

Nagaland — The Uneasy Ceasefire

Major Shailender Singh Arya

The Naga insurgency was the first major internal challenge to confront a young, socialist and somewhat dreamy nation. And the oldest insurgency of the independent India was the first blood for the Indian Army in dealing with insurgency, imparting some costly lessons, which the Army has not forgotten till date. Simmering from the pre-independence years, the insurgency finally erupted in 1955-56, and has kept the state on boil for decades, besides destabilising the entire Northeast region. The current insurgency led by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) is the dominant faction of the erstwhile NSCN, has been often described as the ‘mother insurgency of the northeast’ by the security experts. It was a formidable insurgent group with strong ideological foundations, which spearheaded the Naga insurgency since the early eighties. The Naga problem, with which the word ‘complex’ has become almost synonymous, today after years of bitter conflict has undergone a distinct shift and the peace talks are now inching towards a possible political solution. There has also been a marked change in the perceptions of the local populace, which has altered the ground realities and the dynamics of the region. Meanwhile, the once fierce guerrilla groups have made a near business enterprise out of insurgency while engaging each other in bitter turf wars. An intricate cocktail of these factors has made the ongoing ceasefire an uneasy proposition, leaving the Naga insurgency at a unique cross-road of conflict and peace. The understanding of this volatile cocktail is important to comprehend the dynamics of a protracted insurgency. The future of the ceasefire and the results of the ongoing peace talks will also have a profound impact on the stability of the entire Northeast region and could fundamentally alter our concepts of engaging and containing other terror movements.

Paradise Lost

The popular perception, except in the Northeast India, considers the Nagas to be an exotic, agile and fierce group of tribes with rebellion and head-hunting as their primary means of occupation. This sad but stereotyped perception is extended to most of the tribes of the Northeast, with some kind of variations. Truly, Sanjoy Hazarika describes these people as the ‘Strangers of the Mist’, a term popularised by his book bearing the same name. Naga is a fairly recent generic term attributed to a group of tribes of India-Mongoloid origins speaking Tibeto-Burman dialects of Sino-Tibetan family. This complex definition is inescapable, further defying a clear distinction of (and among) Nagas. Among few conflicting versions, it is commonly accepted that the word Naga is derived from the word Na-ka, which in Burmese means people or men folk with pierced ear lobes. They have been rarely understood, as more often than not, the various insurgent groups have hijacked their mild agenda, each proclaiming to be the sole arbiter of the Naga destiny.

The blue hills of Nagaland had lost their innocence to the sound of gunfire in mid-fifties. After decades of bloodbath, in which according to estimates, 25,000 people have lost their lives from 1947 till date, the situation at ground zero in Nagaland is yet to resemble normalcy. The sound of the gunfire still rattles the countryside on a daily basis, the only difference being that the insurgent groups are battling it out among themselves. Presently, the Khapsing faction of NSCN has joined hands with Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) to counter the dominant Isak-Muivah faction of NSCN and they routinely engage each other in prolonged fire-fights. The pie is quite lucrative; access to unbridled extortion in the dominated areas and a share in any possible political arrangement, which may be adopted upon conclusion of the peace talks. The inter-tribal rivalry, the Achilles’ heel of Naga insurgency, adds fuel to the factional fire. As a result, the state and the neighbouring areas have never seen lasting peace.

After over a decade of ceasefire, commencing with August 1997 ceasefire with NSCN (IM) and the subsequent April 2001 ceasefire with NSCN (K), the durability of peace is still suspect. Hope for a bright future is based on a surprisingly vague notion that finally the insurgent groups will come around and somehow the issue will settle by itself. Quite the contrary, the repeated extension of ceasefire with both the NSCN factions and endless rounds of talks with NSCN (IM) has heralded an environment of endemic factional politics, rampant extortion and interference by the insurgent groups in all the aspects of administration and policy. After carrying out considerable consolidation, it will not be incorrect to state that they now actually run a parallel government. They have the impunity to hold workshops, post propaganda videos on YouTube, advertise for vacant posts in newspapers and routinely publish their page-length statements and rebuttals in the vernacular media. Last year, the ‘Kilo (Home) Ministry’ of NSCN (IM) opened a new branch called Crime Suppression Department (CSD) to carry out polling duties, further assuming the role of a state. This so-called CSD often rounds up some unsuspecting drug-peddlers and releases them after levying fines. The ineffectiveness of the Kohima based Ceasefire Monitoring Group (CFMG) and the failure to revise the Cease Fire Ground Rules (CFGR) are giving more teeth to the security forces, has significantly contributed in this negative spiral. Today, in spite of the ceasefire with both major factions in place, the insurgency related incidents are considerably higher than many other northeastern states where similar arrangements are absent. According to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), insurgency related fatalities have increased from 97 in 2004 to 99 in 2005, to a further 147 in 2006. Incidents of insurgent violence have registered an increase from 180 to 192 between 2004 and 2005 and sharply to 309 in 2006. By all estimates, the toll for 2007 is likely to be higher.

