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Identity, Autonomy and Self-Determination: The Demands for a Greater Nagalim

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ABSTRACT

The drawing and redrawing of national and international boundaries has physically divided the Nagas over time. They are now dispersed in the Indian states of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and in Myanmar. These divisions have raised a sense of consciousness among the Naga tribes who now seek self-determination, identity assertion and demand the integration of all contiguous Naga inhabited areas. This paper assesses the demand for Greater Nagalim by considering the concepts of identity, autonomy, and self-determination. It highlights the historical context which led to the rise of demands for a Greater Nagalim and also evaluates the possible challenges or obstacles that make the achievement of this demand difficult. Using secondary sources of data, the article argues that in postcolonial India, the issue of Greater Nagalim represents interplay between the historical background, cultural preservation and territorial integration of Nagaland amidst changing political scenario.

Keywords: Autonomy, Greater Nagalim, Identity, Self-determination, Territorial integration

INTRODUCTION

Identity politics in Northeast India has been a result of a long and complex history of the 20th century. Sanjib Baruah, noted scholar, has referred to the Northeast as a 'frontier zone' that is a political and administrative unit resided by different tribal communities controlled by state. Different tribal groups and communities lived and interacted with each other and later came under colonial and post-colonial power which then changed their political structures. As such, due to the history of unique political boundaries and government structures, different communities were forced to define their identities. It is in this context that the idea of a unified Greater Nagalim

should be understood as an aspiration among the Nagas to consolidate their identity^{4, 5}.

In the context of identity-based political mobilization, the Nagas provide one of the most interesting examples among the Northeastern communities. Due to the drawing and redrawing of the Naga territories, the Nagas, who are dispersed over many Indian states and portions of Myanmar, have continuously struggled with the problem of being divided into different territories yet sharing similar historical and cultural bonds. This circumstance sparked a feeling of shared desire for a single nation, sometimes referred to as Greater Nagalim. This goal eventually became a central component of Naga nationalist ideology. However, neighbouring states that worry about



losing territory or a shift in the demographic balance are also alarmed by the proposal.

This paper assesses the demand for Greater Nagalim by considering the concepts of identity, autonomy, and self-determination. While all three concepts relate to the same political aspirations of the Naga, they have distinct meanings. The concept of identity refers to the idea that the Naga share a sense of community based on shared history, culture, and customary institutions. Autonomy is the desire of the Naga to be able to govern themselves and make decisions about their local government, customs and access to their natural resources in a way that fits into the current political structure. Self-determination takes this desire one step further as it is the desire of a people to define their own political future, which can include the unification of territory, political authority, etc. The concepts of identity, autonomy, and self-determination in the Naga context are interrelated and in combination with each other, they form the basis of the Naga demand for Greater Nagalim.

These three concepts are not separate entities. Identity is the basis for social structures in which political demands occur. Autonomy serves as an operational mechanism to help communities maintain this identity using current institutions. Self-determination is the broader political desire to have the collective rights recognized, and in some instances, it may be used to consolidate territory. The combination of all three has developed the Naga's demand for greater Nagalim.

This paper has made an attempt to look at how the Nagas have perceived themselves politically, how their desire for autonomy has developed through negotiations in the Indian Constitutional framework and how they have used the concept of self-determination as an argument for achieving greater Nagalim. It highlights the historical context that led to the rise of demands for a Greater Nagalim and also evaluates the possible challenges or obstacles that make the achievement of this demand difficult. Using secondary sources of data, the article argues that in postcolonial India, the issue of Greater Nagalim represents an interplay between the historical background, cultural preservation and territorial integration of Nagaland amidst a changing political scenario.

IDENTITY ASSERTION AMONG THE NAGAS

The Naga community, which is defined by its own clan structures, customary laws, and ritual life, has historically operated as an autonomous unit. These features made them distinct and unique from the different tribes and villages. Fredrik Barth (1969)³ has argued that the formation of ethnic identity is shaped not only by what groups share internally but also by those features that distinguish these groups from others. In the Naga case,

these boundaries were clear and long-standing. What changed over time, however, was the recognition of a collective sense of belonging that extended beyond the village or tribe. Contrary to the idea that Naga unity has ancient roots, this wider identity was largely a product of modern historical forces.

