

Gathering the tribe

Perhaps one of the most talked about issues as far as the Northeast is concerned is the Naga struggle for sovereignty which started a day before India's Independence. In the Naga mind, this issue oscillates between nostalgia for its unique history and the promise of a better future without disturbing this irreplaceable past. The problem with reality is that it does not allow us to romance the past.

The Naga national workers are no longer in the prime of their lives. The chairman of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (I-M), Isak Chisi Swu, has passed away and Thuingaleng Muivah too is getting on in years. In an article, 'The Presence of the Past', Roger Cohen says, "As we grow older the past looms larger. The past is full of possibilities. The future may seem wan by comparison and, for each of us, we know where it ends. With a bang or whimper..."

Reams have been written, several seminars and workshops organised, and there have been daily cogitations on the Naga peace talks since they started in 1997. In August 2015, when the Framework Agreement was signed between the Government of India and the NSCN (I-M), expectations were high that an "honourable settlement" was in the offing. The problem is with the use of words which lend themselves to several interpretations depending on who the stakeholders are. What is honourable for the NSCN(I-M) may not seem honourable enough to Naga society as a whole, with disparate aspirations and interpretations. Be that as it may, the Centre's Interlocutor for the Naga Peace talks, R.N. Ravi, has taken on a formidable task.

No other interlocutor has interacted with and met so many Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) and civil society groups. For the first time, Mr. Ravi was able to push the envelope and create that integral space where all voices are heard with equal respect, sometimes at the risk of the NSCN (I-M) calling off the talks, since they felt that being signatories to the Framework Agreement, they alone have the right to call the shots. This fact needs to be appreciated. And it has to be understood that the Indian establishment too is not an easy customer. There is scepticism and there are doubts whether wider consultations would result in cacophony, making the task of arriving at a solution much more difficult.

For the interlocutor it's a tightrope walk. The Naga people are a proud race and have held fast to their cultures, traditions and language. Yet it cannot be denied that tribal loyalty often comes in the way of a collective discourse for the future of Nagaland. Perhaps one organisation that has brought together people from all tribes is the ACAUT (Against Corruption and Unabated Taxation), which is seemingly inclusive of all tribes and a mass movement of sorts to protest against taxation by different armed groups and factions. So far, about 33 delegations, including the different tribal Hohos and recently the six NNPGs, have had their say. For Mr. Ravi, it is an opportunity to further understand how the Framework Agreement should pan out.

But Mr. Ravi's visit to Dimapur last month was also seen with some scepticism. A video clip of the public reception given to him drew some uncharitable comments. Is the pent-up rage and frustration among the youth due to the protracted peace talks or does the rage spring from something else?

For the Naga people at this juncture, the most pragmatic step is to take a balanced view of the past. Obsession with one point of view hinders any kind of progress. With 16 major tribes, each with a sense of nationality of its own and every tribe having its village republics which is a crucial part of their culture, there will be divergent 'national' narratives. Naga nationalism is both a sentiment and a movement.

Ethnic boundaries of yore which went beyond geopolitical borders of the present nation can be both problematic and defy pragmatism. Then there is the issue of the Indian nation state, a term that is also problematic but which has provided its own stability for 70 years. If one were to go by Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities", then all the communities of the Northeast fall in that ambit.

In an interview to the Nagaland Post, Mr. Ravi said the ongoing peace talks may have been initiated by the NSCN (I-M) but it has now become more inclusive. One ray of hope as far as the Framework Agreement is concerned is that there appears to be a political consensus and faith in the process. This in itself is a huge step forward. Now that the tribal Hohos and the NNPGs have all thrown in their support, there is hope that the much-awaited political solution will arrive sooner than later.

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The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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