The Great Game

The ongoing ceasefire between the Government of India (GOI) and NSCN (IM), which has been ‘indefinitely extended’ on 01 August 2007, is at best uncertain. Similarly, the ceasefire extension for another year has been obtained with NSCN (K) in April 2007. This fragile peace is hostage to the outcome of peace talks and the perceptions of the involved players. These perceptions have a tendency to harden in the current circumstances as the odds faced by both sides have subsided. In almost a decade of ceasefire, these groups have recouped, multiplied and are almost back to their old ways, basking in the satisfaction of re-establishing coherent insurgent organisations. NSCN (IM) in this period has been carrying out approximate 300-400 new recruitments per year and has raised a few more so-called new battalions with arsenal to boot. The dominant Isak-Muivah faction of NSCN and they routinely engage each other in prolonged fire-fights. The pie is quite lucrative; access to unbridled extortion in the dominated areas and a share in any possible political arrangement, which may be adopted upon conclusion of the peace talks. The inter-tribal rivalry, the Achilles’ heel of Naga tribes, and has turned them into their own terror organisations. The resultant credibility loss of these important bodies has further robbed the issue of few objective opinions. Most of the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like the Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Naga Mothers’ Association (NMA) and All Naga Concerned Citizens’ Forum too parrot the NSCN (IM)’s lines. In these happy circumstances, the idea of exchanging their AK-47s and easy money with the vagaries of a political process appealing to them is debatable.

The main demands of NSCN (IM) are integration of Naga-inhabited areas of the Northeast, a special federal relationship with New Delhi and a separate constitution for Nagaland. The NSCN (IM) claims that the total area of proposed Greater Nagaland¹ or Naglaim is about 1,20,000 square kilometres against the present spread of the state of Nagaland which is 16,579 square kilometres. It blames the state for its past aggression against the Naga people and demands the return of the Naga lands. The NSCN (IM) also demands the return of the Naga lands, which constitute their Naglaim include Ukhrul, Senapati, Chandel and Tamenglong districts of Manipur, and Tripura and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. In Myanmar, they claim large chunks of the administrative division of Sagaing and eastern parts of Kachin State. They also claim the forested areas of Assam on the foothills all along the Assam-Nagaland border, which are presently disputed and already under demographic aggression of the Nagas who have created new settlements. Indeed for NSCN (IM) whose many senior leaders including Thuingaleng Muivah are Thangulals (Khamti) from Manipur, this demand for Naglaim has assumed greater importance in the recent years. Understandably there is considerable resentment in these states, particularly in Manipur whose boundary demarcation with the Naga areas was clearly settled as early as 1872.

Its arch-rival, the NSCN (K) faction is more or less content with the current boundaries of the Nagaland state and demands independence as their main requirement. NSCN (K) also challenges the claim of NSCN (IM) to be the only representative of the Naga people. On this aspect, they again seem to be right. The third player is FGN, which due to incessant propaganda of insurgents carries the ‘positive legacy’ of Angami Zapu Phizo, the pioneer of Naga insurgency, as well as the ‘negative legacy’ of the Shillong Accord. Presently, it is a divided house with four factions and a few pockets of influence in the eastern parts of Nagaland. But if not suitably engaged, it has the potential to disrupt the peace process by misguiding and exploiting the sentiments of the people. In fact, it is banking on this possibility to revive its sagged fortunes.

Corporate Interests

The new generation of recruits in the NSCN factions and the FGN are a novel breed. While their predecessors from the previous generation may be children of deprivation; they are nothing but the children of opportunity who have made insurgency the most flourishing business in the region with ideology, ‘cause’ and businesses tossed aside. The core competencies of their business include organised extortion, nano-trade and arms running.

