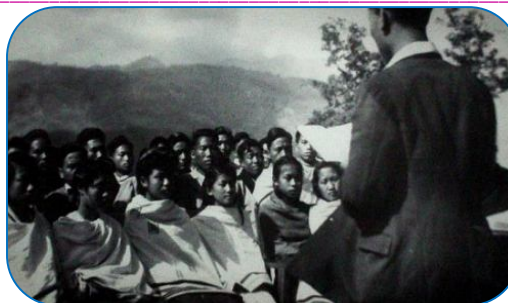




IDENTITY POLITICS IN POST-COLONIAL ASSAM: A STUDY OF NAGA IDENTITY POLITICS

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ABSTRACT:

India became an independent sovereign state, after experiencing prolonged 200 years of British colonial rule in 1947. The homogenization of Indian national identity after independence marked the beginning of identity politics. Before the advent of British rule, the primary units of identity among the Nagas were the clan, family and village. Certain factors like the Naga's Traditional Self Governing Institutions to which the Nagas were only loyal, Government of India Act of 1935 which designated the Naga Hills district as an 'excluded area' with an Inner Line Regulation were perhaps the first stages of Naga Identity formation. The Nagas became part of the Indian Union in accordance with the Hydari Agreement. Naga National Council (NNC) the first ever Naga political organization, have become the nerve centre of Naga tribes as an all Naga political organization and had played a tremendous role in the Naga Identity politics. The Naga identity emerged and expanded under the elaborate administrative, economic, religious and educational policy of the British, which forged to develop a feeling of solidarity and unity among the Nagas. Modernization and education has awakened them and the formation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 was the outcome of the Naga identity politics. The present Naga identity formation is of recent origin, due to a common religion, English Education, Administrative measures such as creation of districts and State, Economic and Development activities and the failure on the part of the government to bring out the desired results.

KEYWORDS: Identity politics, Naga, Homogenization, British, Post-Colonial, Assam.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the universal natural law, everyone is equal and as per this concept we could have lived harmoniously and happily without antagonize to each other. But men are always craving for power, status and glory and these instincts make them to go for unrightfully dominances, conquers, conflicts, mutual treaties, segregates 'us' from 'them'. Thereby, the question of nationalities and birthrights, assertion of identities and maintenance of territorial (physical) boundaries, politics boundary, protections and negotiations become inevitable facts. After experiencing prolonged 200 years of British colonial rule, India became an independent state when British colonialism officially collapsed at the assent on the Indian Independence Bill in 1947. The colonial rulers as a part of their deliberate colonial policy succeeded in dividing the people and the country and India became a divided India and Pakistan with two geographically separated wings East and West. As a result of independence and partition, Assam lost the Muslim and Bengali dominated and highly populated Sylhet district to East Pakistan. Assam is one of the backward states of the Indian Union and the state is severely affected by insurgency, economic backwardness ethnic movements and unabated foreign influx. Due to gross negligence of the center and inefficiency of the state government democracy is also severely injured.

During the post-colonial period due to introduction of democratic and secular electoral politics Assam's politics too transformed qualitatively. Freedom from colonial rule enthused all sections of people and society was gradually politicized under a new situation. Political mobilization took place on the basis of language, tribe, caste, ethnicity and class. Immediately after independence, the Naga question emerged. Insurgency started in Naga Hills district demanding an independent Nagaland. In 1963, Naga Hills district was separated from Assam and given statehood as Nagaland.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- To understand the Identity Politics of the Nagas in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Era.
- To find out the causes that led to the emergence of the Identity Politics of the Naga People.

