



IMAGINARY HOMELAND AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: A STUDY ON THE NAGA-ADIVASI CONFLICT

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Abstract: Northeast India is an abode of multiple ethnic groups having diverse and distinctive socio-cultural features. Such cultural diversity often lends colour and flavour to the North-eastern domain but also, unfortunately, turns it into a hotbed of violence and conflicts. The Naga tribe is a dominant tribe of the Northeast that owns Nagaland and cherishes the dream of greater *Nagalim* (their imaginary homeland). This concept of homeland often spreads antagonism among the Nagas and other communities who are located in the bordering states. The idea of *Nagalim* is fabricated in such a manner that it comprises land belonging to the neighbouring states like Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur, and consequently an unending conflict with the bordering states of their imaginary homeland continues. Several issues and reasons centered around this idea of homeland often give rise to conflicts. The most important causes among them are territory, power, identity, and resources.

Keywords: ethnic identity, tribal-non-tribal, territorial dispute, *Nagalim*, ethnic conflict.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle”

- Karl Marx

Historically speaking ethnic conflict between two or more groups of people is an old phenomenon. The conflict has become part and parcel of human existence in this world and, as such, a permanent solution to this problem seems to be almost an impossible task. India is a multi-ethnic world that provides a home to various tribes, this region is highly sensitive and its history is full of ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts till the beginning of the 21st century. Particularly the ethnic conflicts in the Northeastern part of India can be traced back to the 1950s when ethnic identity movements were launched – sometimes, by tribal communities and, sometimes, by non-tribals on the issue of religion, language, ‘sons of the soil’ and foreign nationals, ethnic separatism, migration, etc. Non-tribal people are settled in the plains and the tribal people are settled both in the plains and hills. Compared to the other parts of India the North-eastern region of India has demonstrated intense cases of ethnic conflict or unrest that occurred frequently and took a heavy toll on human life and property. The Naga is a dominant tribe of Northeast India who owns Nagaland and cherishes the dream of greater *Nagalim* (their imaginary homeland) that comprises areas beyond the borders of Nagaland their existing homeland. This concept of *Nagalim* often spreads antagonism among the Nagas and other communities who are located in the bordering states. The territorial idea of *Nagalim* is fabricated in such a manner that it comprises land belonging to the neighbouring states like Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar consequently an unending conflict with the bordering states of their imaginary homeland continues. Several issues and reasons centred around this idea of homeland often give rise to conflicts.

This article is based on a field study conducted on the Adivasi-Naga conflict that took place in 2014. Along with this, some of the important conflicts that took place among the Nagas and other neighbouring ethnic groups are taken into account. The discussion tends to understand the question, why conflict situation arises between the Nagas and other neighbouring communities across borders at repeated intervals of time?

II. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design was used to understand the nature, type, causes, and impact of the Naga-Adivasi conflict. The data for the study consisted of field responses collected from the families of the conflict-affected villages in the Assam-Nagaland border areas of Dhansiri Sub-division in Assam. The universe of the study comprises 16 villages affected by the conflict in the

border areas, namely, Jahaji Gaon, Kamalpur, Kempur, Majgaon, No. 1 Chainpur, No. 2 Chainpur, No. 1 Chetia Gaon, and No. 2 Chetia Gaon, No. 2 Bilgaon, No. 2 Santipur, No. 3 Santipur, Rajapukhuri, Rani Pukhuri, Ratanpur, Roman Basti and Chukanjan. The family has been taken as the unit of the study for the collection of data. However, the primary data have also been collected from political leaders, student leaders, and people belonging to the neighboring villages based on interview schedules, informal interviews, and case studies which are very helpful in revealing the truth about the conflict between the Naga and Adivasi communities. To collect the field data, a structured interview schedule has administered to the 10 % of families from the villages. Besides, informal interviews of political leaders, student leaders, and police personnel have been used to derive an understanding of the situation as well as a cross-sectional view. The study has used mostly qualitative data. Therefore, it has followed the methods of qualitative and interpretative analyses. Besides, quantitative data collected from the field and documents are used to analyze by using percentages from a comparative perspective. On the whole, the data have been analyzed by the **cultural pluralist** approach. There are other theoretical perspectives such as Marxist perspective, primordial approach, constructionist approach, instrumentalist approach, and relative deprivation that also help in understanding the conflicts in Northeast India.

