



Territorial Dimension in the Naga Peace Process

Longvah Shonreiphy

Dept. of Political Science, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, Meghalaya, 793022

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Abstract

Peace process in Nagaland draws one's attention to the impending havoc if the Nagas' declaration of 'integration' of all Naga inhabited areas, that has definite territorial dimension, is not dealt with great maturity of mind. Naga political conflict which was commenced since the late 1940s is un-fathomable without understanding the Nagas' aspiration for integration. Such aspiration of the Nagas, however, has the potential to set-off fresh round of conflict in the Northeast region of India involving the issue of redrawing the boundary of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. In the light of this, the following paper will make an effort to examine the territorial difficulties involved in the Nagas' aspiration. It will also try to analyse the authenticity of the Nagas' claim for integration as their 'birthright'.

Keywords: Naga peace process, self-determination, integration, territory, birthright.

Introduction

Nagaland is a land inhabited by the culturally rich but politically torn Naga people. Although their land is geographically compact, yet Nagas are divided and placed under different administrative units. In India, Nagas reside in the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland; in Myanmar, they are residing in the Sagaing division and some in Kachin state. The term 'Naga' is a collective name or nomenclature given to the various tribes of Mongoloid racial stock, inhabiting in the compact area "between China, India and Myanmar"¹, covering an area of 120,000 square kilometers with a population of more than four million². Until the first part of the 20th century, many Nagas especially the aged one did not know that they were called as 'Nagas'. Instead, they were commonly known by the names of their village and tribe. From ancient times, each Naga tribe lived in permanently established village-states or village-republics, more like the ancient Greek city-states¹, each independent of the other with a define territory or boundary of its own. From time immemorial, Nagas had great attachment with their land. It was remarked that "[T]he Naga identity is not only rooted in their history, culture, economy and polity but it is also deeply intertwined with their land and its resources"³.

'Peace Process' which has no universally agreed definition is a term dearly hold by the Nagas. It provides a chance to the Nagas towards a better future of peace, development and justice. Generally, peace process is a framework for ending violence, changing relationships and building communities with the capacity to resolve differences peacefully⁴. It is a process that provides an opportunity to the conflicting parties to realize lasting peace by engaging in a peaceful negotiation for the settlement or resolution of a protracted conflict. In Nagaland context, peace process refers to a series of attempts to achieve an end to the long-running political conflict between the Indian

Government and the Nagas through the process of dialogue and negotiation and also reconciliation among the Nagas themselves to sort out their differences peacefully. In fact, the signing of the cease-fire agreement in 1997 between the Indian Government and the Isaac-Muivah led faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM), laid the groundwork for the present phase of peace process in Nagaland.

In order to understand the integration issue in Nagaland, it is essential to understand the Naga political conflict. Even before the independence of India, Nagas had been asserting that they formed a different nation and had a separate identity from that of the rest of India based on historical, political, racial, cultural and religious differences. However, the indifferent attitude of the Indian Government concerning the plight of the Nagas had led to political conflict between the two. Naga rejected the idea that their land, which was under a 'special dispensation' during British rule, could simply pass into Indian hands at the end of British colonial rule⁵. Based on this argument the Nagas constantly held that self-determination or sovereignty is their birthright. In fact, this constitutes the wellspring of the Indo-Naga political conflict. However, of late, 'integration of Naga inhabited areas' has come to occupy a centre-stage in the Naga political conflict and the ensuing peace process.

Integration and the Naga Peace Process

The assertion for integration begins when the national aspirations of a group –minority or majority–based on their distinct identity are ignored or sidelined and are not dealt with sensitivity. In other words, the desire for integration originates when a universal human need, i.e. the desire of a group of people to live together freely as one nationality under a single administration is suppressed by the other stronger or dominant group. In essence, integration is the act or purpose of combining two or more things or people who have previously been

separated. To integrate is to make up as a whole; to make entire; to combine, amalgamate; to incorporate into one or to desegregate⁶.

