

Nagas

Profile

Nagas are an Adivasi hill people numbering about 1 million and living in the remote and mountainous country between the Indian state of Assam and Burma. There are also Naga groups in Burma. The Nagas are divided into sixteen main tribal groups, each with its own name and distinct language, but their sense of national identity, forged during the years of British administration and reinforced by resistance to Indian government domination, now largely overrides the differences that separate them. Nagas traditionally are tribally organized, with a strong warrior tradition. Their villages are sited on hilltops and they make frequent armed raids on the plains below.

Despite the many problems that the continuing insurgency-in the name of the right to self-determination-has created, Nagaland's future will depend on how well any state government can fulfil the expectations of its people. Nagaland's literacy rate stands at 42 per cent, much higher than the national average, yet jobs continue to be scarce, especially outside the civil service. Nagas have successfully resisted the imposition of Hindi by the central government and have been in favour of English. Yet an adequate knowledge of Hindi is necessary to function in the north of India, and this may limit opportunities outside the state.

Historical context

The British first came into contact with Nagas when they took over Assam and the Brahmaputra valley in the 1820s and moved into the hill areas to stop Naga raids, especially from the Angami tribe. In 1878 there was an Angami uprising, which was severely suppressed. After this the British gradually took over the whole area. However, in practice, British administration was limited. It was made a rule that no Indian official should be posted to the hills, that traders and speculators from the plains should be excluded, and that most officials were to be drawn from the Nagas themselves. Missionaries converted many Nagas to Christianity, and this facilitated literacy and the use of English, all of which encouraged a Naga sense of a separate identity.

Prior to the independence of India, Nagas presented their own case for independent statehood. However, when Assam (with other Indian provinces) was granted a large measure of self-rule in 1937, Naga areas remained under direct British administration. In the Second World War Nagas aided the British and harassed the Japanese. Nagas set up the Naga National Council (NNC) to discuss matters of future status, and in 1947 an NNC delegation led by Z.A. Phizo went to Delhi to press for Naga independence, a demand that was refused by Nehru, although he stated that autonomy for the Nagas would be considered. The NNC declared unilateral independence in August 1947 (at the time of Indian and Pakistani independence), but this was ignored by the outside world. However, the governor of Assam held talks with NNC leaders in 1948 and reached a nine-point agreement with them which recognized 'the right of Nagas to develop themselves according to their freely elected wishes', though this agreement was not to be extended or renegotiated after ten years. The Nagas interpreted this as giving them the right to opt out of the Indian union after ten years. This was not the interpretation of the

Indians, however, and in practice the latter treated the nine-point agreement as a dead letter.

From 1948 the administration of Naga areas began to change. Indians took over the administration and with it the posts which in the past had been held by Nagas. After the Chief Minister of Assam had been given a hostile reception by Nagas he ordered that a police force be placed in the hills. The Nagas again declared independence in January 1950 after they had conducted their own plebiscite, which showed an almost unanimous vote in favour of independence, but this was not recognized by the Indian government, which gave the Naga Hills a status as part of the 'tribal' areas of Assam. In 1952 Nehru visited the Naga Hills but refused to meet the NNC while he was there or to receive their demands. Nagas were suspected of being manipulated by foreigners who wished to break up the Indian union. Soon after, Baptist missionaries were expelled from Naga areas.

Nagas then launched a campaign of civil disobedience, similar to that used to achieve Indian independence, withdrawing from schools and the administration and refusing to pay taxes. NNC leaders were arrested, the sixteen tribal councils - all under the control of the NNC were abolished; and armed police and later the Indian army were moved into the area. In 1956 the NNC proclaimed the establishment of Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) with its own constitution and a Naga Home Guard. From 1956 to 1958 a bitter guerrilla war was conducted in the Naga Hills, with alleged atrocities on both sides. According to government figures, 1,400 Nagas were killed against 162 Indians. Nagas and others have alleged that the Indian forces engaged in torture, rape and murder, and burnt and destroyed villages and crops. While not all these reports can be substantiated, it appears that many violations did take place.

Divisions began to emerge within the Naga movement with the formation of the Naga People's Convention led by Dr Imkongliba Ao, which favoured Indian statehood as a practical alternative to complete independence, and this received a more favourable response in Delhi, although the new state of Nagaland, at that time the smallest in India with an area of 15,360 square kilometres and a population of 350,000, came into being only in 1963. But the war continued, with the Indian army using counterinsurgency tactics of rehousing villagers away from their villages in order to separate them from the insurgents. Phizo of the NNC had managed to flee to London, where efforts on behalf of the Naga cause began to attract international attention and sympathy.

A breakthrough in the stalemate with India appeared to come with the appointment by the government of a three-man peace commission consisting of the Reverend Michael Scott, B.P. Chaliha and J.P. Narayan, which was able to negotiate a cease-fire beginning in May 1964. However, efforts to bring about a permanent settlement failed as the two sides could not agree on a formula for settlement. The cease-fire continued in name until September 1972, when it was unilaterally terminated by the Indian government, but in practice fighting had continued even while it was in force, and by the late 1960s the situation had reverted almost to what it had been before the cease-fire.

Further allegations of brutalities were made against the Indian army. It appeared that the Indian forces had been strengthened, and the NNC guerrillas weakened, during these years. There were divisions within the guerrilla forces, with one breakaway group being engaged in a much publicized surrender in August 1973, and there also emerged an apparently well entrenched Nagaland state government which had joined with the Indian government and supported measures against the guerrillas. Many - NNC guerrillas had taken refuge on the Burmese side of the border, while Phizo remained in exile in London. A new state government in Nagaland, the United Democratic Front (UDF), elected in 1974, attempted to negotiate a cease-fire, but this was refused by the Indian government, which was now in a position finally to defeat the much depleted NNC forces, which by 1975 were surrendering in significant numbers.

