Lingua franca and Proposed Partition of Manipur

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Questionable Naga Identity of Tangkhul Tribe

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Nagamese is a mixture of Assamese and tribal words and expressions with a grammar close to the Assamese. It is the only common link among different tribes (Ao, Sema, Angami, Konyak etc.) of Nagaland, who speak mutually unintelligible dialects.

Tangkhuls have been living in the hill region of Manipur Kingdom, paying tribute to the Manipuri royals for centuries. The tribes north of the mountain range traded and exchanged ideas with the Brahmaputra valley. The Tangkhuls did the same with the Manipur valley. The Tangkhuls' folklore and songs have absolutely no reference to any interaction with tribes north of the border, i.e. tribes of present Nagaland, but there are numerous instances of their having interactions with the Metro of the Manipur valley. The Tangkhuls' literacy rate in Manipuri language written in Bengali script is 70 percent. Even the illiterates are proficient in spoken Manipuri, Tangkhuls do not speak Nagamese at all.

After the conversion of Tangkhuls to Christianity around 1960s, they switched over to Roman script, English language and moved closer to Christianised tribes north of the Manipur border; they have started calling themselves Nagas. Vast majority of Tangkhuls do not speak English at all. The tiny English-educated elite like their counterparts in Nagaland, is trying to promote English as the lingua franca. This newly acquired Naga identity is motivated by religio-political factors.

THE June 14, 2001 cease-fire 'without territorial limits' between the NSCN (I-M) (Isac-Muivah faction of National Socialist Council of Nagalim) and the Central Government evoked massive, unprecedented protests in Manipur that turned violent and claimed many innocent lives. The Manipuris saw this prima facie as yet another instance of submission of the Government to the proponents of 'Greater Nagaland' who are clamouring for division of Manipur along ethnic lines and claiming the northern part for Nagaland. In 2005, the patience of the NSCN(IM) leaders ran out and they threatened to resume the armed struggle for achieving sovereign Greater Nagaland. They allege duplicity on the part of Indian Government regarding the understanding of "ceasefire without territorial limits". There is some semblance of truth in this. But they too have practised a subtle form of deception regarding identity-related issues and about the historical relationship of the hill tribes with the Manipur valley and its Meitei people.

The NSCN(IM) has a strong base among the Tangkhul tribe who are numerically the largest among the Manipuri tribes, and have defined the shape of Manipuri tribal politics since the pre-British period. In fact, one of the top leaders of NSCN(IM) T. Muivah is a Tangkhul. Initially Animist and now Christian, the tradition and loyalty of this tribe are the key factors in the politics of NSCN(IM).

THE MOUNTAIN BARRIER, LINGUA FRANÇA & MANIPUR KINGDOM.

The state of Manipur is situated direct to the south of Nagaland with the border between the two states running more or less east to west. Mount Japoo, which rises to the height of 9500 feet, and the congruous mountain range in the North of Manipur are a formidable barrier between Nagaland and Manipur. The Tangkhuls live south of this barrier. There is no reference to Tangkhul-Nagaland interaction (before 20th century, that is) in the comprehensive collections of folktales by

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Arokanathan (1982). There is however much evidence of contact and exchange with the people of Manipur valley.

The mountains acted as a kind of ‘watershed’ for the flow of human interaction. The tribes north of the barrier, that is, of present-day Nagaland, traded and exchanged ideas with the Brahmaputra valley for centuries. Out of these interactions emerged a language called Nagamese, which is an admixture of Assamese and tribal words and expressions. It should be noted that the tribes of Nagaland — Ao Sema, Angami and Konyak are the main ones — speak in mutually unintelligible dialects and needed a lingua franca. Nagamese has been this lingua franca for centuries and remains so to this day. English is the declared official language of Nagaland, but paradoxically almost all public institutions such as the rural haat/market, urban shopping malls and religious congregations, the Legislative Assembly, radio and television broadcasting etc. function in Nagamese. This is to be expected since the vast majority of the people do not know English.

The tribes south of the afore-said mountain barrier, that is, the tribes of Manipur state, traded and exchanged ideas for centuries with the valley of river Manipur, on whose bank is situated the city of Imphal. In Manipur state too the linguistic situation of the hill tribes is similar to that of Nagaland, in the sense that different tribes — Tangkhul and Kuki are the largest — speak in mutually unintelligible dialects. Here the language of the valley, Manipuri, written in Bengali script, emerged as the lingua franca over centuries of interaction, according to Arokanathan (Ibid). The hill tribes use this language for communication among themselves and with the valley. All public institutions, including the haat/market in the hills, function in this language. Some of the tribes use the Bengali script even for tribal languages along with the Roman script; the Church introduced the latter after conversion of the tribes to Christianity.

