Secessionist Movements in North-East States: Case Study of Nagaland and Mizoram

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Abstract

The Northeastern region of India presents a context where continuing insurgency and conflict of decades has given rise to a parallel polity of multiple languages of identity, ideology and imagination which exists alongside a constitutional legal polity and challenges the authority and legitimacy of Indian state. And most peace building initiatives on the part of Indian government have largely been attempts to address political aspects related to granting power through Accords disregarding other stakeholders in the conflict. Such initiatives conducted at elite level generate dissatisfaction and mistrust and undermine the legitimacy of the process, resulting in the growth of parallel militant outfits by aggrieved groups. This paper show the problem of insurgency faced by Nagaland and Mizoram and I excluded other North-Eastern states because it is only Nagaland and Mizoram which suffered a lot from secessionist movement in North-East India. Paper is generally based on secondary resources i.e. News paper, magazine, Books, Journals, Internet sources and from other historical record etc.

Keywords: Secessionist Movements, Nagaland, Mizoram, Hydari Agreement

Introduction

Termed as the land of a thousand mutinies, northeast has witnessed several insurgent movements in constituent parts since independence in 1947. At one point of time, about 120 insurgent groups were active in the entire region with wide ranging demands centering on ethnic or tribal identities, each group devises its stereotypes by a process of self construction and deconstruction in relation to the other who are projected as the enemy. (Frontline, 2012)

Nagaland

Nagaland, the hill state located at extreme north eastern end of India, is located along the border surrounding Myanmar in the east, Assam in the west, Arunachal Pradesh and a part of Assam in the north and Manipur in the south. Kohima is the state capital and Dimapur the largest city. It has an area of 16,579 square kilometers with a population of 1,980,602, which makes it one of the smallest states of India. (http://nagaland.nic.in/) Nagaland is inhabited by 16 major tribes: Ao Naga, Angami Naga, Chang Naga, Konyak people, Lotha Naga, Sumi Naga, Chakhesang Naga, Khiamniungan people, Bodo-Kachari people, Phom Naga, Rengma Naga, Sangtam Naga Yimchunger, Thadou people, Zeliang and Pochury as well as a number of sub-tribes. Continuing state of insurgency as well as inter-ethnic conflict violence and insecurity has impacted Nagaland’s economic development. Infact at the time of British withdrawal from India on independence, Assam comprised of both plains and hill districts, but increasing consciousness of identity and ethnic separatism of people caused division of Assam into seven states.( http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagaland.)

A heterogeneous tribe of Mongoloid and Indo-Burman stock the Nagas led a fiercely independent existence in the current state of Nagaland. In spite of common ancestry, significant internal socio-cultural divisions marked the nature and character of these tribes. Until the British began their expeditions in this region, Nagas lived a life of complete independence. Even the Ahom rulers maintained a policy of distance from the formidable tribe and did not attempt any aggression or annexation on their territory; assaults if any were taken as a measure of retaliation or self defence against occasional raids by Nagas on them. (Venuh, Aleaz, 2005)

As a result of British policy of annexation and encirclement, Naga Hills became a British District in 1881 (Reid, 1983) and, a full-fledged administrative centre was established at Kohima in 1878. (Ao, 1970) However these measures were adopted for strategic and security needs, of the region and as frequent punitive strikes by Nagas on tea gardens left the British with no choice but to contain and incorporate them in administrative set up, departing from their past policy of isolation and non interference in Naga affairs. Subsequent period witnessed introduction of important policies in Naga Hills: the Scheduled District Act 1874, declared Naga Hills as a 'Scheduled District' excluding it from jurisdiction of laws operating in other parts of British India. Further, the Government of India Act, 1919 which declared Naga Hills as 'Backward Tract' also prohibited application of Indian legislation in this District and in March 1936, it was officially declared an 'Excluded Area'. (Sema, 1986)

