The Naga tribes do not have a common tribal mother tongue and there are about 60 mutually unintelligible dialects. The tribes until 1920 never referred to themselves as Naga but as Ao, Konyak, Sema, Nagamese which evolved over centuries of trade and cultural interactions between Ahom Assam and the tribes. The Naga Ho Ho, the gathering of tribal elders, came into existence much later, around 1940s. Hence it is Nagamese alone (a pidgin form of Assamese enriched by tribal woods and phrases) which gives definition to Naga identity. Yet Nagamese has no official recognition and English is the only official language. Christian missionaries who came to today’s Nagaland in the 19th century, foisted the Roman script and the English language forbidding the use of the much more suitable Assamese script. Nagas however do not like their children to learn the Nagamese language in schools, though a majority of them accept it as a ‘useful tool’ for communication amongst themselves. The separatists wish to create a barrier between Assamese and Nagas, to gradually replace words of Assamese origin by English ones. The Linguistic Exclusion principle which has been at work aims at eventually replacing Nagamese by English altogether.

RELIGION and language are the two most important ingredients of a community’s identity. Though Christianity has been in Nagaland since the 19th century it remained the religion of a minority till 1947. In the present article we will examine the linguistic dimension of the Naga identity and how Christianity has attempted to redefine it.

The Naga tribes do not have a common language and there are about 60 spoken mutually unintelligible languages/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. Intertribal conversation generally is 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, p. 132-3]. The Kacharis, a Dimapur based indigenous non-Naga group, speak a variant of Nagamese. English is the only official language of the state. In fact, in linguistic terms Nagaland is unique among Indian states in many respects. It has an English element in its name and it is the only state to recognize 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) [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.

**History & 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 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 Lugar-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 plain men.

During British rule Assamese language was introduced in the schools of Nagaland, this further helped to spread the Assamese language in Nagaland which soon emerged as a pidginized 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), purported for ‘safeguarding’ the tribal culture, the interaction between Naga dialects and Assamese continued as Naga Hills was a part of Assam where Assamese was the official language. The Naga interlocutors, known as Dobashis (distortion of the word “dobhashi” which literally means ‘bilingual’; it is a word descended from Sanskritic roots), who were the communication channel between the Colonial Government and the Nagas, were conversant in Assamese. They interpreted Naga Customary Law for the British Courts [Nag 2002, p. 55, 60 & 61]. Nehru in his letter (Aug 1 1946) to Sakhré had pointed out that most Nagas knew ‘some Assamese already’, which made Assamese one of the candidates for the choice of common language for Nagas [Nag 2002, p. 125].

So, one should not be surprised that ‘Nisheli’ the first Nagamese play, based on a Sema folk story, to be staged at 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 interpeople contacts remains to be 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.

**Language Policy of the Church**

The Church has promoted education in the whole of North-East and Nagaland is not an exception to this. Starting from late 19th century the Church has been at 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 a shared linguistic medium, the Church has always emphasized the primacy of English and Roman script over native languages and scripts. The rationale behind stress on English and Roman is fairly obvious: it means severance of a connection with the heartland of India in general and the neighbouring regions in particular. Chaube (1973) observes:

The transcription of tribal languages into the Roman script permanently alienated the tribal languages from such neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages as Assamese and Bengali.

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 Roman script on dialects of Christianized tribes in North-East, like Khasis, Garos and Mizos, which did not have their own scripts. Similarly, Roman script was introduced for Naga languages. In fact, very few communities in North-East – unlike the Singhpoms, Monpas and Sherdupkans of Arunachal Pradesh [Bhattarcharjee 2002, p.19], 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 National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), fighting for ‘the Independent Holy Land of Tripura’, and National Democratic Front of Bodoland, fighting for ‘Independent Bodoland’, in favor of a Church inspired campaign for replacing the existing scripts by Roman script for Kokborok 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:

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-Croatian.