The NSCN(IM) would have us believe that Manipur or Kangleipak of yester years was confined only to the valley, but this is not supported by history. The politico-administrative unit called the Manipur State was neither created after Independence nor created by the British when they took over around 1830. It had been there, being ruled by a king of valley-based dynasty. The British accepted the borders of his kingdom.

**Tangkhul Relationship with the Manipur**

Traditionally the Tangkhuls have enjoyed close relationship with the people of Manipur Valley, called Meitei (see Arokanathan, Ibid). The Meitei kings and the Tangkhul Chiefs used to have marital relations [p. 240], the Tangkhul Chiefs used to host the king's army in the Hills [p. 107], the Meiteis and the Tangkhuls participated in each other's festivals and ceremonies [p. 113], the Meiteis visited the fairs and markets in the Hills for trading [p. 226], and the Tangkhuls used to work in the Valley to earn a livelihood [p. 231]. The Meitei king used to be crowned in a Tangkhul dress, near Uikhul in the village of Hundung. Even today some Tangkhuls organize phiroy, a Meitei memorial feast for the dead. Because of the intense two-way interaction, described above, Manipuri words entered into the vocabulary of tribal dialects and the vice versa.

According to Ethnologue (2005) the Tangkhuls' literacy rate in Manipuri written in Bengali script is 70%. Ethnologue is silent about the illiterates, but our information is that even they speak Manipuri. (A word about Ethnologue is necessary here. SIL International, which publishes Ethnologue, is a Christian missionary source, and it tries to provide the missionary on the field with the most accurate data about tribes all over the world, such as the number of speakers of a tribal language, the script or its absence, a popular second language, if any etc., and this comes in handy for the linguist professionals too.) The most point is that the Tangkhuls are and have always been proficient in Manipuri and they do not speak Nagamese, the lingua franca of Nagaland, at all. Yet NSCN(IM) would have them secede from Manipur and join up with Nagaland. Other small tribes in the area, such as Anals etc, who also use Manipuri as a link language, are following in the footsteps of the Tangkhuls. The NSCN(IM) would like the people of India and the Tangkhuls in particular to forget their ancestral history, given above in brief.
CHANGING CONTOURS OF NAGA IDENTITY.
A resolution of the Naga National Council (NNC) led by A. Z. Phizo, dated February 20, 1947 and submitted to the British Government of India, says, "In religion the great majority of the Nagas are animists but Christianity was introduced by the American Baptists long before the advent of the British rule and is now speedily spreading."

It appears that the majority of the Nagas were not Christians in 1947. NNC sponsored Yezabo (Constitution) goes on to proclaim "Protestant Christianity and Naga religion" as the two recognized faiths of the Naga nation, (see Nagas at Work 1996).

Article 371A confers a special status on Nagaland which meant that 'no Act of Parliament shall apply to Nagaland in relation to religious and social practices of the Nagas, etc'. The Shillong accord of 1975 was signed by the NNC while accepting a solution under the Indian Constitution. A dissident group of NNC condemned it and formed the NSCN to continue with the insurgency. NSCN split later and one of the factions came to be known as NSCN(IM).

NSCN(IM) made Christianity, without any denominational qualification, its main plank and dropped the terms "Protestant" and "Naga religion" altogether from its manifesto. It should be noted that between 1947 and 1975 Catholic Christianity had secured a sizable foothold and the original Naga religion, which in 1947 had the loyalty of the vast majority, had almost vanished from Nagaland by 1990. By 1960s Nagaland crossed the 50% Christian mark and the hills of Manipur became Christian-majority even later. NSCN(IM) declares in its manifesto that 'import of things repugnant to the taste of a Christian people would be prohibited'. It is obvious that the religious identity of the Nagas shifted much between the times of the NNC and NSCN(IM).