Initial signs of insurgency in Nagaland appeared during the later part of British colonial rule with the founding of a ‘Naga Club’ in Kohima and Mokokchung in 1918 and followed by a Lothas council in 1923. In 1928 another
organization called Ao Tribal Council was formed. With World War II, Japanese invasion of Nagaland and the ensuing conflict between the warring factions inflicted severe blow to the economy of the region. In an attempt to rebuild post war economy, the British administration formed the Naga Hills District Council (NHDC) in April 1945, later renamed by Tribal chiefs as Naga National Council (NNC) which started a movement for local autonomy and a separate electorate for the region.(Chadha, 2009)

On the eve of India's independence Naga movement for secession gained momentum under the command of Naga leader, Angami Zapu Phizo,( Phizo was a leader of the movement for independent Nagaland, President of Naga National Council (NNC), began an armed struggle against the Indian state, went underground and stayed in Pakistan and spent the last three decades of his life in exile in UK) soon after Assam government violated an agreement to recognize NNC as ‘the principal political and administrative force in Naga Hill district’ and began to extend ‘its administration to the Naga area’. (Brass, 1990) After India's independence Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru initiated negotiation with NNC over Nagaland’s status within India. Failure to reach an agreement led to fresh attempts at resolving the issue with the mediation of then Governor of Assam, Akbar Hydari, which resulted in an agreement on 29th June, 1947, known as ‘Nine-Point Hydari Agreement. It stated:

1. **Judicial** – That all cases, civil or criminal arising between Nagas in the Naga Hills be disposed of by duly constituted Naga Courts according to Naga customary law or such law as may be introduced with the consent of duly recognized Naga representative organizations. In case of a sentence of transportation or death there will be a right of appeal to the Governor.

2. **Executive** – That the Naga Council should control what it is prepared to pay for. This principle will apply equally to the work done as well as the staff employed.

3. **Legislative** – That no laws passed by Provincial or Central Legislature which materially affect terms of this agreement or religious practices of Nagas shall have legal force in Naga Hills without the consent of the Naga Council. In cases of dispute as to whether any law did so affect this agreement would be referred by the Naga Council to the Governor, who would then direct that the law in question should not have legal force in the Naga Hills pending decision of the Central Government.

4. **Land** – That land with all its resources in the Naga Hills should not be alienated to a non-Naga without consent of the Naga Council.

5. **Taxation** – That the Naga Council will be responsible for imposition, collection, and expenditure of land revenue and house tax and of such other taxes as may be imposed by the Naga Council.

6. **Boundaries** – That present administrative divisions should be modified so as (1) to bring back into Naga Hills District all forests transferred to Sibsagar and Nowgong Districts in the past, and (2) to bring under one unified administrative unit, as far as possible, all Nagas. No areas should be transferred out of Naga Hills without the consent of the Naga Council.

7. **Arms Act** – That the Deputy Commissioner will act on the advice of the Naga Council in accordance with provisions of the Arms Act.

8. **Regulations** – That the Chin Hills regulations and the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations will remain in force.

9. **Period of Agreement** – That the Governor of Assam as an Agent of the Government of IndianUnion will have a special responsibility for a period of 10 years to ensure the observance of the agreement. At the end of this period the Naga Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period, or a new agreement regarding future of Naga people is to be arrived at.(The South Asian Terrorism Portal, Kohima)

However, the nine point of the Hydari Agreement in effect, did not solve the problem due to conflicting interpretation of provisions. An important point of difference was the interpretation of Article 9 of the Agreement between the Government of India and the NNC.

Pertinent to mention here that the N.N.C interpreted the ten year period as a condition after completion of which they could exercise a freedom of choice to opt out of Indian union. But the Indian government interpreted it to mean that at the end of ten years the Nagas would be free to suggest changes in the administrative pattern. Continuing deadlock over the issue hardened extremist factions within the NNC with intensified demands for independence. (Ao, 1970) And on August 14, 1947, just a day before India became independent; Phizo along with Naga people declared independence of Naga region, (http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naga_National_Council,) and subsequently gave a Plebiscite call in February 1950, where he claimed 99% of the Nagas favored a sovereign independent state. Independent India's first General elections held in 1952, were boycotted by NNC which also warned that the Naga case would be submitted to the United Nations in case of further problems. (Gupta, 1994)