Some Nagas, while supporting the ideal of independence, nevertheless argued that the armed conflict against the full power of the Indian state could only lead to suffering for the Nagas and ultimate defeat, and therefore that resistance should be on the political plane with a search for maximum autonomy within the Indian union. The Naga Peace Council, a continuation of the body which had brought about the cease-fire of the 1960s, made contact with the underground forces. The result was the Shillong Accord, signed between the Governor and the representatives and the FGN in November 1975. The provisions of the accord stated that the signatories accepted the binding nature of the Indian constitution, that weapons would be surrendered to the peace council, that security operations would be suspended and that the curfew would be lifted. This accord reflected the strong desire for peace within Nagaland but was not accepted by all the Naga resistance forces. Phizo in London repudiated it, as did the Chinese-influenced group led by Muivah in Burma. This group became the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and introduced a new ideological note into the formerly heavily Christian Naga movement.

By the 1980s most of Nagaland was at peace, in contrast to other parts of north-east India, where various insurgent movements were active. The NSCN, however, was still active not only in Nagaland but among the Nagas of neighbouring Manipur, and there were continuing clashes between the NSCN based in Burma and the Indian army, as well as allegations of human rights violations by the Indian military. Within constitutional politics there had been growing dissidence in the ruling Congress I Party (the NNC had merged with the Congress Party in 1976), but its future appeared secure when it was re-elected in November 1987. However, it lost its majority in August 1988; rather than the newly formed opposition Joint Regional Legislature Party being allowed to form a government, the legislature was dismissed and the state was placed under President's rule (direct rule from New Delhi). The NSCN later split into splinter groups during the late 1980's-one group was led by Issac Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, called as NSCM (IM) and the other led by SS Khaplang named as NSCN (K). The ethnic dimensions and the geographical influences within NSCN have gained significance. Issac Chisi Swu was a Sema Naga (a sub-tribe largely settled in Myanmar).

What followed through the 1990s was the formation of a number of Naga splinter groups based on ethnic lines and commanding influence in their respective areas. The notion of parallel 'governments' came into existence with the formation of various factions and groups like the NSCN (K) and FGN (Federal Government of Nagaland initially formed by Phizo) as well as the elected government in the State. An attempt was made by various Baptist Church leaders in North America to unite the disparate groups when commemorating the 125th Year of Christianity in Nagaland in Atlanta in July-August 1997. Although all the factions were invited, NSCN (IM) boycotted the Atlanta meeting. In the meantime, NSCN (IM) entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in August 1997 that is still in operation. Although the peace is still fragile and somehow surviving the protracted and painfully slow negotiations, the silver lining is that political negotiations have been continuing without any party breaking the ceasefire. There have been various provocations to subvert the peace process like the attempted murder of elected Nagaland Chief Minister SC Jamir in 1999 and the subsequent killing of 12 NSCN activists by the army.

Current issues

There have been several meetings that have been held between the NSCN (IM) and the central government representatives led by Oscar Fernandes in November 2004 and subsequently in February 2005. The only agreement on the part of the Indian government was to extend the ceasefire agreement to cover the naga inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The NSCN saw the refusal of extension of the cease-fire to all Naga inhabited areas as one of the obstacles to peace talks. The acceptance of this demand though has been a cause for an increase in inter-state ethnic conflict in the region. There are a lot of concerns as regards the talks and the peace process. First the talks are very

slow and protracted and this causing anxiety and anger amongst various sections of the Naga community. There has hardly been any positive result of the talks. On the part of the Indian government, the demand for Nagalim includes parts of various other states in the North-East: Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh as well as some part of Myanmar. The 30-point charter of demands forwarded by the NSCN (IM) includes the unification of Naga-inhabitant areas to form a sovereign state - Naglim. The talks have now slowly centred on 'autonomy' and both sides explore the scope of 'autonomy' within the Constitution at the peace negotiation meetings held in Amsterdam. One of the striking points is the NSCN (IM) demand for a 'sub-national constitution' for the Naga being accommodated within text of the Indian Constitution. NSCN (IM) has consistently opposed the reinforcement of a federal relationship with India and has positioned themselves on defining the relationship between India and the Nagas by a mutually agreed settlement clause incorporated in the Indian Constitution as well as in a separate Naga constitution. This has caused a difficulty in arriving at any agreement in the most recent talks held in 2006.

A significant issue therefore would be to find a way to balance the demand for sovereignty with the demand for 'Naga territorial imperative' of 'Greater Nagaland'. The implications of conceding the demand are fraught with grave consequences for the region. The issue therefore in 2006 for both parties is to scale back from their positions and to also understand the dialogue must go on along with unconditional ceasefire. The absence of the Khaplang group in the peace negotiation has also left a big question-mark as to the scope of mandate enjoyed by the NSCN (IM) amongst the Nagas in the present peace process. This becomes critical when it is seen that Konyak, sub-tribes are the numerically largest and have a significant presence within Indian Territory. The alienation of the Konyak aspirations would therefore be deemed detrimental to the present peace process. The challenge for civil society and the parties in 2006 is prevent a return to ethnic violence in the Naga inhabited areas in the North-East when the political process.