III. TERRITORIAL DISPUTE AND NAGA VIOLENCE

3.1 Historical Background of Naga Violence

To get a glimpse of the Assam-Nagaland border turmoil, we need to go back to the time when India was under British rule. The entire conflict started in the year 1866 when a separate district in the name of “Naga Hills District” was formed. In this district later in the year 1963 a new state “Nagaland” was carved out of Assam. But the most important matter of concern was that neither the British Government before independence nor the Indian Government post-independence took any concrete measures to mark the boundary of Assam and Nagaland in practicality, rather it was done only in terms of official paper documents. Though the “Sundaram Committee” marked the Assam-Nagaland border Nagaland never accepted the committee’s recommendations (Borah, 2017).

According to the notification of the then British Government, in 1925, it was notified that A B C, and D sector along with the forest reserve around the Assam-Nagaland border was allotted to Assam. This very notification of the then British Government is regarded as the main issue of the conflict. If we peep into History then we can see that the undivided Assam went under the rule of the British in the year 1826 by the Yandaboo Treaty. In the plain areas of the undivided Assam, various Tribes made their habitat and the Naga tribe inhabited the Hills of Assam. With great effort, the British were about to rule the Nagas by forming a separate administrative unit in the name of the Naga Hills District. In the notification that came on the 15th of November, 1866, it was stated that – “It is hereby notified that, with the sanction of the Government of India, the Lieutenant Governor has been pleased to abolish the Sub-Division of North Cachar in Assam and to constitute a separate district, consisting of that part of the district of Nowgaon which lies on the right bank of the river Doyang. The name of the district will, for the present be the Naga Hills, and its headquarters will be Samoogooting. It will be administered by a Deputy Commissioner of Assam” (Jeyaseelan, Lazar, 2008).

On the 28th of June, 1875, the British Government circulated another notification in which they identified some mistakes in regards to the formation of the Naga Hills District. But during that time the government was seen devoting much time to the establishment and development of the Assam Tea Industry. The seeds of conflict were sown when some forest areas started to be annexed to Naga Hills District and consequently, the administration thought about solving this border dispute. Consequently, the border went on changing time and again but the permanent settlement of border dispute did not materialize. In 1913, Dimapur was annexed into Naga Hills District and in the year 1925 (25th November), new decisions were taken regarding the border issue as per notification no. 3102. R. This notification is based on the survey conducted by the British Authority in the year 1916 and 1923 and interestingly in this notification; there is no mention of fixation of the border regarding hills, rivers, or streams. On the contrary, some pillars were constructed for the sake of determining borders but afterward such pillars were destroyed willingly. But the permanent border that was designed based on this notification is also not properly visible. There was no change of border till the year 1947.

Under the leadership of A. Z. Phizo, NNC raised the demand for independent Nagaland in the year 1947. Before this, in the year 1918, the Naga Club was formed by Government service holders and the village headman. On 16th January 1929, the Naga Club put before Simon Commission, their demand for independent Nagaland. In the memorandum submitted by the Naga Club, it has been clearly stated that- “You are only people who have ever conquered us and when you go, we should be as we are”. In May 1947 the Commission signed the Sri Akbar Hydari (Governor of Assam) nine-point Charter.

The Naga Armed struggle started in 1947 and after this outbreak of violent struggle, the NNC was banned. After the outbreak of armed struggle, the peace process was also started by Government authority and as such, some members of NNC came forward abiding by the constitution to establish peace. The first sitting of the “Naga Peoples’ Convention” was held in 1957. On 21 May 1958, the first demand was raised by the “Naga People’s Convention” for the formation of the Nagaland state. Finally, on 1 December 1963 Nagaland was formed. On 30th January 1980, the Nagas formed the organization ‘NSCN’ and this organization has taken the course of “Unrepresented Nations and Peoples’ Organization” (UNPO) in 1993 and established this issue of ‘independence’ at an international level. As the borders of the newly formed Nagaland, the earlier set boundaries of Naga Hills District and Naga Tribal Area were accepted. On the other hand, another armed struggle appeared among the Nagas where along with Nagaland, some areas of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal, and Myanmar were taken together to mean *Nagalim*. In brief, the dispute began from the time when the administration decided to include some of the forest lands in the Naga Hills District (Jeyaseelan, Lazar, 2008).

3.2 The Conflicts Before 2014

In the study areas, initially, the conflicts emerged in sectors A, B, C, and D, under Golaghat district which is a reserve forest area under the Bengal Forest Act 1878. These areas were free from any encroachment till 1947. Till then only forest villagers were

allowed for tree plantation and their maintenance. Four forest villages, Merapani, Saudangpathar, Kasomari, and Amguri were established in Doyang Reserved Forests in 1905 and a few more lately at Uriamghat in Rengma Reserved Forest and M.V. Chungajan in Nambor South. No other settlement has been recorded till 1947. As a result of the Naga peace talks, some militants of the hill state surrendered before the Central Government which accorded them permission to set up villages in Diphu, Nambor South, and Rengma reserve forests. Some major incidents have taken place between 1979 and 2014. The major conflicts are mentioned below (Jeyaseelam 2008).