III. METHODOLOGY

The paper is descriptive and analytical one, primarily based on secondary data. The secondary data are consulted from the published materials in the form of books, research journal papers, magazines and from other internet sources.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF THE NAGAS

The homogenization of Indian national identity after independence marked the beginning of identity politics. Identity politics refers to politics in which groups of people having a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social or cultural identity tend to promote their own specific interests or concerns without taking into account the interests or concerns of any larger political group. Identity politics includes the ways in which people's politics may be shaped by aspects of their identity through loosely correlated social organizations. Before the advent of British rule, the primary units of identity among the Nagas were the clan, family and village. Each village had its own culture and often its own religion, besides dialects. The term 'Naga' was given to them by non-tribal plains people. Even the major tribal groups such as Ao, Angami, Lotha, and Konyak got their names from other tribes. Therefore, like most identities, the Naga identity is also exogamous to the Nagas themselves. The increasing use of the name 'Naga' and the presence of people belonging to different race and cultural origins in turn made the Nagas to think in terms of 'us' and 'them'. During the pre-British period, tribe was not a primary reference point for identity among the Nagas, but in the British and post-British periods, it became increasingly so. Colonial rule brought certain cohesion of the Naga tribes as an ethnic group. The maintenance of law and order, introduction of 'civilizing' agencies such as Christianity and education, development of modern means of communication, and above all, the invasion of the Nagas, a stagnant society so far, with all progressive forces of change both within and outside the district, inevitably brought about gradual transformation in Naga Hills. Changes in economic, social and religious dimensions influenced the corresponding changes in the socio-political life of the people. The dynamic development of a Naga identity, which resulted from the process of uniting discrete tribes into that of one collectivity, forms a significant aspect in the emergence of a stage of social formation in contemporary Naga society and economic situation. This development reflected its frame in the light of the British colonial establishment and later, with that of the Indian Union. It altogether geared the Naga ethnicity in political terms with its own ideology.

1886 was the beginning of the British annexation of Naga Hills. After the annexation of Naga territories all the sub-tribes of Naga Group came under a united administrative control of the British power. However, they did not accept the new British rulers as they had their own customs and traditions; their own administrative system i.e. their Traditional Self Governing or Traditional Political Institutions to which the Nagas were only loyal. This was perhaps the first stage of Naga Identity formation. While the process of formation of Naga identity was going on autonomously, the political situation in the sub-continent necessitated the political expression of a pan- Naga identity. After the World War I, the Nagas realized the importance of protecting their socio-political identity and realized the importance and need to live together under one banner to achieve their common goals. The Naga soldiers who fought during the First World War, after their retirement formed an organization called

the Naga Club in 1918 and it was the first Naga Civil Organization. Before the existence of the Naga Club the sense of identity consciousness was not there among the Nagas and this organization did a lot in arousing political consciousness among the Nagas. Another factor that contributed to the Naga identity consciousness was the Government of India Act of 1935 which designated the Naga Hills district as an 'excluded area' with an Inner Line Regulation, which means that no outsider could enter these areas without a valid permit from the district authorities. In April 1945, the first ever Naga political organization called The Naga Hills District Tribal Council (NHDTTC) was established. Later NHDTTC changed its name to Naga National Council (NNC). The Naga identity and Naga movement are so closely interlinked that it is not possible to make any complete study of the emergence of Naga identity without reference to the latter. In fact, the Naga movement arose as a response to what Nagas perceived to be a threat to their cultural and ethnic identity.

The original aim of the NNC was thus to foster the welfare and social aspirations of the Nagas. The first political act of the NNC was the drafting of a memorandum, which was issued on 19th June, 1946, wherein, the NNC declared that it stood for the solidarity of all Naga tribes. The Cabinet Mission arrived in India on 15th March 1946. On 16th May, on the eve of its departure for England, it issued a statement in which to save the unity of India, it recommended grouping of provinces. The prospect of Assam and also Naga Hills (as it formed part of Assam) was grouped with Bengal which alarmed the NNC. The NNC foresaw that if small minorities like the Nagas were placed in such a situation it would become politically non-entities, too small and too weak to defend their rights in any way. Therefore, the NNC referred to the above in a memorandum and strongly opposed the proposed suggestion of grouping Assam with Bengal. The memorandum concluded that the Naga Hills should be included in an autonomous Assam in a free India with autonomy and safeguards for the interests of the Nagas and that the Naga tribes should have a separate electorate.