We return 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. The Indian language is: I shall go to Kohima by walk

Nagamese: Moi theng moari Kohimaa loi joam

Assamese: Moi Kohimaa loi khoj kaarhee joam [Hazarika 1995, p. 88]

It should be noted that the language and script of Assamese cannot properly be written in the Roman script. The fear that the use of the Assamese script would ultimately marginalize 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 co-existed for centuries in Europe. Similarly, in the Indian sub-continent Marathi, Hindi and Nepali use the same script. So, what is the real motive of introducing 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 anglicized 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 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

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: limahland), the separatist outfits have toed the line of the Church and neglected the native tongues of Nagaland. In fact, Sakhrie and Phizo of Naga National Council (NNC) had solicited Mizo Union’s support for independent Nagaland and asked Mizo Union’s Vanlawma to declare Lushai Hills independent. They also offered merger of Naga and Lushai Hills to form one independent country ‘whose official language could be Mizo language’ [Nag 2002, p. 127]. So much for their love for Naga linguistic heritage.

WHO IS A NAGA?

When the colonial administrators and missionaries first visited the Naga Hills the tribals used to identify themselves with a particular tribe, eg as Ao, Sema, Angami etc, and not as a Naga (Mishra 1998). And this was the practice till as late as the 1950s. Elwin testifies to the above point based on his personal experience in the Naga Hills. He says,

The derivation of the word ‘Naga’ is obscure... the name however was not in general use among the Nagas until recently. It was given to them by the people of the plains and in the last century was used indiscriminately for the Abors and Dafias as well as for the Nagas themselves. Even as late as in 1954 I found the people of Tuensang (name of the mountain range) rarely speaking of themselves as Nagas but Konyaks, Chungs, Pongs and so on... Gradually however as the Nagas became more united they began to use the name for themselves, until today it has become widely popular (Elwin 2001, p. 284-5). [Nari 2003]

It is clear that the naga identity is a new and evolving construct. The words, Naga and Nagamese, came into vogue in the closing years of the 19th century. Nagamese, a pidgin of Assamese enriched by tribal words, is what the Nagas spoke with the plains people of Assam for centuries, which eventually became the lingua franca over a loosely defined territory. It is this territory, known as Naga Hills during the British period, which demanded

Separatists and the Naga Heritage

It is strange that the separatists who swear by the preservation of 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 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 I – The Yezabo of Nagaland]

Contempt for Nagamese and Separatism in Nagaland
independence in 1947 and later became a state of the Indian Union, called Nagaland. After a long search the present authors have come to the conclusion that the language Nagamese was the only common institution among the tribes of Naga Hills, none of which called itself Naga only a half-century ago. Even the Naga Hoo Ho, a gathering of tribal representatives, came much after the formation of Naga National Council in 1946 (Nag 2002, p.61) almost as an afterthought. Hence it is Nagamese that gave definition to Naga identity in its formative years. In the 1920s only a miniscule fraction spoke English and Christianity was a minority religion and it is Nagamese which acted as a link between different tribes, brought them closer and catalyzed the Naga identity. It is the ancestral link language of the present generation of Nagas.

**Conclusion**

We observe that the Church and the separatists have together attempted to redefine the linguistic horizons in the state. Is there a link between the attempts to change the two major components of Naga identity, religion and language? 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 westernized mood the Naga people may not accept that script. Then let Nagamese language and literature grow in Roman script. The main point is that the Nagas should hold it dear and not in contempt.

In Nagaland the separatists and the Baptists 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 Naga society. What is at stake is the existence of multicultural 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 westernized and modern, and psychological/sociological dangers of hating their ancestral lingua franca; will act in unison to further the cause of syncretic multiculturalism in Nagaland and hold the beacon light for others in the region.

The Central Government is learnt to have recognized in principle that the Naga people have a `unique history and situation in India' [Kaur 2003]. The breakthrough in negotiations with the NSCN (I-M), 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 Brahmaputra Valley as the norm all through their `unique history'.

**Note**

Major languages of Nagaland used by its population (Census of India, 1991) [in percentage terms]

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<th>Ao</th>
<th>Sema</th>
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* Approximate
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