In March 22, 1956, an underground government called the Naga Federal Government (NFG) and a Naga Federal Army (NFA) was announced by Phizo with all institutional design of a constitution, parliament, cabinet minis-
ters and the support of Naga Home Guards for purposes of maintaining law and order. Nearly 3000 soldiers were recruited in the Naga army by 1956, who struck with impunity on government and civilian establishments. Apart from a formal organizational structure of command and obedience, the NFG's cadres had the advantage of guerrilla warfare techniques in forest ambushes, hit and run attacks and remote controlled explosive devices which enabled them to strike and cause large scale devastation. It was a show of defiance and rejection of the authority of Government of India and projection of NFG as the legitimate representative of the Naga people which forced the Indian government to adopt counter insurgency measures with induction of army and introduction of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. This Act gave three principle advantages to the state to control insurgency: (a) legal basis to induct army in a conflict zone or 'disturbed area', (b) empower military forces to take over functions of civilian government agencies like the police, (c) civil and criminal immunity to military personnel for actions undertaken in the course of the operations. (http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/background/index.html)

As a result of counter insurgency measures with the induction of army, the rank and file of the insurgents was degraded and their striking capability reduced, who now resorted to only adhoc actions which were not very effective. However, severe violence inflicted by the NNC created disorder and anomic in Naga Hills which led to a faction of the movement to oppose Phizo’s violent separatist movement. From 1956, negotiation between this faction and the Indian government initiated the process of incorporating Naga Hills in the administrative and political framework of India. In response moderate faction's proposal for unification of all Nagas area under a single administration, the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru assured of a change in the present set-up in full consultation with the Naga people 'subject to the unity, integrity and security of the Indian Union'. On 22-26 August 1957, a convention of moderate Naga leaders was convened in Kohima which unanimously adopted, a resolution demanding integration of the Naga areas as a single administrative unit under the Indian External Affairs Ministry to be administered by the Government of Assam on behalf of the President of India. Thus the demand for an independent Naga State was abandoned and an 'interim arrangement', proposed pending a final political settlement within the Indian union,(Gupta, 1994) On August 21, 1962, the lower house of Indian parliament introduced the state of Nagaland Bill effecting thirteenth amendment in the Constitution. Consequently, on September 4, 1962, Nagaland became the 16th state of the Indian union comprising Naga Hills districts and the Tuensang Tribal Area. In the first General Elections, which were held for the Interim Body in January 1964 (Assembly), leader of Naga Nationalist Party, Shilu Ao, was sworn in as Chief Minister of Nagaland.(Singh, 1984) Moreover special status was also given to Nagaland under Article 371A which offer a great degree of autonomy, as well as special powers that permit Naga tribes to conduct their own affairs.(The Hindu, 2012)

After statehood, further attempts were made to make peace with the insurgents by formation of a Peace Mission in April 1964, with Jai Prakash Narayan, B. P. Chaliha and Michael Scott as its members. Despite signing of an Agreement for suspension of operation (AGSOP), the insurgents continued to violate the agreement by committing acts of violence resulting eventually in the dissolution of the Peace Mission in 1967. In 1972, the NNC, the NFG were banned as ‘unlawful associations’ under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967. (http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/background/index.html)

Another round of negotiations resulted in an agreement known as ‘Shillong Accord’, signed between the Government of India and a section of the NNC and the NFG on November 11, 1975. Even as the Naga rebels accepted the supremacy of Indian Constitution, agreed to surrender and renounce their demand for secession of Nagaland from India pursuant to the terms of Accord, factionalism within the insurgent cadres surfaced, which declared the ‘Accord as treason and its signatories as traitors’. (Ao, 1993) In 1980, about 140 activists under the leadership of Isak Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S. S. Khaplang formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) which witnessed a further split into NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM) faction in 1988.(Kumar, 2007) After Phizo's death in April 1990, NNC further splintered into two more factions-NNC (A), under Phizo’s daughter Adino leadership, and NNC (K), led by previous NNC Vice-president Khodao Yanthan.(http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shillong_Accord_of_1975.)