V. CAUSES FOR THE EMERGENCE OF NAGA IDENTITY

The Naga identity emerged and expanded under the elaborate administrative, economic, religious and educational policy of the British, which forged to develop a feeling of solidarity and unity among the Nagas. The colonial administrative policy immensely contributed to the emergence of Naga identity which was further enhanced by the colonial economic policy, which produced a deep impact on the Nagas towards a shared system. Further, the colonial educational policy also has its own sphere of importance in promoting the emergence of Naga identity and in molding the Nagas towards unity and broader vision. Naga identity emerged and got constructed as a result of the various policies and developments within the colonial state.

The colonial administrative arrangements i.e. the unification of most of the Naga tribes under a single centralized administration and the inclusion of the various Naga tribal areas under the greater Naga Hills District, the establishment of peace and of administrative headquarters, the construction of roads and opening of markets all together promoted inter-mixture of the Naga tribes leading to the development of a feeling of oneness among the Nagas. Peaceful co-existence under British administrative rule brought cohesion and resurgence to the Nagas as one people. The economic policy of the British led to the construction of link roads, opening of markets and trading headquarters which resulted in the intermingling of people. Moreover the construction of roads and markets facilitated and encouraged the development of closeness among the various Naga tribes which helped the various tribes to know and learn about each other better. The introduction of Christianity and western education awakened the Nagas to new beliefs, ideas, possibilities and thoughts, and showed them the means and spirit to strive for congregated solidarity and to assert their identity.

The education imparted by the church to the Naga people paved the way for the growth of a pan-Naga consciousness and there emerged educated group of Naga which began to represent the whole Naga population. It was this educated section that for the first time put up a platform for the representation of the Naga people as a whole which subsequently led to the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 at Kohima with the joint efforts of government official, village headman and those British recruits who returned from France after serving as Labour Corps during the First World War.

Moreover, Nation building is deeply rooted in modernity. Although foreign missionaries imparted modern education to the Nagas, the main reason the Nagas were so strongly attached to independence was more moral to their animistic base which ordains not to be subjugated to an alien and upon which Christianity had fervently injected an inspiration of individual freedom. Along the same way the imposition of Assamese language on the unwilling tribals and attempting to introduce it as a medium of instruction in the University and Secondary levels of education ignited the Identity Politics.

VI. IDENTITY POLITICS OF THE NAGA'S IN THE POST COLONIAL ERA

India represents a classic example of plural society determined by diverse ethnic groups. The Nagas became part of the Indian Union in accordance with the Hydari Agreement (the 9-point accord which was signed between the then Governor of Assam, Akbar Hydari and the representatives of the Naga National Council at Kohima) on 15 August 1947, with the independence of India. The fruit of the discussion was expected to provide the basis for future negotiations between the government and the NNC on the Naga question but rather than that it immediately became the cause of distrust, suspicion and dissension between them. The NNC entered into negotiations with two objectives in view, namely: i) a ten-year interim government for the Nagas, and ii) the right of the Nagas to decide their own political future. The understanding of the Naga National Council and of India in regard to the meaning and implications of the Nine-Point Agreement was so different and wide that both the parties involved in this affair began to accuse each other of willful and deliberate misinterpretation of the terms of the agreement leading to a long drawn struggle and conflict. The Naga nationalist became so anxious that they declared themselves independent on August 14th, 1947 and even send their declaration of independence to the Government of India and also to the United Nations and also informed that the Nagas did not accept the Indian Constitution.

By 1947, the NNC had become the nerve centre of Nagas not only in the Naga Hills but also in Manipur and Burma, as an all Naga political organization. The rapidity with which the NNC gained acceptance of the Naga tribes is an outward manifestation of the inner feeling that already exists in the minds of the Nagas. It is an indication that the Nagas which had come under the same administration as strangers during the end of the 19th Century, who were developing a consciousness of oneness as belonging to the same group at the beginning of the 20th Century had fully developed the higher consciousness of being one people by 1947. In 1952, the NNC launched the civil disobedience campaign refusing to pay taxes. The Nagas had boycotted the 1st general elections held in 1952. There was total non-participation in the first Indian general election. No Naga stood or voted for the election. On March 30th, 1953, the Nagas welcomed Nehru's decision to visit Kohima. He was accompanied by her daughter Indira Gandhi and Burmese prime minister. The NNC were busy preparing to submit a memorandum but just before the meeting Nehru gave instruction to stop any Nagas from making any written or oral address to the reception. As a result Naga delegation walked out of the meeting and Nehru was humiliated and was left to address only a handful of Government servants. Phizo went to New Delhi and requested Prime Minister Nehru to meet their demand for a sovereign Nagaland. The request obviously was rejected and considered NNC as coming within the 6th schedule. Phizo on his return started mobilizing the different rival sub-tribes of Nagas with the slogan of "Naga Nationalism".