The Chungajan Carnage took place on 5th January 1979 in which 54 villagers were killed and 39 injured, 467 huts were burnt down and about 23,500 persons who were displaced took shelter in 13 relief camps. In the *Armed Conflict of Merapani* (4-6 June 1985), 96 villages and 7,607 families were affected in the Merapani area. Besides, schools, temples, mosques, office buildings, quarters, rice mills, oil depots, shops, bridges, and vehicles were destroyed and damaged. 28 police personnel and 13 civilians lost their lives in different parts of the Golaghat district. *The Massacre of Rajapukhuri* took place on 7th April 1989 at Rajapukhuri village under Sarupathar Police Station in Sector-B of the Dhansiri Sub-division in the Golaghat district. Tension was built up in the area as Hokai Sema demanded the withdrawal of Muslim families from the villages. According to official records, the death toll was 25. Besides, 15 persons were injured and 178 houses were burnt down (Jeyaseelam 2008). *The Dimasa-Hmar (Naga) conflict* emerged in the Cachar and Dima Hasao districts of Assam in March-May 2009 where 11,737 persons were displaced, 66 lives were lost from both communities, and 21 were injured and more than 500 houses were burnt down. The Hmars and Dimasas have been living together in these areas for several decades. The conflict was led by two rebel groups: namely, NSCN (I-M) and DHD. The NSCN-IM instigated the Hmars and as a result, three important members of the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) were abducted by cadres of NSCN (I-M) which was an earlier ally of Dimasa. There are two main causes of conflict between Hmar and Dimasa; viz., (i) the NSCN (I-M) had demanded greater tax on the extortion booty collected by both the rebel groups (NSCN-IM and HPC-D from the Dimasa inhabited areas and (ii) another reason for the bitterness is the DHD's claim over Dimapur as their ancient capital which was under the areas of 'Dimaraji'. The first act of violence took place on March 3, 2003, when Dimasa militants kidnapped three Hmar farmers. Again, on March 5, 2003, armed Dimasas attacked two Hmar villages in the North Cachar Hills district where 800 Hmars fled their homes and moved to Lakhipur, a place on the Assam-Manipur border. Again, on 26th March, the Dimasa insurgency group started a fresh attack on some Hmar villages and ordered the Hmar community to leave North Cachar Hills district. These attacks and counter-attacks led to the massacre. Besides the claim of 'homeland', there are some other issues related to this conflict: the problem of land alienation—a pattern of change from tribal community ownership of land from jhum cultivation to private ownership for settled agriculture and another cause had a religious dimension, i.e., the Hmars are mostly Christians and the Dimasas are Hindus (Borah 2017:61). *Naga-Kuki Conflict* took place during the period from 1992 to 2000. In Nagaland, the Nagas are the dominant ethnic group comprising sub-groups like Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiamnungan, Konyak, Liangmei, Rongmei, Zemi, etc. The Kukis and other ethnic groups are also living in Nagaland. The ethnic conflict in Nagaland is an ongoing process, particularly with the neighboring states of Assam and Manipur on the issues related to border and territory (H. Sivananda 2011: 13-16). The Naga-Kuki conflict which broke out in the early part of 1992 in Moreh under the Chandel district of Manipur continued till 2000 because of the involvement of insurgency groups of both the Naga and Kuki communities. As a consequence of this conflict, 5724 houses were destroyed, 15,000 persons were displaced and 1000 persons were killed. The Naga and Kuki are the two major tribal groups in hill areas of Manipur and the Kuki-Chin migrated to this region over a long period of three centuries. Such immigration leads to demographic imbalance, competition, clashes of interests, and animosity over the sharing of land and resources. According to the United Naga Council (UNC) and other Naga organizations, the demand for the creation of a separate revenue district for the Kukis as their homeland and the constitution of Sadar Hill Autonomous District under the North East Reorganization Act of 1971 by the Kukis has been the root cause of the Naga-Kuki conflict (Phukan 2004:157-159). *The Meitei-Naga conflict* occurred on 18th June 2001 in Manipur. The Nagas resented that the Meitei always discriminated against them and the development schemes were only centered in and around the Imphal valley areas. On the other hand, the Meitei opined that Manipur belonged to all ethnic groups and they did not recognize anyone ethnic groups like Naga, Kuki, or Meitei. The Naga's desire for integration with greater *Nagalim* and the Meiteis' determination to preserve the territorial integrity of Manipur are the causes of conflict between these ethnic groups. Besides, the emergence of ethnic identity assertion in both communities also makes the situation precarious. The conflict started when the central government extended the ceasefire to the Naga insurgency group, NSCN (IM), yet they could move all over the Naga inhabited territories. In the case of Manipur, about one-third of the state's population belongs to Naga and other tribal groups and they were allowed to move into the state. The Meitei people who are in majority in the valley areas felt threatened. It resulted in conflict, deaths, and destruction (Borah 2017:60).