Colonial intervention played a decisive role in knitting together what had earlier been loosely connected communities. The British administration reorganised the hills through policies that effectively set them apart from the rest of the Assam plains, including the introduction of the Inner Line Permit and the governance of the Naga Hills as a "frontier" space. Even while they did not eliminate tribal differences, these structures gave the hill groups a common administrative and political experience. The exposure of the Naga middle class to knowledge and new communication channels introduced by missionaries led to the creation of the Naga Club in 1918. Perhaps for the first time, the Club conveyed a feeling of shared political interest among various Naga tribes when it submitted its memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929. According to authors like Vashum (2000) & Shimray (2007)^{10, 11}, this was an early expression of a political self that went beyond local identities rather than nationalism in the contemporary sense.

AUTONOMY AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Will Kymlicka (1995)⁹ defines autonomy as the institutional capability of ethnic groups to manage their internal affairs in the case of multinational democratic nations. The Nagas, however, did not only view autonomy as a tool for creating institutions of local governance for administrative decentralisation, but rather as a means that shaped everyday social relations. Village councils, clan-based dispute resolution, customary land arrangements and ritual authorities are the practical institutions through which people organise family life, resolve conflicts and reproduce social norms. In that sense, claims for autonomy are demands to preserve forms of social ordering that predate modern state administration and not merely requests for administrative special treatment.

Scholars studying tribal politics have repeatedly shown how such demands emerge from long-standing patterns of marginalisation and cultural vulnerability. Virginius Xaxa has emphasised that tribal autonomy movements often stem from efforts to safeguard cultural institutions against external interference¹². Other scholars, drawing on liberal theories of group-differentiated rights, argue that minority protections must accommodate internal cultural governance rather than force assimilation. These theoretical concerns disquieted the Nagas, as a result of which they held several talks with the Indian government,



which led to the signing of the Sixteen Point agreement and the creation of Nagaland as a separate state.

Article 371A of the Constitution was the most significant provision of this bargain between Nagaland and the centre, as it was designed to keep Naga customary laws, land rights and village authority protected from ordinary central legislative encroachments. Yet, despite these safeguards, many Naga organisations have continued to feel that autonomy offers remained narrower than what their historical and political experiences justified. According to them, constitutional protection secured important cultural safeguards but did not resolve broader political anxieties about territorial fragmentation or political agency. Their critique centres on two issues: first, that statehood did not unify the Nagas living in neighbouring states, leaving the cultural community territorially fragmented; and second, that autonomy remained constrained by the larger structures of Indian federalism, limiting what they regarded as their historical right to self-governance. As such, autonomy came to be understood as a political space that required continuous negotiations rather than a constitutional arrangement that is static in nature.

SELF-DETERMINATION: A LONG-STANDING QUEST

The idea of self-determination for the Nagas has always been central to them as it has shaped how the group views its history and envisions its political future. Naga leaders did not start with a single, set plan for their relationship with India in the early decades of organized political mobilization. Rather, they discussed a range of solutions, from examining looser federating options to maintaining customary autonomy. But eventually, a powerful faction inside the Naga National Council came to the conclusion that their concerns about administrative and cultural impairment could only be resolved by a completely different political structure. Their thinking was influenced by their dissatisfaction with the postcolonial state's response to their initial petitions and discussions, as well as their ideal of a village life where authority rested with village people. Literature on the history of the formation of the state of Nagaland very well highlights how this progressive sense of alienation led to a greater dedication to political self-rule.

The Shillong Accord of 1975, which led to the ceasefire of the Naga armed cadets, changed the dynamics of the movement to a great extent. The Accord was perceived by many Nagas as having too many concessions and insufficient consultation, which led to organizational and emotional breakdowns. The Accord, according to younger leaders in particular, undermined the fundamental tenet that had led the movement since its founding. Because of splits within Naga leadership, several new groups were

formed with the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) emerging as the most powerful and the concept of self-determination was viewed through new lenses in tune with the emerging geopolitical scenario. Self-determination was no longer limited to the language of sovereignty for these factions as they sought the unification of all Naga-inhabited territories that were wrongly bifurcated as part of colonial and post-colonial policies.