NNC came increasingly under the control of militant leaders like Phizo after the murder of T. Sakhrie, the moderate Naga leader in January 1956. The Naga militants formed the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) in 1956 and with it; its armed wing was also formed known as the 'Naga Home Guard' later known as the 'Naga army'. It was the first armed resistance group to oppose Indian army force and it initiated armed insurrection to carry ahead their struggle for independence. Within a few years the Naga movement which was initially strong only in the Naga Hills district spread to Tuensang Frontier Division and to the Naga inhabited areas in Manipur. To contain the growing militant activities, the Indian government deployed the army and enacted several 'black' laws such as the Assam Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous Districts) Act 1953, the Assam Disturbed Areas Act 1955, and Armed Forces (Assam, Manipur) Special Powers Act 1958 etc equipping the armed forces with more and more powers to deal with insurgents. Thus the 'reign of terror' broke out leading to an open

war which resulted in heavy casualties for both the sides. There was intense fighting between Naga resistance and Indian security force which forced the Naga leaders to go underground. Thus, an undeclared war between the Nagas and India began. Even the church was not spared and many innocent victims lost their lives. Taking advantage of the special powers assigned to them, the armed forces resorted to violation of rights by committing acts of rape, murder, arson, loot etc. Despite the actions against it, the NNC chose to continue its struggle. However, while armed confrontation continued, efforts were made to bring peace. In the late 1950's the idea that statehood within the Indian union might provide an answer to the demand for independence surfaced. This was the proposal associated with the new organization called the Naga People's Convention. It was formed as an over-ground organization to act as an intermediary between the Govt. of India and the Federal Government of Nagaland. The formation of Nagaland in 1963 as a separate state within the Indian Union under the Ministry of External Affairs could not satisfy the militants urge for freedom but instead it brought more of self realization of what one has been fighting for. The Government of India and the Federal Government of Nagaland on September 4, 1964 realized the utmost necessity of bringing peace to Naga territory as there were an undeclared war going on between the Indian Army Forces and the Naga Army. Therefore in order to normalize the situation, the Government of India constituted a high level commission called Formation of Peace Mission in 1964. But even this organization seems to fail in responding to the call of Naga struggle and so in 1975 Shillong Accord was signed between the Government of India and some authorized underground representatives but this became the most infamous accord ever signed. This created further division among the Nagas because of the fact that it was simply a political trap to suppress the Naga National Movement for freedom.

In 1972, NNC was declared an unlawful organization and enforced a ban on it along with some other militant outfits under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. But however some hardcore NNC Leaders left NNC and formed a new party i.e. Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in February 1980, with Isak Chisi, K.K. Khaplang and T. Muivah as chairman, vice-president and general secretary respectively. However in 1988, ethnic divisions led to a split within NSCN into two groups, one led by Isak and Muivah called NSCN (IM) and another by Khaplang named NSCN (K). This split was a glaring example of how intra-state and intra-ethnic tribal rivalries dominate much of insurgent politics in Nagaland. The Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) was formed in 1978; this was the first democratic rights organization of the Nagas and it was largely through its efforts that people in other parts of the country became aware of the brutal repression of basic rights by the armed forces operating in Naga inhabited areas. Naga Mother's Association was formed on February 14, 1984 at Kohima. Its objectives include upholding womanhood, human values and rights; serving as a channel of communication for Naga women's mutual interest and welfare; encouraging human development by educating the masses for responsible and wholesome living; and recreating interest in the traditional socio-cultural values of the Nagas and maintaining their self-identity and sense of self reliance. In 2003, during Vajpayee's term the self-exiled leaders of NSCN (IM) – Isak and Muivah – came to India to hold discussions with Indian leadership. In 2004 after the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) took over power at the centre, at the invitation of Dr. ManMohan Singh, Isak and Muivah visited India and had talks with political leaders, ministers and top government officials. After the formation of NDA Government in 2014 at the center, with an aim of ending insurgency in Nagaland, the government signed an accord with key outfit NSCN (IM) which Prime Minister Narendra Modi described as a 'historic' step to usher in peace in the state. However, Khaplang group did not stop carrying out the attacks on the Indian Armed forces from their bases in Myanmar.