The perennial source of revenue for the NSCN factions has always been the organised extortion carried out from all possible sources. They call it taxation and in fact assert their right to it, as of a legal government. Phantlashing Shillong, a senior NSCN (IM) leader, who is also a self styled ex ‘Brigadier’ and the Convener of the officer’s Ceasefire Monitoring Cell (CMC), when asked about continuing tax collections by the group despite the ceasefire said, ‘It is our right to... Will the Government stop collection of taxes during the cease fire?’² The system is deep rooted, not unlike the Income Tax department, the tax notices go out every financial year and proper receipts are issued once payments are made. The collection rates are fixed; it is a 24 per cent of one month’s salary per year in case of salaried employees, including all government employees, Rupees 120-150 as ‘House tax’ and ‘Census tax’ per household for all. Similarly the rates for all types of shops, commercial vehicles and other trading or business activities like saw-mills, coal mines, stone quarries, brick kilns etc are fixed. The annual collection is done centrally, a town’s taxi union does not from the taxi owners, the local Chamber of Commerce does it for all the shops, the Naga National Council Chairman collects the same from the villagers and the District Education Officer (DEO) may be required to collect from all the teachers. The money is deposited with the regional self styled Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) or self styled Regional Chairman in case of the Khapsing faction. At places it is collected by the self styled Town Commissioners. Finally, it is forwarded to the NSCN (IM)’s ‘Chaple’ (Finance) Ministry to be further distributed per the approved budget after being audited by their so-called ‘Comptroller and Accountant General’s Office’. The ‘Chaple Ministry’ also sets region-wise targets for income for the financial year. In areas where the influence of a particular NSCN faction is less than control, the rates may be subject to certain negotiations.

NSCN (IM) has managed a pie in every conceivable business, from smuggling of the precious Burma Teak and poaching of rhinoceros in the Kaziranga National Park, to the running of Volo Coaches, which ply between major cities of the Northeast. It controls the border trade at Moreh in Chandel district of Manipur, which is a major trading point between India and Myanmar. Here, according to estimates, the formal income per year is Rupees 100 million while the informal trade is the tune of Rupees 20 billion³. The likely increase in the mobile penetration in the state is likely to be the next ‘sunrise sector’ for the NSCN factions. Many novel and rather amazing business models have been devised in their singular pursuit of greed. They have ‘forced partnerships’ in lucrative business houses- a self imposed business partner provides security and prevents ‘unauthorised outsiders’ while sharing the profit. No more counterfeited banknotes, expertise or capital investment is required. Therefore, a typical flourishing business in Nagaland is likely to have a local partner, who shows up to only pocket his share or is hurriedly contacted in case the lower rung cadres show up at the shop for some unauthorised collection.

Their participation in the drug trafficking is a well-known fact, though the NSCN factions try to conduct this trade in a hush-hush manner by parcelling consignments abroad through Bangladesh and Myanmar rather than routing them through the Indian cities. After Afghanistan, Myanmar is the world’s second largest producer of illicit opium, with whom India trades 1,640 kilometres of unfenced border. The drugs are sourced from the Heroin and Speed Pill laboratories of the drug syndicates in Tiddim and Sagaing divisions of Myanmar and along the Chinwin River, while opium and ganja are procured in bulk from producers through their middlemen. The proximity of the region to the golden triangle of Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand naturally adds this lucrative nano-trade. Drug consumption in the Northeast has reached endemic proportions but the underlying drug trade goes unchecked and almost unadorned. However, the pivotal role of NSCN factions in arms running and training of other insurgent groups of the region is rather well documented. Like MNAC, they believe in providing complete solutions for running insurgents to their esteemed clients; procurement of weapons, training of initial batches, logistic needs, ideological guidance, provisions of venture capital and catering for an umbrella organisation. NSCN (IM) had earlier formed an umbrella organisation called United Liberation Front of the Seven Sisters (ULFSS) in 1993, which was later reconstituted as Self Defence United Front of Southeast Himalayan Region (SDUFSHR) in November 1994. On other hand, NSCN (IM) had formed an umbrella organisation of the NSCN factions, Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) and People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) for several decades in Myanmar.

Consequent to the nurturing of new insurgencies, the NSCN factions often outsource extortion to these surrogate groups. In Tripura, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) have been armed and trained by NSCN (IM). In turn, they assist NSCN (IM) while transiting weapons and personnel to Bangladesh. In Assam, NSCN (IM) had armed and trained Dima Halam Doga (DHD) in the NC Hills. The DHD, fighting for the Dimas tribe, collaborates with NSCN (IM) in spite of the fact that their own areas of NC Hills and Karbi Anglong are within the map of NSCN (IM)’s Naglaim. In Assam again, NSCN (IM) has outsourced extortion activities to a lesser known group called United People Democracy Solidarity (UPDS) in return for training facilities and weapons.⁴ This surrogate group, which demands a separate state for the Karbis of Assam, has been armed and trained by NSCN (IM) as its rising in 1999. The Hmar Peoples Convention (HPC) is another surrogate group of NSCN (IM) in Mizoram. In Manipur too, the NSCN (IM) has forged ties with Kanglie Yawol Kuma Lup (KYKL), Zomi Reinfication Army (ZRA) and even few traditionally rival Kuki groups like United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) and Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA). These fledgling groups send their cadres to the training camps of NSCN (IM), which train them on a purely mercenary basis. In return for training and logistical support, NSCN (IM) demands a lion’s share of the extortion booty, sometimes as high as seventy to eighty per cent. This booty funds their vast military and civil wings, new recruitments, arms acquisitions, funding of front organisations and propaganda machines. Undisclosed amounts of funds are also channelled for running their offices in foreign locales and sponsoring jet-setting lavish lifestyles of many senior functionaries. As per a 2001 MEA report on Northeast militants, Th. Muivah, General Secretary of NSCN (IM), holds 124,550 shares, worth about US \$ 1,25,000, as an MNC in Ireland which is well known for its production of consumer goods. The linkages of the comparatively poorer NSCN (IM) are also evident; they have a marriage of convenience with United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), wherein they train ULFA cadres in their camps opposite the IB in Myanmar in return for money or weapons. As per the statement in January 2003 by NSCN (K) leader Zeluolu Angami, the group has also been providing armed training to the ULFA militant groups like ULFA, Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) and People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) for several decades in Myanmar.