Amitav Acharya has argued that regions and political communities are not formed by regional territories; rather, they are connected by a sense of common identity, history, culture, norms and political imagination^{1, 2}. With this realization of the importance of geographical unification, the idea of a Greater Nagalim or the aspirations of creating a contiguously Naga inhabited area gained relevance. It was envisioned as a territorial context where Naga institutions, customs, and political ambitions could coexist under a cohesive administrative framework, rather than just as a larger geographical entity. This geographical ambition had become inextricably linked to the larger desire for self-determination by the time talks between Naga organizations and the Indian government resumed in the late 1990s.

CONSTRUCTING THE IDEA OF A GREATER NAGALIM

The Sixteen-Point Agreement, which led to the formation of the state of Nagaland, officially acknowledged the demands for Naga territorial integration. Clause 13 of the agreement stated that, with the approval of the relevant state legislatures, Naga-inhabited lands might be combined into a single administrative unit. Over time, Naga political groups saw this provision as proof that their moral and political understanding with the Indian state included integration. However, Charles Chasie pointed out that the Agreement never had widespread acceptance because it was viewed as inadequate or premature by a number of Naga tribes, and subsequent state governments in the area have opposed any territorial reorganization, making it a contentious historical document⁶.

Beyond official agreements and political statements, the idea of a unified Naga homeland is shaped by the lived cultural geography of the region. Long before the arrival of modern state boundaries, many Naga communities maintained social and economic relationships that covered wide stretches of the hills. The villages that were connected by shared customary practices, rituals and social norms were bifurcated and placed under different territorial jurisdiction. As such, the demand for integration is interpreted by many Nagas not as a territorial expansion but as an attempt to reassemble a world that was fractured by successive political reorganisations. However, this imagined geography also intersects with territories inhabited by various other ethnic groups, making any



political proposal for integration far more complex than a cultural narrative might suggest.

DRIVERS OF THE NAGA INTEGRATION MOVEMENT

Much of the force behind the idea of a shared Nagaland homeland comes from more recent political and social experiences, especially in places where Naga communities live outside the state of Nagaland. The way the Naga spaces have been split up over various administrative reorganizations is one of the most significant problems. Naga villages that had previously interacted freely were integrated into several administrative units following the Treaty of Yandaboo and the consolidation of British power. Older residents of a number of border villages still remember how families ended up reporting to various districts or completely different administrations, despite belonging to a single clan network. Many Nagas saw the continuation of these colonial distinctions after independence as a systemic reflection of a past injustice that only political unity would be able to make right.

However, this political movement of Naga integration is also driven by certain economic factors. Walter Fernandes (2008)⁷ was of the opinion that the tribal population perceives lack of development as an erosion of their dignity, as land, identity and livelihood are closely linked aspects for them. It is evident that the Naga areas outside the administrative control of Nagaland suffer from a lack of political participation, slow infrastructure development and administrative apathy, which has created a sense of being peripheral citizens within their respective states. The Naga Community envisaged that if they were integrated under a single administrative unit, it would better represent their priorities and end the cycle of marginalization.

Another important aspect that fuels the issue of integration is that of resource governance and utilisation. The area claimed under Greater Nagalim is rich in forest, minerals and land, which has both cultural and economic significance for the Naga People. Although administrative and political authorities rarely speak about resource control, community conversations frequently highlight dissatisfaction with decisions made by outside organizations without sufficient consultation. They believe that they are being deprived of what is rightfully theirs unless they integrate themselves into a single political unit.

KEY CONSTRAINTS

The idea of uniting all Naga-inhabited regions under a single political system still has emotional appeal, but the difficulty of the task becomes evident as soon as one moves from emotions to practicality. The neighbouring states that would be directly impacted if any changes are made in the boundary arrangements present the biggest immediate

obstacle. Over the years, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh have all stated that even a small change to their borders might upset long-standing political agreements. Manipur has been particularly outspoken, as seen by the rapid emergence of public demonstrations whenever the Naga merger is discussed. Even Dima Hasao, an Autonomous district under Assam, vehemently opposed any progress undertaken in the direction of fulfilling Naga demands, as the district would lose a significant part of its territory if the idea of Greater Nagalim materializes. The neighbouring states are unwelcoming of the idea because they perceive it not only as a territorial expansion into their state territory but also as a threat to the identity and history of other tribes living in the Naga majority areas of these states. This gives way to a sense of unease and fierce political opposition to the idea of Greater Nagalim.