To bring amicable political solution various treaties or agreements have been signed by democratic and pacific means between the Government of India (GOI) and pan-Naga ethnic community. But so far not much progress has been shown. Tracing back the Nagas' history, the course of Naga National struggle for freedom, five major significant agreements have been signed right from 1947 to 1997 between the Government of India and the pan-Naga Ethnic Community. However most of these treaties signed were led to failures because of various reasons. Chronologically to begin with, the first treaty called Nine-Point Agreement (1947) was signed between the Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar

Hydari and NNC to recognize the rights of the Nagas relating to Judicial, Legislative, Executive, Land, Taxation, Boundaries, Arms Act, Regulations and Period of Agreement. The second treaty, called Sixteenth Point Agreement (1960) was signed between the Government of India and the Nagas people's Convention. The third treaty, called Cease-fire Agreement (1964) was signed on September 4, 1964 between the Government of India and the Federal Government of Nagaland as there was an undeclared war going on between the Indian Armed Forces and the Naga Army. The fourth treaty, called The Shillong Accord (1975) was signed between the government of India and some underground representatives on 10th November 1975. The fifth treaty, called The NSCN Cease-Fire Agreement (1997) was signed between the Government of India and NSCN (I-M) with the sole objective to continue the peace process during which the Naga political talk could be held.

Today Naga ethnic problem is yesterday Naga political problem unsolved legacy. Had Nehru been a little careful to tackle the Naga political problem in a positive way by recognizing the fundamental rights of the Nagas in democratic hearing and pacific dealing, this cancerous wound in the entire North-Eastern region might not have been developed as of in the contemporary times as one witnesses in the North-East India. The most unfortunate part was that Nehru took it as a mere law and order problem and tried to suppress it by military force.

In order to have an amiable and peaceful solution of the problem certain points are to be taken into account. Both the sides should be transparent and sincere to negotiate and have discussions as frequently as possible to curb misunderstanding between them and for confidential building measures. If this is not done that it would make bilateral talks after talks valueless and would lead to continuity in criticizing or pick pointing each other weak points. Moreover, neither of the sides can be blamed as it is a tragedy which is common to both the sides. The fruitful solution lies in negotiating through democratic and pacific means like reconciliation process which needs to be strengthened to a higher degree to bring amicable political solution at the earliest.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Naga conflict is the result of historical blunders committed wittingly and unwittingly by the British and Indian leaders. For instance, the British policy of non interference in the administration of the Naga Hills alienated them from the rest of India. This isolation could be one of the reasons why it has made them feel that they are different and are not part of India. The British did not provide any concrete plan for the Naga when they left after India became independent in 1947 and as such the Nagas felt betrayed for forcefully handing them over to India. Initially the Govt of India did not take the Naga problem in right earnest and simply considered it as law and order problem. Unfortunately for the Nagas the Indian leaders never showed full commitment towards solving the Naga problem through a process of dialogue. No steps were taken which can be considered as indicative of confidence building measures. Instead they used the policy of force or luring the Naga leaders with money and position to divide and rule over them.

The Nagas have come a long way today. The enthusiasm to work collectively for the good of the community as a whole and their spirit of adventure evoke in them a feeling of oneness, solidarity and unity and this became a very crucial component in the emergence of Naga identity. These quality feelings guided the Nagas towards the realization and pursuance of their separate identity. With the emergence of Naga identity, the name 'Naga' has come to signify an ethnic group of people with political aspirations interests and rights. With the emergence of Naga identity, they became more determined to prove their efficiency and worth. A unique Naga identity has emerged with full force blended with the equally unique and rich cultural and traditional ethos of the people.

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