In Nagaland, the assertion for integration cannot be comprehended alone without its relation to the Nagas' declaration of self-determination. In other words, there is an inter-relation between the two, in the sense that both concern the territory and rightful entitlements of the Nagas. Nagas' aspiration for self-determination is the vortex of Indo-Naga political conflict which is based on the assumption that Nagas has national, racial, social, political, cultural as well as historical identity different from that of India. Based on these differences they declare their right to self-determination, that is, to determine and administer their future freely as it deem best to them. According to A. Z. Phizo, self-determination of the Nagas means refuting the various arguments given by India in order to justify their subjugation of the land of the Nagas. The first argument is about the 'menace' of China and Burma (present day Myanmar) – the land of the Nagas is too small to exist independently on its own. It will be usurped either by China or Burma. Therefore, the best choice for Nagaland is to become a part of the Indian Union; the second argument is concerning the 'strategy' for security of India. If Nagaland becomes a part of either China or Burma or Pakistan, it will be of grave security threat to the national integrity of India. Therefore, Nagaland must be subjugated; the third is about economy, that is, Naga cannot sustain itself economically without depending on the Indian Government; the latest argument is that Nagas are not united and therefore, there is no substance or basis to defend the independence of Nagaland⁷. India firmly held that, 'Nagaland formed an integral part of India before 1947 and with the transfer of power to India by the British Parliament; Nagaland became part of India in the same way as all other states in India'⁸. On the contrary, Nagas maintain that their declaration of self-determination is solely based on their rights as a people on this earth. It is their basic needs and is not just a mere whimsical aspiration. Before 1947, i.e., before the independence of India, economically, politically, socially, Nagaland had never been dependent on India⁷. Therefore, they have every right to rule one-self.

Of late, it has been observed that although there are differences among the Nagas on the issue of self-determination or independence, there is a near unanimity among all political parties, revolutionary groups and civil society on the issue of 'integration'. The process of 'integration' can happen in various dimensions like cultural, emotional and physical or territorial. However, Nagas gave primary importance on the territorial aspect of integration. They opined that they are already assimilated emotionally as well as culturally; therefore, what they now need is territorial consolidation.

Nagas consider integration as their 'birthright'. Integration for the Nagas means amalgamating all the Naga inhabited areas, who are residing under the various administration of the state of

Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar under a single political administration. Nagas frequently emphasize that they are members of one family, and, "as members of the same family we say that we want to live together. By expressing the desire to live together we have not done anything wrong against any community or anybody because integration is the birthright of the Nagas"⁹. The proclamation for Naga integration is often referred to as the crusade for creation of 'Greater Nagaland'. However, Nagas argued that such terminology is a misnomer; there is no 'greater' or 'lesser' Nagaland; 'Nagaland is Nagaland'. The adjective 'greater' make it sounds as though "Nagas are trying to grasp some other people's land or territory, which is not true"¹⁰. "We are not claiming anybody's land/territory. Land that was begotten by our forefathers should belong to us because that is our inherent birthright"¹¹.

Since the 19th century, the land of the Nagas have been divided and sub-divided for administrative convenience, diplomatic and security reasons. All throughout, both the colonial Britain and the Indian-Burmese States imposed a policy of 'divide and rule' which has a devastating impact on the Naga people in political, economy, cultural and other spheres³. The first division of the Naga territory "without the knowledge and consent of the people" was brought in with the signing of Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 between British-India and Burma; dividing the Naga territory into two, one under British India and the other under Burma¹². Later on, after India's independence the drawing of the official borders between India and Myanmar further affected the Nagas. Still a boundary agreement was signed on 10 March, 1967 by Kyi Maung of Burma on behalf of the Government of Union of Burma and by K.M. Kannampilly on behalf of the Indian Government, which resolves to delineate, delimit and demarcate the boundaries of 909 sq. miles between the two countries³. Such drawing and re-drawing of international boundaries in the land of the Nagas certainly divided the Nagas physically. For instance, in Longwa village (one of the biggest Konyak village in Eastern Nagaland) this agreement splits the house of *Angh* (Chief) into two, with kitchen in India and bedroom in Myanmar.

On the Indian side, the areas of the Nagas were further sub-divided with the inauguration of Nagaland as the sixteenth state of the Indian Union on 1st December, 1963. 'Nagaland' for the Nagas was created by leaving out large junk of their own land. For instance, Tuensang and Mon sub-divisions of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) were carved out and join with the Nagaland State while leaving out Tirap and Changlang sub-divisions and other areas in the formation of Nagaland state³. A portion of Nagas were left in Manipur, some in Assam and still some in Arunachal. Some scholars therefore are of the view that "formation of Nagaland state is a success story on the part of national integration of India, but a failure story on the part of Naga national integration"¹³.