Though the basic objective of Naga insurgency was independence and rooted in the Naga sense of identity; tribal unity, culture and religion. India's no compromise policy over independence or secession and strategic-military and political response weakened the movement, fragmented its cadres and brought the moderate factions into political mainstream. But the insurgent factions who continue to pursue their armed struggle do so by relying on outside support. It is important to point out that a crucial dimension of insurgency in Nagaland has been the support of neighbouring countries like China, Pakistan and Myanmar. Though insurgency had indigenous roots, support from outside the country has helped fuel and sustain it for decades. At the heart of China and Pakistan support lies the larger geo-political reality of rivalry...
between India, China and Pakistan: more specifically, events like the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 and Indo-China conflict of 1962. Apart from China's displeasure over India's handling of Tibet question, a larger issue of regional dominance was seen as reasons for China's calculated design to foment trouble in the domestic affairs of India. For Pakistan India's northeast provided an ideal ground to foment trouble as a payback for India which was seen to play a role in east Pakistan which separated from Pakistan in 1971 to become the state of Bangladesh. Even after 1971, Bangladesh continued to support insurgent movements in India's northeast: a response to India's perceived role in supporting rebels in Chittagong Hill tracts. Northern Myanmar has provided extensive support to Nagas against India over training, transit and weapons. Diplomatic support for independent Nagaland was also sought by Phizo from UK, USA, UN, but the West has not been very sympathetic to Naga movement in the cold war period, especially since September 11, 2001 as such militant movements raise collective concerns about western security and political interests.

Currently, fragmentation and factionalism in the insurgent movement has produced smaller groups which lack discipline and commitment to the cause and resort to criminal acts like kidnapping, extortion, drug peddling and killings in the State. Due to this, families in some localities had to move out to other places for months due to the crossfire between the warring NSCN factions. (Verghese, 1996) These groups have emerged as the most striking and dreaded outfit among the insurgent groups in the Northeast. As a result the Naga problem has continued to elude a political solution after more than four decades of violence. While the numbers of in the game players have increased, the objective continues hold appeal. (http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volme16/Article4.htm)

**Mizoram**

Etymologically, Mizoram stand for the ‘land of the men living in the hills’, ‘Mi’ means ‘man’, ‘Zoo’ means ‘hill’, and ‘Ram’ stands for ‘territory’. (Singh, 1984) Situated at the extreme southern boundary of India’s North-east, the state shares border with the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar and comprises of homogeneous population of Christians. It has the distinction of a high literacy rate which is next only to Kerala. (Sathapathy, 2009)

Ethnically, Mizos are a Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman stock. They are internally heterogeneous and composed of several other groups’ like Paite, Lakhers, Lusei, Thado, Ralte, and Shendus. A very small section of its population is known as Chakmas, of the Indo-Aryan stock who migrated from the Chittagong hill tracts in east Bengal. Whereas, the Mizos migrated to the present Mizoram from Burma where they are believed to have lived for a long time, what was originally an egalitarian society for the community in due course transformed into a system of chieftainship (Lal System). (Shastri, Suri and Yadav, 2009) These village chiefs were responsible for the safety and well being of the people but heredity provided them a legitimacy to raid other villages in pursuit of their material interest or protection of perceived religious beliefs and ideologies. (Ganguly and Fidler, 2009)

As a result of British policy of annexation, an expedition in the Lushai Hills brought this area under one administration in 1898, which was subsequently divided into two parts: the North Lushai Hills and the South Lushai Hills. While the North Lushai Hills were placed under government of Assam; the South Lushai Hills district headed by a superintendent, was placed under the Chittagong division of Bengal Province. In 1898, both parts were amalgamated into one district and brought under Assam administration. For further administrative convenience along with other hill districts of Assam and empowered provincial legislature to make laws for them with overriding powers vested in the Governor. (Shastri, Suri and Yadav 2009) More restrictions followed under the Government of India Act 1935, which declared Lushai Hills along with other hill districts of Assam as the ‘excluded area’. It gave Assam Governor the ultimate authority to administer with a Superintendent to carry on routine business. As India came close to independence, a young and educated class of Mizo youth trained in missionary school culture emerged in the Lushai Hills to assert their identity and challenge the authority of the chiefs. It took the form of Mizo Union in April, 1946, a political organization with proclaimed goal to counter the influence of the chiefs and autonomy or independence for people of the region. (Bhaumik and Jayanta Bhattacharya, 2005) A pamphlet called ‘Zoram Independent’ issued by the party stated, "The fact that we speak one language is itself a good reason why we should strive for independence." (Sena, 1985)