The Global Trail

The foreign connections of the Naga insurgency date back to the 1950s when Naga Nationalist Council (NNC) was trying hard for recognition and support from the international community. They first succeeded in 1960 when A.Z. Phizo, with the help of Rev. Michael Scott, escaped to London via East Pakistan and Zurich. His popularity with the British press which printed stories of ‘Indian atrocities’ alarmed Pandit Nehru who then sought to negotiate with the moderate Nagas⁵. The NNC need not have tried so hard. The ethnic similarities with Myanmar and the geographical location of Nagaland itself invite a host of foreign influences.

The insurgent groups of Nagaland demonstrate a distinct ideological connection with the Peoples Republic of China. Terms like ‘Collective Leadership’, ‘cadres’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘Socialist Council’ and ‘Government of Peoples Republic of Naglaim (GPRN)’ point in only one direction. The gray black and white photographs of severities of the Naga insurgents posing with the Chinese officials against the Great Wall of China and Tiananmen Square confirm the direction. In February 2000, there were reports that NSCN (IM) had established a ‘full-fledged liaison office’ in Chinese territories opposite Arunachal Pradesh. In the same year, a crossed cheque for US \$ 50,000 from an NSCN (IM) front was encashed by a firm in Beijing for an arms consignment of automatic rifles and machine guns. There are recent media reports (of October 2007) of Yunnan province of China emerging as a centre for procurement of arms by the insurgent groups of Northeast⁶. But the official support from China has been on the wane since mid-eighties (ieca 1987) perhaps a quid pro quo for their not supporting any armed resistance of Tibetans. The historical visit of Shri Jagu Gandhi to China in 1988, which was famously termed as ‘Breaching the Wall’ by the media, cemented his unspoken understanding between the Dragon and the Elephant. Furthermore, in a Christian majority state, where the Church plays an important role, an atheist communism did not find favour with the Church. Moreover, as the ties between the two giant Asian neighbours grow, the wily insurgent groups of Nagaland have reconciled to take China from their current calculations.

The Naga insurgency is deeply intertwined with the dynamics in Myanmar. The state of Nagaland shares 242 kilometres long international boundary (IB) with Myanmar, wherein the tribals are allowed to freely cross over under the free border regime. In addition, the Naga-dominated districts of Tripura and Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh and Chandel in Manipur too share a long boundary with Myanmar. Myanmar’s territory opposite all these areas in the Northwest part of that country is a densely forested and isolated region, virtually unadministered by the Central authorities from Rangoon (Yangon). It is no wonder that the areas contiguous to the IB in Myanmar shelter many training and administrative camps of both the NSCN factions. The criticality of these camps is more in case of NSCN (K) as they have their command and control structures located there due to the pressure of the rival group in the state. Their connections also run deeper as their Chairman SS Khapsing is himself a Hmu (or Hmei) Naga from Myanmar. The faction, therefore, enjoys support from the Hmu and Paganet settlements in Myanmar.

Bangladesh is now the most favoured sanctuary of all the insurgent groups of India’s Northeast. Dhaka is a secular terror hub where the religion is insignificant and no so-called ‘slash of cultures’ takes place. Here a Hindu dominated United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and an essentially Christian NSCN (IM), which proclaims ‘Naglaim for Christ’, hobnob with Islamic terror groups and government spy agencies with homely ease. Its ports of Chittagong and Cox’s Bazaar are the preferred entry points for the arms shipments from the arms markets of Southeast Asia and the Cambodian counterfeit spyliov weapons. The largest training camp of NSCN (IM) too is based in the Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh⁷. Transit facilities for movement of arms and cadres are conveniently located at Sylhet in the north and Bandabaran near Chittagong in south of Bangladesh. These links are not a seasonal development; FGN had a base in Dhaka since the early sixties when it was part of East Pakistan and their self styled General Kato Sena led a group of rebels through Jaintia Hills to the adjacent areas of East Pakistan⁸. Presently, apart from maintaining safe houses, training camps and coordinating the move of arms and drug consignments, the ‘Aloo (Foreign) Government’ of NSCN (IM) is reportedly based in Bangladesh⁹. They maintain contacts with the Directorate General of Field Intelligence (DGFI) of Bangladesh and Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI). It was in Dhaka that Pakistan diplomats handed over more than one map to the NSCN (IM) in 1995-96, as confessed by their arrested self styled finance secretary Kharuph Hyahri. Bangladesh is also the safest induction route for the counterfeit Indian currency from Pakistan to India. It is the ubiquitous Bangla-connection which has made NSCN (IM) and ULFA go soft on the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, which was incidentally one of the ration d’ e of ULFA and the very start point of the anti-foreigners agitation in Assam.

