

Gleanings from the Regional Press

The Nagas' Wild-Goose Chase*

BETWEEN THE LINES

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My hunch is that the government's invitation to chairman Isak Chishi Swu and general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) has been through Union Minister Oscar Fernandes who had promised them to raise the level of talks to the Prime Minister. That they were not happy with K Padmanabhaiah, the Indian face of the negotiations, was clear when he left last year after conducting talks for more than a decade. They considered him too junior to deliver the goods.

Yet it goes to the credit of Padmanabhaiah that he was able to keep the discussions on track. He had the ceasefire extended again and again. But he realized, as New Delhi did, that a ceasefire is the means to reach a settlement, not the end by itself. The NSCN-IM was using the period to consolidate the hostile Nagas and to win international opinion. Muivah visited Beijing and got in touch with the ULFA leaders to put pressure on India.

I have followed the jig-jaw puzzle which the Naga leaders of Socialist Council have placed before the government to have a political understanding. The reason why they have not been able to solve it is the wall they have hit, not due to New Delhi's lack of efforts, but because both Swu and Muivah have failed to face the facts. I have had a few meetings with them, the last one about a year ago at Delhi in the house which the government has allotted to them. They continued to harp on the sovereignty of Nagaland and the regrouping of Nagas' territories in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh into Greater Nagaland. Both demands are not tenable: one, because they strike at the very roots of India's unity; and the second because they shrink the territories of three States without their consent.

Take the question of sovereignty. How can the State of Nagaland be sovereign at the expense of India's sovereignty? Muivah has said in a press interview this week that they would not accept anything less than sovereignty. On the other hand, Home Secretary GK Pillai has talked about a State with special status. The two sides are poles apart. And this has been the position since independence in August 1947.

It is true that some sections of the Nagas have not accepted New Delhi's tutelage from the beginning. Phizo, leader of the Naga movement which included Swu and Muivah, was the most rebellious. He too pitched his demand for a sovereign Nagaland. Yet he said before his death that the Nagas had to find "a solution within India." His old comrade, Khodao-Yanthan,

communicated this when he met me at India House, London some time in 1990. I was then the High Commissioner to the UK.

Take the response of the general run of Nagas to the demand for independence. They have been participating in elections, both for Parliament and the State Legislature, for many decades. Their voting has been more than 60 per cent. None, not even the Church which influences them, has ever challenged the polls or doubted their authenticity. Elections have been fair and transparent. Muivah is right when he says that the sovereignty depends on the will of the people. But they have elected their representatives to Parliament and the State Assembly to register their free will in favour of the Indian Union which comprises 28 States, including Nagaland.

As for the redrawing of Nagaland's map to integrate the Naga habitants in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, it is chauvinistic and parochial in character. People of different ethnic and linguistic identity are spread all over the country. They cannot be grouped together in one State because of their movement necessitated by economic, business and other considerations. In fact, the slogan of one-people, one-language does not fit into a secular society which the Indian Constitution ensures. The danger is that the linguistic grouping may lead to demands for autonomy and self-determination. On a smaller scale, India has already experienced it after the reorganization of States because some of them have become islands of chauvinism.

I belong to Punjab. I would like all Punjabis to be grouped together. That would mean the splitting of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The two States are opposed to such a demand because they would have to part with their territory and also disturb the homogeneity of the population which has taken place over the years.

It is not that New Delhi has not tried to see how far Muivah's demand for Greater Nagaland can be met. It sent a feeler to Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. They strongly opposed the cutting off the areas where the Nagas are predominant. It was a correct response since, after living in a particular State for years, the Nagas are as much Manipuris, Assamese or Arunachal Pradeshis as other habitants in the State are. Their voting has made all the difference in the complexion of the governments elected.

I recall Muivah telling me that Nagaland and India could have a "joint defence," the Naga "forces" joining hands with the Indian forces. I can appreciate the demand for integration of his men in the Indian Army but of not forming a parallel force. Our defence establishment may not even open its doors to the Nagas who have been fighting against the Indian Army.

This happened to the Indian National Army (INA), under the command of Subash Chandra Bose. Jawaharlal Nehru was inclined to absorb the INA personnel. Both the Congress and the Muslim League, which were to succeed the British, supported the INA case. Yet the military top brass had its way. Their argument

was that the INA's integration would tell upon the morale of the armed forces. Even when Nehru became the Prime Minister, he had to go along with the wishes of the military commanders.

I have not liked the press release issued by the Muivah group which calls itself ministry in charge of information and publicity of the Government of People's Republic of Nagalim (GPRN). Its cryptic press release says: "Our general secretary will meet the Indian Prime Minister after arriving from Amsterdam." The press interview Muivah has given is worse. He says he is willing to look at the proposals that the Government of India will present.

It is time that the Nagas operating under the illusion of freedom came down to the earth. It took Phizo some four decades to realize that some status within the Indian Union was a realistic demand. Two decades have passed since his death. It is time for the National Socialist Council of Nagaland to work for socialism, for food, jobs and egalitarianism in the existing State of Nagaland. Muivah men are engaged in a wild-goose chase. And they should know that violence is a self-defeating exercise in a democratic polity.

* Reprinted from *The Sentinel* website, www.sentinelassam.com, dtd. Guwahati, Wednesday, March 10, 2010.

The best way to cheer yourself up is to try to cheer somebody else up.

— Mark Twain.

To bring up a child in the way he should go, travel that way yourself once in a while

-Josh Billings.

I count him braver who overcomes his desires than one who conquers his enemies, for the hardest victory is over self.

— Aristotle.

When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.

— Alexander Graham Bell.

Source: *Indian Currents*. Vol. XXII. Issue No. 5. 25-31 January 2010.