Udayon Misra remarks that “while the British policy of segregating the different Naga tribes is perfectly understandable; what is rather intriguing is the adoption of an almost similar policy by the Government of free India”¹⁴. The Indian people who sacrifice even their lives in protest against the evil policies of the British colonialism, meted out that same evil treatment mercilessly against the Nagas who had no proper idea of the Indian people. Except in Nagaland state, Nagas are a minority in all other States. In the pre-independence period the British administrative policy touched only those Nagas living contiguous to British settlements in Assam¹⁵; without exercising any kind of administrative control in some Naga areas referred to as the “Free Naga Hills”¹⁶. This Free Naga Hills also known as the Eastern Nagaland were considered as “un-administered areas” by the British India Act of 1935, which took effect in 1937; and continued to exist as independent tribal principalities¹⁵. Even when the Naga Hills were eventually brought within the British Empire, a policy of non-interference in the local habits and customary laws of the tribal people was worked out and consistently followed¹⁴. However, with the independence of India in 1947, both the administered as well as the non-administered areas of the Nagas were eventually made a part of the Union of India ‘without the knowledge and consent’ of the Naga people. This remains the main crux of the Indo-Naga political problem till date.

The philosophy of Naga integration is that they want to live as one people in a socio-political set up according to their desire and vision, in their own ethos and genius³. The feeling and the process of coming together, living together, reasoning together and building their world together under one socio-political set up is known as the movement for ‘Naga Integration’⁷. The demand for Naga Integration has become an un-omissible factor from the time of the letter to the Simon Commission in 1929 till date. For instance, reiterating the 13th point of the Sixteenth Point Agreement regarding integration of contiguous Naga inhabited areas under a single administrative unit, the Nagaland Legislative Assembly has passed resolution four times in December 1964, August 1970, September 1994, and December 2003 respectively. Reciprocating to such resolution, the Naga leaders in Manipur also makes various efforts to realize their common goal of ‘Naga integration’. It may also be noted that Naga political movement for integration is not confined to the Indian side alone. The Nagas in Myanmar refused to enter into an agreement known as the ‘Panglong Agreement’ on which basis the Federal Union of Burma was formed³.

Obstacles to the Nagas’ Aspiration for Integration: Integration is considered as an element that pre-condition the greater objective of the Nagas aspiration for self-determination. “It is a part and parcel of the solution to the Indo-Naga political conflict. There can be no true solution without addressing the territorial issue”¹⁸. Furthermore, in the words of Th. Muivah “solution cannot be expected while Nagas are divided territorially”¹⁹. Nagas believed that ‘if integration is ruled out from the contemporary peace process, then there will be no

settlement of the Naga conflict”²⁰. However, such aspiration of the Nagas for integration has provoked violent protests from the neighbouring states of Nagaland, especially the state of Manipur where there is a sizeable Naga population occupying four districts – Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel. It invokes challenges from the neighbouring states of Nagaland because the resolution of the Nagas’ integration will certainly involve alteration of boundary of her neighbouring states.

It has been observed that the significant factor behind the development of unfriendly relations between the Nagas and the Meitei community of Manipur considerably revolves around the issue of ‘rights’ versus ‘interest’ and also the element of ‘fear psychosis’. Nagas everywhere faced the heat of the Indo-Naga political conflict for several decades. Therefore, they feel that longing for a peaceful life from the humanitarian point of view is no crime. Thus, as the necessary step towards the journey of peace, they need the extension of cease-fire agreement that will cover all the areas inhabited by the Nagas and not only the state of Nagaland. However, in 2001, alleging that the policy of extending the cease-fire agreement between the Indian Government and the NSCN-IM ‘without territorial limits’ has a hidden agenda of Naga integration issue, the Meitei community of Manipur protested vehemently against the Bangkok Agreement or the cease-fire extension agreement of June 14, 2001. Such action on the part of the Manipur Government (accused of representing only the interest of the Meitei community) was considered by the Nagas as infringement of their rights to live together as one family peacefully. In connection to such opposition, the Nagas asserted that, “When the Meitei said that the territorial integrity of Manipur cannot be broken, they said for their interest alone but not of their rights. When the Nagas said we want to live as one family that is the inherent rights of the Nagas”²¹. It is also remarked that the psyche behind Manipur’s opposition to the Naga cease-fire involves a deep fear psychosis. For instance, according to Dr. Shurhozeli Liezietsu, President of the Naga People’s Front, “the area of Manipur is little over 22,000 sq. km., out of which little over 2200 sq. km. formed the Valley. That means if integration is implemented more than 15,000 sq. km. areas will go away from them. The fear of the Meitei is whether 2200 sq. km. (excluding Churachandpur district) can exist as a state or not. But because of their fear why should they go against the Naga people? It is for them, to tell their grievances to the Government of India”⁹.