In the last few decades, while the NSCN (K) has confined itself mainly to Myanmar, it is the NSCN (IM) which is going global. The NSCN (IM) had almost succeeded in internationalising the Naga issue. They maintain offices in Manila, Bangkok, Geneva and Amsterdam and rely on the ‘Christian factor’ and human rights related propaganda to entice support and funds. NSCN (IM) has formed various international front organisations like UK based Naga Vigil and Amsterdam based Naga International Support Group (NISG). They have managed to ropo prominent personalities like ex US President Jimmy Carter to espouse their cause. He, in June 2005, wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, encouraging him to move ahead to present an ‘acceptable solution’. Earlier, on 23 June 1993, dealing a major blow to India’s diplomatic efforts to isolate them internationally, NSCN (IM) was admitted as a member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) at Hague. It is also a member of the UN Working Group on Indigenous People (UNWIGIP). NSCN (IM) had earlier platform for anti-India propaganda when Isak Chishi Swu was allowed to address the UN Commission on Human Rights at Geneva on 24 April 1998. Predictably, the NSCN (IM) Chairman made full use of this opportunity. NSCN (IM) has also signed the ‘Deed of Commitment’ in October 2003 under Geneva Call, a Geneva based NGO for a total ban on anti-personal mines. These glossy actions are a bid by NSCN (IM) to equate itself with a government and gain some legitimacy. Sadly for them, the global perceptions on supporting terrorist movements; most of which were earlier called as freedom struggles, have undergone a paradigm shift post 9/11. This has undermined the NSCN (IM)’s attempts to put international pressure on India. But the international connections have not become completely irrelevant. NSCN (IM) sources weapons in Thailand which are then trans-shipped from southern Thailand via the Three Pagoda Pass opposite Karen state in Myanmar and later along the Rangoon coastline¹⁰. In spite of India’s diplomatic concerns, NSCN (IM) still runs its offices and administrative bases in Bangkok. On 19 Bangkok based tourist operator Rafiqque Khan, an ISI operative.

Religion has played its part. Pandit Nehru, an impeccably secular leader, conceded the same in a letter in 1952, wherein he stated that, ‘As India independence gradually approached, some of the British officers and Christian missionaries induced them to think in terms of ‘Naga Independence’¹¹. At the instance of Baptist Church leaders of North America, the celebration of 125th year of Christianity in Nagaland was organised in Atlanta in July-August 1997. All the insurgent factions were cordially invited for the same in an attempt to lure the rebels. The Hong Kong based Christian Conference of Asia and Geneva based World Council of Churches have also been contributing in keeping the Naga issue alive. The Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) and Council of Nagaland Baptist Churches (CNBC) receive considerable foreign donations. Kredsda, a Dutch Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) and England based Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, are showing keen interest in Nagaland and their representatives regularly visit the state. Both organisations have strong religious undertones.

The Past Becomes

The chequered history of the Naga insurgency is littered with abrogated ceasefires and failed accords. While the Naga-Akbar Hyalari Accord of June 1947 became ineffective due to the different interpretation of its last (ninth) paragraph, the Sixteen Point Agreement between the Naga Peoples’ Convention (NPC) and the GOI in July 1960, which resulted in the formation of the state of Nagaland in December 1963, failed to carry the underground and the hardliners along. For many, the Naga issue was finally resolved on 11 November 1975 with the signing of the Shillong Accord between the representatives of the underground organisations and Shri LP Singh, the then Governor of Nagaland. The Hyalari Agreement of 1947, signed by Sir Akbar Hydari, the then Governor of Assam with the Naga was discarded to the detriment of history because of ambiguous interpretation of its ninth clause by the Naga hardliners. The insurgent propaganda lists various out-of-context quotations from Mahatma Gandhi, supposedly given in his meeting with Naga delegation led by A.Z. Phizo on 19 July 1947 at Bhangi Colony in Delhi. A reading of the entire conversation, as recorded by Pyarelal, an associate of Mahatma Gandhi is sufficient to dismiss the gimmick¹⁶. They highlight the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) into its constituent republics but conveniently ignore the unification of Germany or the formation of the European Union (EU). The most current and perhaps the most glaring example of their shifting interpretation is the non-implementation of the CFGR.

