists of Muslim National Guards. And the Muslim boys said, “May we be worthy brothers!”

Hindu families, quiet and timid Bhadrakolok families, came in hundreds to visit Park Circus with their wives and children in tikka gharries piled by Muslims. Muslims, well-to-do and poor, visited Burra Bazar, and Ballygunge in endless streams. And this was going on all these three days.

They are all going to paras or mohallas they had to leave or where they had lost their near and dear ones. Today there is no area more attractive and more crowded than the very spots where the worst butcher-

ies had taken place. As if to expiate for the sins of the last one year, Hindus and Muslims of Calcutta vied with each other to consecrate their city with a new creed of mighty brotherhood.

On the evening of August 16, one year back, I sent you a despatch which could describe but inadequately the mad lust for fratricidal blood that had overtaken Calcutta that day. To mark the anniversary of that day I visited the crowded parts of Hindu Burra Bazar and the Muslim Colootola where in this one year hardly anyone passed alive when spotted by the opposite community. But this evening Muslims were the guests of honour at Burra Bazar and Hindus, as they visited Colootola, were drenched with rose-water and attar and greeted with lusty cheers of “Jai Hind”.

On the very evening, at Park Circus, was held a huge meeting of Hindus and Muslims. Suhrawardy, J.C. Gupta, MLA, and Bhowani Sen spoke. It was here that Suhrawardy asked the Muslims to go and implore the evicted Hindus to come back to Park Circus.

At Belliaghat, Gandhiji’s presence itself has brought back hundreds of Muslim families who had to leave in terror of their lives only a few weeks back. And Gandhiji’s prayer meetings are attended by an ever increasing concourse of Hindus and Muslims—themselves living symbols of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Reports from Bengal districts also prove that this remarkable upsurge of solidarity was not confined to Calcutta alone. In Dacca, despite panic, Hindus and Muslims jointly participated in the celebration of Pakistan, and Muslim leaders themselves intervened in one case where the Congress flag was lowered, and the flag was raised again.

Everywhere Hindus showed response by honouring the Pakistan flag. Joint Hindu-Muslim demonstrations were the marked features of the occasion.

Reports from Comilla, Kusthia, Dinajpore, Krishnanagar, Munshinganj, Malda and Jessore, all

Corrigenda

In the article “Naga Question in India-II: Outsiders’ Reply to Vashum’s Paper” by Kunal Ghosh and Vikas Kumar in Mainstream (September 24, 2005),

(i) on page 19, column two, para two, line 12, please read “medieval and modern” instead of “modern”;


(iii) on page 22, column one, line six, please read “NDDB” instead of “BDBB”.

These errors are regretted.

—Editor