

Forging peace in Nagaland

Reams have been written about the Framework Agreement signed on August 3, 2015 between Union government and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), or NSCN-IM. The agreement has raised expectations among the Naga people but also apprehension in neighbouring Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, and rightly so. States that have been created after due consideration of a number of factors and their geographical boundaries clearly mapped out can hardly be expected to take kindly to any attempt at rearranging those boundaries. But let's look at whether this is the only sticking point or if there are issues too — between the protagonists of the Naga peace talks, the NSCN-IM, and Delhi.

The two sides

A section of articulate Nagas who have questioned the secrecy around the Framework Agreement believe that its terms need to be discussed and debated. However, this elite conveniently forgets that we are, even today, ruled by a plutocracy and that large sections of the population have and have had no say in matters affecting their lives. So what democracy are they talking about? Is it only the Framework Agreement that will change the entire contour of their present existential crisis? I have my doubts.

Most in Nagaland speak with derision about the NSCN-IM because it is led by Th. Muivah, a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur. The question often asked on social media is, why should a Tangkhul Naga decide the future of the Nagas of Nagaland vide the Framework Agreement? But the counter question is why not?

It is true that the NSCN-IM had, for several decades, used the gun to silence its detractors, and indulged in large-scale extortion and imposed its diktat on the Nagas. It has also tried to sabotage platforms such as the Forum for Naga Reconciliation for alternative discourses on the peace process. But to be fair to the NSCN-IM, its leaders have remained steadfast to the goal of wresting an "honourable settlement" for the Naga people from the Government of India.

In the Indian establishment too, there are layers of prejudice as far as the Naga demand is concerned. There are some in the security establishment and the political dispensation who dismiss outright Naga claims of a "unique history," instead of trying to understand where this claim arises from.

Lessons from JP

It is to the credit of democratic India that it produced a statesman like Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) who, in his interactions with the Nagas, showed incredible comprehension and empathy about their history and origin. JP traversed the length and breadth of Nagaland, later bringing out a book, *Nagaland Mein Shanti Ka Prayas* (The Attempts to Forge Peace in Nagaland). He was perhaps one of the first national leaders to argue about a civilisational unity in India which preceded its political unity. JP was speaking about all the tribes inhabiting India's easternmost periphery, much before the term "India" was coined to define this country. Even today the tribes of this region are not influenced by the "Indian" culture. They are proud inheritors of a unique culture.

Today it is those in Naga civil society and political leaders who make visits to Delhi to prevail upon the 'Indian' establishment to take a more pragmatic view of the peace deal and not regurgitate the idea that India must settle all contentious issues on the basis of the Constitution. The Nagas

contend that they never signed the Instrument of Accession to India (which the Khasi chieftains of present-day Meghalaya and the Maharajahs of Manipur and Tripura did) and hence cannot be made prisoners to a Constitution they never had a hand in crafting. To add to the predicament, India has not produced another statesman of the stature of JP who would break bread with the Nagas in the spirit of a fellow traveller who does not smirk at the Naga claim of a unique history.

But at the same time, the Nagas too must admit that they have journeyed a long way with the rest of India. Both have developed a comfort level with each other and taken cognisance of the sticking points that prevent the resolution of a long-drawn struggle. Therefore, it is time to shed political egos and move on keeping in mind the best interests of the next generation of aspirational Nagas. Today the Nagas have transcended the victimhood syndrome and shed their hatred for an India once perceived to be the enemy. The current interlocutor, R.N. Ravi, too has been most open and accepting of a broad spectrum of views from a cross-section of Naga civil society.

It is in this climate of mutual respect that the Framework Agreement ought to proceed, which is what drives it, according to Mr. Ravi. Insularity and intransigence from either side or from both sides is unlikely to result in any good for the Naga people.

Speaking of a peace deal within the Constitution, let us admit that pluralism is its cornerstone. And pluralism legitimises the compromises that are necessary to negotiate contesting claims in a country like India.

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