A Fresh Perspective

In 1965, after extensive travels in Nagaland as a member of the Peace Mission, Shri Jayaprakash Narayan, had argued in his pamphlet called ‘Nagaland mein Shanti ka Prayas’ (The Prospects for Peace in Nagaland) that there was a civilisational union in India which antedates its political unity¹⁷. Understandably, in a multi-cultural and secular society like India, mere ethnic diversity should be the last cause for secession. The ideological basis of the Naga insurgency is a carefully crafted myth which revolves against the basic foundations of the Indian Union. Their claims are replete with inherent contradictions. All of them claim in their propaganda that the Nagas have never been conquered. The recorded history begs to differ. After putting Assam under their control by the Treaty of Yandabon in 1826, the British had turned their attention to the troublesome Naga areas, which were the origin of fleeing raids to the adjoining tea gardens of Assam. A ‘Forward Policy’ was adopted and in next few years, a number of expeditions were launched, many with assistance from the Manipuri troops, to complete the conquest of Nagaland. Interestingly, these years were also the first blood for the Assam Rifles in dealing with the Nagas, which as then Cachar Levy launched the first expedition under Mr Grange in the Angami Naga areas in 1839. Later, towards the close of 1878, a formal decision was also taken to gradually extend British authority over ‘all independent tribes’. In their own confirmation of this fact, when the Simon Commission came to India in 1929, the Naga Club, a forerunner to the NNC, submitted a memorandum at Kohima in January 1929, wherein they requested to be left out from the proposed reform scheme of India and preferred ‘direct administration under British.’. Quite simply, since India inherited the British ruled India, this area was a natural inclusion as per the provisions of the Indian Independence Act, 1947.

Furthermore, the basic unit or entity of the Nagas has always been a village. There has never any bigger political entity or any semblance of a kingdom. Fierce inter-tribal rivalry, inter-village rivalry and even intra-village rivalry (among different kheels of village) with the associated practice of headhunting caused no deviations. There was no unified dialect or homogeneous administrative system. Other features of political communalism like common currency / coinage or common laws were also simply absent. Therefore, unlike the numerous princely states which still had an option to secede, and the possibility of coercion or manipulation with its subsequent historical versions, the Nagas are on a non-existent historical and political foundation for their rebellion. Sending telegram of independence to the UN on 14 August 1947¹⁸ and its clear acknowledgment by the UN does not constitute a ground for secession.

Even the anthropological position is not clearly defined. Till late fifties, the word Naga, which is of the 1920s origin, was resented by most tribes who preferred to be known by their own names. With the rise in political consciousness caused by the propaganda of NNC, they began sufficing Naga to the name of the tribe as a concession. The consensus on the number of tribes which can be classified as Nagas on the basis of certain common traits has not yet been reached. The claims of the anthropologists, British historians, government records, insurgent groups and the tribes themselves are at considerable variance. Even A.S. Shimray, in his pro-NSCN (IM) book ‘Let Freedom Ring, Story of Naga Nationalism’, lists 40 Naga tribes and states that investigation is still on to ascertain the exact number of Naga tribes¹⁸. But the numbers have swelled as they are the most politically conscious and visible tribal group, and have attracted certain tribes which earlier belonged to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group. The number of tribes which consider themselves as Nagas may further increase, if they manage to extract more concessions from the GOI.

Therefore, though it is devoid of any historical, anthropological or political sanction, the core issue as propagated here has always been the ‘fundamental resistance to integration with India’. The NSCN factions have not yet given up on this rhetoric. The basic thread of their argument is that Nagaland was never a part of India and therefore, the question of cessation or independence is per se meaningless. Their logic appealed to many Nagas who were till then indoctrinated due to the British adopting a policy of non-interference in their tribal matters. It is another story that the British adopted this policy as they found Naga Hills unproductive. It is yet another story that India too intended to leave, and indeed has left their tribal matters untouched. Thus, it was neither mismanagement, neglect or step-motherly treatment by the Union Government, nor was it brutal repression, religious divide or issues like rigging of elections, which precipitated the commencement of an armed resistance in Nagaland. The differences here went much deeper than Jammu and Kashmir – but they never caught the media limelight.