IV. THE NAGA-ADIVASI CONFLICT

The Adivasi were originally workers at tea estates of Assam. They settled in these Assam-Nagaland border areas in the year 1964-65 to do agriculture and settle permanently. According to Nagas, in the 1960s, the forest area was cleared by the Naga ancestors and then the plain land was prepared for agriculture by different communities. Since the Nagas were not proficient in ploughing the land, the Adivasi community was requested to plough the land as tenants. The benefit-sharing was a mutually agreed-upon 50% of the crop share for both the tenants and the landowners. But with time, things changed and the Adivasi groups stopped giving the crop share to the Nagas. This entire conflict is rooted in the land struggle of the landowners and the tenants. The Nagas demand their fair share of crops as landowners and the Adivasi community denies them that share. The inter-ethnic conflict that took place between the Adivasi and the Lotha Naga in July 2014 was changing its shape and spill over from individual dispute to inter-ethnic conflict; inter-ethnic conflict to border dispute; and border dispute to mob violence (WinGo, India, 2014).

4.1. Root Causes of the Conflict

The Root Causes of the Conflict that were lurking in the background and preparing an economic and political platform for the outburst of the violent conflict between two communities are as follows:

4.1.1 Border Issue and Greater Nagalim

On the Nagaland side, Telephonic interaction with the NSCN leader by a group of the “Women in Governance, India”, informed that “...there was no such decision to carry out arson in these villages bordering Assam. However, the NSCN leader apprehends that some group members may be involved in their capacities. Therefore, the NSCN statement “may be involved in their individual capacity” indicates that the Naga militant group was involved in this massacre. The NSCN has been working on the imaginary homeland of the *Greater Nagalim* and the ‘B’ sector is also a part of *Greater Nagalim*. Moreover, in the field observation, proof of the involvement of the Nagaland Government could also be traced because after the conflict the Naga police were measuring land for the construction of a police station on the Assam side. Besides, encroaching on the forest plains’ land is the goal of the Naga people, because the hills are not suitable for settled cultivation, and also the plain areas are sources of income from oil, natural gas, etc. (P.K. Borah 2017:61).

4.1.2 Huge Stock of Illegal Weapons

The Naga militant persists due to a lack of political will on the part of the Nagaland government. “Mainstream Naga politicians do not want insurgency to end because once the action is taken against the militia leaders, they would compete with them in politics and the militant groups have a huge stock of weapons.

4.1.3 Searching Land for Settle Cultivation

During the survey of the Naga village Mugavi (Golaghat, Assam) an interesting phenomenon comes forward although the Nagas have started to settle in the plain areas for convenience, they are not proficient in ploughing the muddy land. They have traditionally inhabited the hills. After clearing the forests, the Nagas hired the Adivasi community from neighbouring villages to cultivate the land. In some places, immigrant Muslims were also hired to cultivate their fields.

4.1.4 Naga Traditional Discourse

The issues of such conflicts are very often centred around sentiments like ‘sons of the soil’, foreign nationals, migration, religion, language, culture, etc., and conflicts emerge demanding of ‘autonomous council’, separate ‘statehood’, etc. to protect their ‘homeland’, and other resources. Consequently, the inter-ethnic relations and their structures have undergone drastic changes over time. The sense of relative deprivation is likely to emanate from a sub-group that acknowledges differences in terms of dialect and culture from the other sub-groups they believe to dominate their sub-group. When this sense of relative deprivation is sustained for long and becomes acute, the aggrieved sub-group will emerge with vocabularies and narratives of differences despite their earlier belief in a common origin, language and culture. The Nagas are having a unique way of living that differentiate them from other communities. Their village houses are close to each other and their lands use to stretch far away from their home. Therefore, it is very vulnerable to encroachment. Some forest lands encompassing large areas belong to them and when other people try to clear those forest areas conflict arises such conflict often takes violent forms and territorial disputes.