Most recently, the overt opposition to the Nagas aspiration was demonstrated by the Manipur Government led by O. Ibobi Singh on the proposed visit of Th. Muivah to Somdal, his native village and other Naga areas in Manipur. The Naga people who geared up at Mao Gate to welcome their leader was brutally assaulted by the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB), Manipur, wherein, two male students, Chakho and Loshou were shot dead and more than 100 persons, mainly women, sustained grievous bullet wounds and related injuries. In relation to such unfortunate events, the Naga Hoho (the apex body of the Nagas

civil organisations) issued a statement that 'henceforth, we derecognize any artificial boundary lines drawn across our ancestral lands in the so called Manipur State'³. Nagas continually profess that people and land cannot be separated because 'from this land came forth all our culture and our history. Therefore, there can be no meaningful solution to the Naga political problem without integration'¹⁸.

Further, it has been observed that seven insurgent groups active in the area who oppose the 'Naga integration' concept have constituted a platform called the United Liberation Front of Seven Sisters (ULFSS)²², who held that the demand for the integration of all the Naga inhabited areas under a single administrative unit by the NSCN-IM as well as the political parties of Nagaland is untenable²³. Thus, it can be inferred that if the dream of Naga integration becomes a reality, than the whole Northeast India will be in turmoil, since it involves the boundary issue affecting the state of Assam, Arunachal and Manipur.

Another obstacle to the Naga integration is that the Government of India is not likely in the position to negotiate integration of the Nagas as it has the potential of initiating anti-national activities in North East India. The issue of integration of the Naga areas has picked up many tails on the way. The neighbouring states of Nagaland, especially Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh has expressed strong resentment to the Nagas desire to live together. "The Nagas also accused the Indian Government of patronizing the Meitei community in order to side-track the Naga peace process. As such, the clash between the Meitei and the Nagas occurs because the Indian Government started looking at the interest of the Meitei at the expense of the rights of the Nagas"²¹. Despite assertion from the Naga politicians as well as the civil society that the Naga conflict is against the Government of India and not against the neighbouring communities of Nagaland and that Nagas wants to live in peace with her neighbours and want her neighbours to realize that they will continue to live together as neighbours till the end of time²⁴, the integration issue is considered as a potential threat to the territorial integrity of the neighbouring communities. In essence, integration of Nagas means the disintegration of other communities. Thus, whenever Nagas articulate the need of Naga integration; it gives an impression of Naga politics conditioning the neighboring communities.

Challenge to the goal of Naga integration also comes from the Naga themselves. It is an undeniable fact that, unless the Naga themselves inculcate a sense of unity and understanding, the 'Naga unification' is not feasible. In the light of the recent development in Eastern Nagaland, the notion that there is a near unanimity among Nagas concerning integration has become questionable. A group of Nagas like the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) cannot be said to be in support of the integration issue while they are demanding a separate state of their own. Further, differences on the concept of integration within the Nagas have been observed. For instance,

political parties in the state of Nagaland assumed that by 'integration' they meant that Nagas from Assam, Arunachal and Manipur must be joined with Nagaland³⁸. On the contrary, some Nagas, especially the NSCN-IM opined that "Integration does not mean joining the Nagas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh or Myanmar with the state of Nagaland. It simply means Nagas should be brought under one administrative roof"²¹.

Conclusion

It has been perceived that the demand for integration of Naga areas is a vital process of the Naga national movement for self-determination, wherein, the aspirations of the people and their land cannot be explained in isolation. For the Nagas, integration of its territories under one political roof is recognition of their original boundary or derecognizing the artificial boundaries that separates them. Before the advent of the British, Nagas lived on a contiguous region without any national or international demarcation, although the various Naga tribes were never under one administrative rule²⁶. To the Nagas, his land had, except for a brief period of British possession (barely 80 years), has always been an independent principality¹⁴. Thus, many scholars blamed the British for leaving behind the legacy of unending conflict between India and the Nagas. The Nagas posits that emotionally, physically and spiritually, they are already integrated; it is only the 'artificial' political boundary that is separating them. However, actual events indicate that they are divided from within based on various factors like factionalism, tribalism, etc. Lack of unanimity among the Nagas, enmity of the neighbouring communities and also limitation of the Indian Government, are some of the major obstacles to the Naga peace process. In a nutshell, until and unless the issue of integration is addressed with great maturity and sensibility by the Government of India and until the neighbouring communities of the Nagas understand the psyche behind the Naga movement, there can be no sustainable solution to the long-drawn Indo-Naga political conflict.

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