Many experts are hopeful about the weakening of the insurgent’s ability to fight the security forces after a prolonged ceasefire. It is true that most of the new recruits joining the NSCN factions’ rank and file have monetary rather than ideological considerations. It shall also be correct to state that the heady days of the insurgency with hostiles ‘living-off the land’ in thick jungles are past. The cadres now are used to a comfortable town life with modern amenities. Many of their Designated Camps have electricity and cable TV connections. There is a sharp decline in the discipline with most cadres resorting to petty extortion, the proceeds of which are pocketed. In a token attempt to check the corruption in their rank and file, NSCN (IM) had even opened a so-called ‘National Bureau of Intelligence’. However this decline in the jungle-bred guerrilla fighting ability and substitution of ideology by greed is not an end in itself. It may prove counter-productive in the long run. There is nothing to prevent the insurgency shifting its epicentre to the urban areas from the jungles and counties of Nagaland. The Naga insurgency is no less deadly. Similarly, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that corruption weakens insurgency. The insurgent groups prefer to keep the pot boiling even when most of their ideological demands have been rendered irrelevant by changed circumstances – merely to fund their lifestyles (read vices). Corruption also prevents a smooth transition to any political process, wherein the insurgents prefer status quo rather than to face voters to seek a mandate.

Today, the losses of the nineties have been largely made up by the NSCN factions. Still, the NSCN factions are in no state to resume the bush-war. In July 2001, the government rolled back its month-old decision to extend the ceasefire ‘without territorial limits’ due to violent protests in Manipur. The provocation and the opportunity were evident. But in spite of being stung by this major policy volte face of the GOI on the issue of Nagalim, NSCN (IM) did not ‘go back to the jungles’, as they routinely threaten. It only wait to have been suicidal for them to do so. But they can continue this policy posturing as luckily for them, their bluff is unlikely to be called-off by the GOI which already has enough terrorist incidents, insurgents and Naxalites to handle. Since the peace process is now irreversible, the only way left is forward. The violent history and the deep deficit between the two sides have definitely going to cast its negative shadow on the forward movement of the peace process. However, for any political solution to last, both the sides have to jettison the past. As writes Amartya Sen in The Argumentative Indian, ‘While we cannot live without history, we need not live within it either’.

The Peace Dividend

In Nagaland, after bloodshed for decades, ceasefire has been simply addictive. The once deep-rooted sympathy for the insurgent groups, wherein the people termed them as ‘national workers’ and willingly contributed, is now on the wane. The Nagas instead now aspire to share the rising prosperity of an emerging India. They wish to emulate the economic turnaround of Mizoram, which commenced after the Mizos abandoned a 20 years old insurgency. In fact, the economic aspirations of the comparatively smarter Nagas are much more as their benchmarks are Singapore and Thailand. In commerce, in spite of extortion notes, in banking and revival plans for sick industrial units are underway. Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC), after pulling out of Nagaland in 1994 due to threats and extortion demands is back with Canadian collaboration as Canoro-ONGC for commencement of exploration in a potentially oil-rich state.

The per-capita income and literacy rates are steadily rising. The girls now aspire to become an housewives and call-centre executives rather than unwillingly feed and nurse Mahala-baystered-insurgents whose erstwhile ‘guerrilla glamour’ has given way to greed. The respite from violence has seen shops, which used to be shut by 2 PM, open till late evening and people stroll on the streets. Ladies, clad in designer, sleek mobile phones and gaudy Malindi-Scarves can be seen in the remote interiors of the state. A recent spate of MTV style rock shows, band concerts and competitions like Naga Idol are a big hit in this culturally westernised state whose youth identifies themselves more with Jim Morrison and Ernesto Che Guevara rather than Sonu Nigam and Bhagat Singh. That too is now changing. In a small, yet significant symbol of cultural integration, Akumou Khezhie from Nagaland was declared the winner of the Femina Fema Fest and Sony My Miss India surlines in the recent Pantaloons Femina Miss India Contest.

For a political solution to be successful, there are certain pre-requisites. The insurgent groups have to realise that the peace dividend is much more than the conflict dividend. The people have already realised the same but in an area where insurgency was a part of the childhood and growing up, they are yet to find a voice in form of the gun-toting cadres. Nevertheless, the overwhelming public option in favour of ceasefire has ensured its repeated extensions. All the involved parties including NSCN (K) and FGN factions have to be a part of the peace process and the political solution. More importantly, they must be able to bury their internal differences in a common formula and carry it through among the populace. For that they have to secure the support of the people without the force of the gun. The present status quo may attract in the short term, with easy money and zero accountability towards the people, but they cannot keep on fighting ‘staggering’ battles for long. As a warning of this to come, the backlashes against NSCN (IM)’s arrogance and extortion squeezes have commenced, on 22 April 2007, a large mob of about 5,000 people attacked and destroyed the Wunguan Colony in Dimapur, home to several NSCN (IM) leaders.