4.1.5 Kidnapped two Adivasi Students

This individual tension transformed gradually into inter-ethnic conflict after missing two Adivasi students, named Sri Filson Kujur and Sri Ajay Garh on 26th July 2014. Many organizations protested and raised demands to find out the missing students. Besides these protests, the Adivasi villagers went to the Chetia gaon 155 CRPF camp and surround the camp. On the other side, on behalf of the Naga people, a group of Naga people with weapons were hiding about 200 meters away from the camp and started firing on protesters. There are recurring clashes over land and villagers producing grains were asked to pay taxes to armed groups. Initially, the tax was in the form of grains harvested and the amount kept on increasing from time to time. And the conflict-ridden areas were one of the important fields of NSCN to collect taxes through which they run their organization. The Naga villagers believe that the situation has become more sensitive due to the involvement of ALNA, an Adivasi militant group that has instigated the humble Adivasi tenants not to give their share to Naga people in the individual dispute turned into ethnic conflict. On the other hand, the NSCN came forward and the Naga violence took place from 12 July 2014 in 16 villages under “B” forest sector of Dhansiri Sub-division. 11 persons were killed, 726 houses were burnt down and countless household properties were destroyed by Naga people.

Further, the conflict took the shape of mob violence on 20th August 2014. An economic blockade was organized by various organizations against the Uriamghat conflict and there was a big rally from Rangajan to Golaghat Town to march to the S.P. Office or D.C. Office at Golaghat, but when they reached the Erengapar Chariali at Golaghat, police firing started and one boy died in that incident. The peaceful demonstrations which took place near the Rangajan area suddenly turned violent with stone-pelting and Adivasi communities coming out in large numbers with bows and arrows. Some officials also sustained minor injuries during the stone-pelting incident. The state officials shared that the mob could not be controlled without any violent intervention. Instigation done by some people turned the protesters into a mob that needed violent controlling agents. Hence the security forces open fired and 4 protesters were killed in police firing (WinGo,2014).

4.1.6 Individual Land Dispute

Initially, a land dispute occurred between two persons, namely, Mr. Simon Sama (Adivasi) and Mr. Ekonthung Lotha (Naga). Both communities’ members claimed the possession of a plot of land and several negotiations remained inconclusive. On 28th July 2014, an ADC level meeting was held at the sector headquarters “B” sector, Rengapani to discuss this land dispute. This meeting was attended by 21/C 155 BN CRPF, ADC Golaghat, ADC Bhandari, SP (Border) Nagaland, Additional SP Golaghat, SDO (Civil) Sarupathar and Relan, Border Magistrate Nagaland and Assam, SDPO Sarupathar and Bhandari, Sector A&B Sector Commander and public of both sides. In this meeting, four decisions were taken by both states to maintain peace in the border area. Mr. Lotha will allow Mr. Sama to cultivate the land on a sharing basis for 1 year. The tenancy term may be extended subject to the satisfaction over the deal. Mr. Lotha will erect a temporarily thatched shed for cultivation in the plot of land during the

cultivation period. They will maintain peace and harmony and will not resort to any unlawful activities. If anyone violates the term, sector commander CRPF, SDPO Sarupathar, and Bhandari will take action as per the law. (WinGo, India, 2014; Nazimuddin Siddique, 2014).

As a result of this inter-ethnic conflict, it has already been mentioned that 11 persons were killed and 8 persons were injured. The Adivasi people of the area lost all their properties and 726 houses were burnt down, many cattle, food grains, vehicles, rice mills, household staff, and cash were destroyed. Paddy was burnt in their storage. About 10,000 people from 16 villages were displaced. The displaced people were temporarily settled in different schools and public halls. Education of the children is adversely affected as around 18 schools are converted into relief camps and are closed for about three weeks (Nazimuddin Siddique, 2014; WinGo, 2014; Borah, 2014).

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, to conclude, we need to say that in Northeast India one cannot find a single pattern or particular type of conflict or a specific issue responsible for the outbreak of conflict. These conflicts are diverse and the issues involved in them are also of varied types. Moreover, in some instances of conflict one can notice an amalgamation of various issues and characteristics in a single conflict. Some of the most important issues responsible for the outbreak of ethnic conflicts in Northeast India are – cultural differences and ethnic identity, resources, power, and territory or border disputes. The Naga's conflict with other ethnic groups is also provoked by sensitive issues related to their identity consciousness, utilization of resources, striving for autonomy or power, territorial disputes, and so on.

One of the study's major limitations is that it is difficult to collect data from insurgency groups since it involves life risks. All conflicts in Northeast India still have not been studied empirically. More research in this area will certainly open up new dimensions and thereby put forward solutions to such problems.

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