The words, Naga and Nagamese, came into vogue at the same time in the closing years of the 19th Century, although the language, Nagamese, had existed much earlier as a lingua franca of a territory which came to be known as Naga Hills during British period, and which demanded independence in 1947 and later became a state of the Union, called Nagaland. After a long search, the present authors have come to the conclusion that the language, Nagamese, is the only secular common institution among diverse tribes of Nagaland. The Naga Hoho, the assembly of elders, was established as late as in 1998 and most tribes from Tuensang district including the powerful Konyak kept away from it (Naga Hoho 2005). But what must be accepted is that the words Naga and Nagamese are a natural growth, and the state of Nagaland follows naturally from that.

However, the Naga identity for the Tangkhul tribe (who live in the Hills of Manipur, traditionally speak Manipuri as their lingua franca and no Nagamese) is a more recent and artificial construct, shaped by NSCN(IM). Manipuri as a lingua franca finds no mention and only English is given primacy in the manifesto of NSCN(IM). English already is the only official language of present Nagaland, whose state government shows only benign neglect to the ancestral link language Nagamese and yet cannot do without it. The elitist leadership has adopted a strange policy where immediate linguistic concerns of the common folks are forgotten, in both Nagaland and hills of Manipur. According to the NSCN (I-M) the 'Naga Nation' consists of at least 40 tribes including many from Manipur. However, to begin with the Naga National Council (NNC) consisted of only 29-members, representing various tribes on the basis of proportional representation (Nag, Sajal 2002). Manipur or any entity from this state had not figured in the original resolution of the NNC and the negotiations that followed for a long while. The first agreement/memorandum where Manipur is explicitly mentioned was the 'Supplementary Agreement to the Shillong Accord (5 Jan 1976)'. It is apparent that the radius of Naga identity has expanded much since 1947, when the first demand by NNC for an independent Nagaland was made, as newer tribes such as the Tangkhuls, have subsequently declared themselves to be Nagas. The English language and Christianity will be the identity-markers of the new Greater-Naga nation and languages of Indian origin, Nagamese and Manipuri, will be marginalized, judging by the language policy of the state of Nagaland and NSCN(IM) manifesto.
This since 1947 the ambit of Naga identity has expanded to include the Tangkhuls of Manipur whose linguistic identity has changed along with the religious one.

Conflict in Manipur Hills

The NSCN (I-M)'s fight for a sovereign 'Greater Nagaland' has brought the Tangkhuls of Manipur to loggerheads not only with the Meiteis of the Valley but also with other tribes, like the Kukis, with whom they share territory. The Kukis are numerical equals of the Tangkhuls in the Hills of Manipur. For the last two decades the Kukis have been targeted by the NSCN(IM) so as to ensure that the people of the territory, proposed to be a part of the Greater Nagaland, are demographically homogenous. More than 1000 lives have been lost, mostly of the Kukis (Ghosh & Kumar 2005).

Conclusion

We observe that the demand for Greater Nagaland is based on a historical deception regarding Naga identity of Tangkhuls and other smaller tribes of Manipur Hills. The Tangkhuls, who have been traditionally proficient in Manipuri and have no familiarity with Nagamese, now wish to give up Manipuri and adopt English so as to consolidate their neo-Naga identity. A tiny elite know English whereas the masses speak Manipuri as lingua franca, and such a fractious language situation is bound to cause difficulty in taking the Tangkhul territory of northern Manipur into Nagaland. Yet NSCN(IM) is hell bent on such a course.

There are also some tribes who share territory with the Tangkhuls, such as the numerically equal Kukis, but who do not share loyalty to the cause of Greater Nagaland. The persecution of the Kukis by NSCN(IM) is the consequence of their unwillingness to yield and join the Greater Nagaland bandwagon as yet another Naga tribe. The size of the Kuki tribe makes them difficult to be ignored and that explains the intense antagonism of the Naga extremists towards them. A question naturally arises: what triggered the change of identity of the Tangkhuls?

Attention can be drawn to a coincidence that since 1947 Christianity has spread and so has Naga identity, large scale conversion of the Tangkhuls having taken place (in 1960s and 1970s) much later than in Nagaland. The Kukis of Manipur came to Christianity even later and, having a long history of conflict with the Tangkhuls during the British period, they do not want to merge identity with the Tangkhuls. Shift in linguistic and religious identity and loyalty of the Tangkhuls poses a threat to the integrity of Manipur.

Even in the hills there are Meitei settlements whereas many tribal people work and do business in the valley. Different communities live cheek by jowl. There is violence in the air. One shudders to think what might happen if Manipur is bifurcated.

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