Growing consciousness of an oppressive British rule and exploitative chieftain system made Mizos rethink their status and existence. A sense of despair also arose because the chiefs were well protected by the British as a safeguard for their colonial interests. From the 1940s Mizos began to resent the label-backward people, feared eclipse by outsiders from the plains and expressed a desire that they be attached to the Hills of Burma. Such a proposal clearly showed preferences of people of Lushai Hills and their disregard for plains’ people. (Rao, 1994) After independence, an act of Parliament declared Mizoram a district of Assam with special status: known as Lushai Hills Districts. In 1954 the Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chief’s Rights) Act came into
force under jurisdiction of Lushai District Council and Pawi-Lakher region which deprived the chiefs and their ministers of all privileges and abolished chieftainship in Mizoram. (Verghese, 1996)

A contingent factor that led to political organization of Mizo was a severe famine called ‘Mautam in 1959, where administration failed to take necessary action. It resulted in dissidents from Mizo Union and Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) to come together and distribute relief by forming the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF). Laldenga, an employee of District Council resigned his job and became an active member of the new party. But poor communication facilities and inadequate supply of relief material in famine conditions led to further discontent and strained relations between Mizo Union and the central government. Consequently Mizo Union and United Mizo’s Freedom Organization (UMFO) joined All People Hill Leaders Conference (APHLHC) in 1960, while the Mizo National Famine Front transformed itself into a full-fledged political party called the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1961, with Laldenga as its president. A defector from Mizo union named A. Thanglura formed the first Congress unit in the district. (Singh, 2004)

However, deeper roots of insurgency in the region are traced to state policies in pre and post independence period. External boundaries demarcated in pre-independence period created internal divisions which now manifest in demand for ‘Zoram’ (Greater Mizoram) including areas in neighbouring Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Indian states of Assam and Manipur. Further exclusionary legislations kept Mizo isolated which disallowed anti-imperialist spirit to filter in and designs like a ‘Colonial Crown’ under ‘Coupland Plan’ caused resentment among people as attempts to keep them under British control. Though Mizo became part of India at independence some proposed to opt out in favour of an independent state. Post independence, India was seen as apathetic to Mizo cause with unwanted interference in their traditions, customs and regional outlook. In October 1965, a memorandum by the MNF sent to the Prime Minister of India once again made a case for Mizoram’s identity as a distinct nation with sovereign independent status of state. Perceiving an impending threat in such claims the central government geared up anti-insurgency task force even as it engages contending groups in negotiations. (Ganguly, Fidler, 2009) Soon after, in March 1966, the MNF declared ‘Independence for Mizoram’ and launched an attack on Indian security forces with ‘operation jericho’ where about 1500 MNF cadres overran Aizawl, Lunglei and Champhai districts. ‘Stern action’ against the rebels by the Indian army and air force recaptured these districts. (The Hindu, 2013) Airstrikes in Mizoram remain a rare instance of India carrying out an airstrike in a civilian territory.

Thus extremist faction of IMF advocated use of violence to seek independence from India and also created a special armed wing-the Mizo National Army (MNA) for the purpose organized on the pattern of the Indian army under a ramified command structure. (http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_1966_Mizo _National_Front_uprising.) In response, Mizo Hills was declared a ‘disturbed area’ on March 2, 1966 under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958. Mizo insurgents engaged in guerrilla tactics with devastating effect against the security forces and political institutions and systematically eliminated local’s informers and sympathizers. Foreign countries extended support to Mizo insurgency Pakistan was particularly liberal with sanctuary, weapons, training through East Pakistan corridor. Strained Sino-Indian relation in the aftermath of 1962 war gave insurgents the advantage to exploit the situation and seek political, economic and logistic support from an adversary like China countries provided Laldenga the opportunity to exploit Chinese assistance. But the same was not the case with other major countries such as United States, United Kingdom, France, Japan and Indonesia with whom the insurgents opened channels of communication. (Ganguly, Fidler 2009)