The other aspect of the constraint is the existence of differences of opinion within the Naga society itself regarding the integration. A section of the Naga Society feels that the goal should be for cultural integration rather than boundary or territorial integration, as they realize that alterations to the boundary are very hard to achieve. In other words, local expectations regarding autonomy, authority, resource control, and cultural recognition must be taken into account and any differences should be reconciled in any attempt to envision a united territory¹⁰.

The obstacles are much more significant in terms of the Constitution. Changing the boundary of states comes under the purview of the parliament and it will require the Parliamentarians to align themselves with the idea of Greater Nagalim, which would be both rare and difficult. Furthermore, a portion of the projected Naga homeland is located in Myanmar, adding an international dimension that India is unable to handle on its own. Unlike the reorganization of state boundaries, redrawing the political boundary between two sovereign countries is a more difficult and strenuous task, as no country, especially Myanmar, will surrender its sovereignty just to fulfill the aspirations of the Naga tribe.

Additionally, the Indian Government is also accountable for recognizing the history, identity and aspirations of other ethnic communities who are part of the proposed map of Greater Nagalim, like the Hmars, Kuki, Mizo, Dimasa, etc. Any attempt to materialize the Naga demand may lead to neglect of the aspirations of these tribal communities, who have vehemently opposed the idea since its inception. Because of this, the territorial matter is far more delicate than it first seems.

RETHINKING AUTONOMY AND INTEGRATION

As the debate on Greater Nagalim has matured, a growing number of scholars and policymakers have begun to argue that the question may not be solved through territorial



reorganisation alone. That is, if one looks at the political landscape carefully, the more promising direction seems to lie in imagining autonomy in ways that do not rely exclusively on redrawing boundaries, but rather one that recognises that it can be fulfilled through various other institutional forms.

One proposal gaining tentative traction is the reworking of asymmetric federal provisions. Rather than envisioning a territorially unified Naga entity, the constitutional protections available in Nagaland, particularly those modelled on Article 371A, could be extended, in calibrated ways, to Naga-inhabited areas in neighbouring states. Such arrangements with provisions for greater autonomy over customary matters, land, cultural institutions and legal spheres across different states without disturbing the geographical integrity can prove to be useful.

Another alternative to the demand for territorial integration is cross-border development and cultural integration. A pragmatic approach towards the issue can be used by the government to deal with the development issues faced by the Nagas residing in neighbouring states. Better infrastructure with better governance and improved political participation can address many of the aspirations of the Naga Community. Cultural integration will also help in safeguarding the identity of the Nagas and provide them with an avenue to acknowledge their shared history. Long-standing cultural bonds can be experienced through cross border cultural exchanges and cultural alliances without creating issues with neighbouring states or a foreign country.

There is a requirement for a flexible, multidimensional approach towards these demands. The Indian Government has recently made a move to build a border fence along the Indo-Myanmar border, which has been opposed by many Naga civil society organisations like the United Naga Council of Manipur. The Govt has also attempted to end the previously existing Free Movement Regime in this area. Organisations have opposed this on the grounds that all these actions are unilateral and without consultation, as well as not in conformity with traditional Naga territorial claims. In contrast to these, if the Government can consult local councils on the rules of movement along the border and set up joint review panels that can identify emerging tensions and recommend suitable adjustments, then there are lower chances of escalation of opposition.

CONCLUSION

The argument presented in this paper demonstrates that an understanding of the demand for Greater Nagalim can be most effectively obtained by considering the interaction of identity, autonomy, and self-determination within the context of political discourses in Nagaland. The identity of the Nagas and their historical experience have produced a strong demand to have their identity recognised collectively. The Nagas have viewed autonomy as a mechanism to increase their influence in governing themselves as well as increase their access to economic and social resources, and to protect their cultural heritage. Moreover, the concept of self-determination has served as a basis to shape the Naga peoples' hopes and aspirations for political and territorial unity among the Naga people. Therefore, it may be said that the demand for Greater Nagalim represents the coming together of these three forces. Furthermore, this paper also illustrates that there are considerable political and legal barriers to achieving the aspiration of the Nagas for a unified homeland. Ultimately, any long-term solution to achieve the aspiration of the Nagas for a unified homeland will require flexible institutional arrangements that provide increased autonomy, opportunity for participation in decision-making processes, and the opportunity for economic and social development while at the same time, taking into account the interests of the adjacent communities.

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