The age of the ‘angry young Naga’ is over, not much unlike the decline of the Bollywood’s angry young man of the seventies. The people’s attitude is already on the horizon. But the once denied insurgent groups too require a safe and comfortable exit or ‘honourable solution’ as they ambiguously term it. The acceptability component is the key here. For every climbdown by the insurgent groups, the reciprocation from the Union government has always been quick. A statehood, granted in spite of serious reservations on the financial viability of the state and the clear acknowledgment by the UN does not constitute a ground for secession.

370 A of the constitution are already in place since 1963. Under this article, the Nagaland state continues to enjoy special rights and privileges, particularly with reference to customary tribal laws and land ownership. Furthermore, all laws passed by the Indian Parliament are required to be ratified by the Nagaland Assembly for them to be effective in Nagaland. Indeed, when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru stated in Lok Sabha on 01 August 1960 while announcing the decision to create the new state of Nagaland – ‘Nagass are as independent as any other Indian citizen’, he was not far from reality.

The government has gone even further. The GOI, in a Joint Communique issued from Amsterdam on 11 July 2002, had recognised the ‘unique history’ of the Nagas. On 26 November 2002, the Centre allowed the ban on NSCN (IM) to lapse, paving the way for Th. Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu to resume negotiations. They flew on a private passport, but they did not want to pay for it. Their worst nightmare is being assigned the streets label of ‘some misgans’ on an time and all-encompassing favourite euphemism of Indian policy makers. At the same time, the fatality of violent means has been taken to a haler, the absence of any charismatic second-rung leaders in both the factions will put them against the wall when the time runs out. In fact, in NSCN (IM) the next important leaders after Th. Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu viz. R.H. Raising, Convener of Securing Committee and V.S. Atem, Special Envoys to Collective Leadership are complex hardliners who oppose any solution within the Indian Constitution. But in spite of their rhetoric, it will essentially be more money and more autonomy that shall constitute the solution. In the present circumstances, this may require some alterations to the Indian Constitution to satisfy their aspirations, unless of course organisations or political parties, more representative of the people, emerge on the scene making these insurgent groups irrelevant. The Union Government may also rename Nagaland as Naglaim, without altering any boundaries, as another concession. In this complex game of realpolitik, only one fact emerges as certain – Any further indecision can only promote an uneasy peace.

Conclusion

The NSCN factions still retain some ideological moorings and unlike most of the other insurgent or terrorist groups operating on Indian soil, have not become complete slaves to the dictates of ISI. They fear the sheer resilience of the Indian state, wherein after six decades of violence has seen nothing but the steady rise of the GOI. Their worst nightmare is being assigned the streets label of ‘some misgans’ on an time and all-encompassing favourite euphemism of Indian policy makers. At the same time, the fatality of violent means has been well understood by their ageing senior hierarchy. Indeed when a tired Th. Muivah reportedly said ‘Let us have a solution in our lifetime’, much was conveyed. This senior hierarchy; even as they preside over a systemic criminalisation of insurgency, understand that they cannot forever remote-control the insurgency from foreign continents despite handsome doles to the execution level operatives. They also understand that the current ceasefire, however uneasy, is nevertheless a fragile bridge between the Union Government and the NSCN factions. This bridge crumbles on one to the Indian Constitution to satisfy their aspirations, unless of course organisations or political parties, more representative of the people, emerge on the scene making these insurgent groups irrelevant. The Union Government may also rename Nagaland as Naglaim, without altering any boundaries, as another concession. In this complex game of realpolitik, only one fact emerges as certain – Any further indecision can only promote an uneasy peace.

But sometimes the lion must roar, just to remind the horse of his fear. After all, the commitment of the government to work towards peace is to the people of Nagaland and not to the insurgents. The urgent need of the hour is to strengthen the CFGR and its monitoring mechanism to confine the NSCN factions to their designated camps. The delinking of extortion from insurgency is now not an option, but a necessity as this illegitimate extortion is a new conflict in its infancy. The use of force, as an option may be retained. Later, as and when the GOI and the NSCN factions walk the extra mile to converge on a pragmatic solution, one of the bloodiest chapters on insurgency in India may finally come to an end. The closing of this chapter will initiate a domino effect on other Northeastern insurgencies, which may find it difficult to operate and the deep deficit between the two sides are definitely going to cast its negative shadow on the forward movement of the peace process. The understanding of this volatile cocktail is important to comprehend the dynamics of a protracted insurgency. The future of the ceasefire and the results of the ongoing peace talks will also have a profound impact on the stability of the entire Northeast region and could fundamentally alter our concepts of engaging and containing other terror movements.

Major Shailender Singh Arya is a member of the Regiment of Artillery and is presently serving with 303 Assam Rifles. He was also the winner of the USI Gold Medal Essay Competition 2006 in Group B.

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