Apart from a coercive approach in curbing insurgency, the central government, countered it through political concession and developmental benefits. In 1972, after 20 years, Mizoram, an autonomous district was declared a union territory but Laldenga continued his extremist activities. (Shastri, Suri, Yadav 2009) Continuing attempts at negotiation on the part of Indian government resulted in MNF decision to give up arms and secessionist demands to work out a solution within the framework of Indian constitution. In July 11, 1976, a peace accord was signed at New Delhi between Laldenga and the central government emissaries who acknowledged Mizoram to be an integral part of India. But soon thereafter Laldenga reneged on commitment to Accord and began to violate terms of implementation. He proposed a five point plan in 1981 to solve the Mizo problem, with a demand for a greater Mizoram’. He emphasized Mizo ethnicity with claims that they were Mongolian and Christian by religion, while majority of others were Indo-Aryan, governed by Hindu ethics and philosophy, and resolved to continue the struggle rather than settle for a solution within Indian constitution. (Gupta, 1994)

In the meantime, civil society initiatives and government officials opened another round of negotiations with MNF leader Laldenga resulting in an Accord in 1986 and known as the ‘Mizoram Accord’. It subsequently led to introduction of Mizoram Statehood Bill in Parliament and in 1987; the Union Territory of Mizoram was granted statehood to become the 23rd state of Indian union.
with Laldenga as its first Chief Minister in 1988. (Ghosh, 2014)

**Conclusion**

Ethno-cultural exclusion, uneven economic development, interregional disparities, and alienation are crucial factors behind most ethnic conflicts and insurgencies in northeast India. Its complex social character, isolation and backwardness compared to the other part of the country have given rise to complicated demands in different parts of the region. Vast international borders have also added to sensitive nature of its politics, as external forces fuel insurgency, criminalization, and weapon culture. Thus a region which has more than seventy major ethnic groups and sub groups, two hundred and seventy tribal and non tribal ethnic groups speaking nearly four hundred languages and dialects represents a rare matrix of ethnic diversity. More importantly, the dynamic nature of ethnic contests has given rise to a mushroom growth of movements and conflicts, which is a rare phenomenon in other part of the world. This has led to a growing call in the northeast to consider the third voice in the conflict — the people’s voice and replacing the state Activism with People’s Activism. No doubt the Indian government has made efforts to mitigate the unrest of North eastern people, but in view of the growing problems deeper understanding is needed to deal with it. As an underdeveloped region with tremendous resource constraints, the North east’s developmental task are enormous. It is not in a position to execute this task on its own and requires greater governmental efforts and productive regional cooperation. Economic planning has to focus on the outcome rather than economic growth itself and spread over the whole region rather than remain concentrated in a few areas.

**References**


[17] Laldenga also contributed much to the outbreak of insurgency. He was an ex- Havildar of the army, and worked as a cashier in the Mizo District Council office at Aizawl. But when he saw the people die of starvation due to *mautam* famine, he was rudely shocked by the incidents and gave up his fruitful job and starvation due to *mautam* famine, he was rudely shocked by the incidents and gave up his fruitful job and found the MNFF.

[18] *Mautam* is a Mizo word meaning ‘flowering of bamboos’. It is believed among Mizos that bamboos flower once in 50 years. When bamboos flower, rodent population multiplies to eat those flowers. Once the flowers are exhausted, rodents move to paddy fields and other cultivable lands, eating away everything eatable, thus causing drought.

[20] P. Shilu Ao was a Naga politician who was involved in the negotiations leading to the creation of Nagaland. Ao was served as the first Chief Minister of Nagaland until August 1966.


[22] Phizo was a leader of the movement for independent Nagaland, President of Naga National Council (NNC), began an armed struggle against the Indian state, went underground and stayed in Pakistan and spent the last three decades of his life in exile in UK.


