

THE NEEDLE'S EYE How do Naga peace and Article 371A of the Constitution belong together?

Sauce for the Gander


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The abrogation of Article 370 and the five-week-old lockdown in Srinagar have triggered tremors 3,000 km away in Nagaland. Home minister Amit Shah repeated over the weekend at a meeting of the North Eastern Council that Article 371, which bestows special status on northeastern states, would not be touched by the Modi government. Why is this significant?

Nagas do not pay tax on income earned within the state (they pay indirect taxes). Entry by other Indians (and foreigners) into Nagaland, as well as Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, is restricted by Inner Line Permits issued under the colonial Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873. And Article 371A of the Constitution, enacted in 1963, confers special provisions on Nagaland, with clause (a) reading: "...no Act of Parliament in respect of (i) religious or social practices of the Nagas, (ii) Naga customary law and procedure, (iii) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, (iv) ownership and transfer of land and its resources, shall apply to the State of Nagaland unless the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland by a resolution so decides."

A few days before the J&K clamp-down, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's chief interlocutor with the Nagas, R N Ravi, was quietly appointed the governor of Nagaland. Ravi has been in talks with the dominant Naga faction, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), and he signed the 'historic' Framework Agreement with the NSCN-IM's chief negotiator Thuingaleng

Muivah with much fanfare in Modi's presence on August 3, 2015. Since then, the trail has gone cold.

The Framework Agreement has been kept secret, as have the talks Ravi has been holding with NSCN-IM. (He has also been trying to rope in other rebel factions.) His dual role in the Kohima Raj Bhavan might just tip the scales: Ravi has announced that Modi has given him three months to hammer out a final peace deal.

The Hills Have a Heart

In 2015, Ravi told me, "The Nagas want to be with India, they don't want to be within India." That is the nub of the problem. The Nagas have always been rebellious and believe in their distinct identity and autonomy, although they are split among many tribes (17 in Nagaland, about the same number in Manipur, three in Arunachal Pradesh, one in Assam, and several across the border in Myanmar). The Naga National Council declared independence on August 14, 1947, one day before the rest of India, and claimed that a plebiscite overwhelmingly opted for a separate Naga nation. Rocky integration into the Indian Union led to the outbreak of an armed insurgency in the 1960s.

Years of army counter-insurgency operations in the region only pushed down rebellions that reared their heads periodically. The 1975 Shillong Accord was supposed to bring peace to the Naga Hills, but fell apart.

Much has changed since I wrote about the northeast's human tragedy in October 1982 (bit.do/e8hfg). In fact, even since I wrote more recently in December 2015 about the region (bit.do/e8hCh), the BJP has dramatically expanded its footprint in the northeast.

But the Nagas' hunger for separateness endures. Niketu Irulu, a peace activist in Kohima, likens the Nagas to the Sami, the semi-nomadic reindeer-herding tribe dispersed across northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia's Murmansk region. Their habitat and culture have been threatened by mining, logging, wind



FILE PHOTO

Special status symbol?

farms and military activity.

Protected Nagaland has also been exploited, mostly by corrupt contractors and officials in an environment where government jobs have, as chief minister Neiphiu Rio said recently, reached saturation point. The state is rich in resources. It has oil reserves and can grow tea and rubber. Its predominantly Christian population is 80% literate, and largely English-speaking. But the economy is heavily subsidised by the Centre.

The 2019-20 Budget listed central assistance — grants and loans — totalling ₹7,894 crore, nearly 45% of total receipts. It wants more. Rio said he has asked the 15th Finance Commission for funds totalling over ₹84,000 crore in the 2020-25 period. "We also pointed out that many critical infrastructure created during the initial years of Statehood are now in a dilapidated condition, and that they are on the verge of collapse," he told the assembly in February.

The NSCN-IM does not seem to have a budgetary squeeze. It continues to extort 'taxes' from citizens in Nagaland and Manipur. Over the past 22 years since it agreed to a ceasefire with New Delhi, it has been running a parallel government of the 'People's Republic of Nagalim' from Camp Hebron, 35 km from Dimapur. It calls itself 'Independent Sovereign Christian Socialist (and) Democratic'.

The delay in a final pact is telling on the NSCN. Earlier this year, the Assam Rifles forced the rebels to flee an illegal camp and seized an arms cache in Manipur's Ukhrul district. (The battle-hardened Assam Rifles is looking to beef up its aerial surveillance with state-of-the-art drones). On May 21, an Arunachal legislator, Tirong Aboh, his son and nine others were killed in an ambush by suspected NSCN-IM guerrillas.

The rebels have accused Ravi of 'capricious and bossy' body language. An August 24 statement said NSCN chairman Qhehezu Tuccu and Muivah wrote to Modi about the 'doubt and confusion' among the Nagas over whether a final agreement could be reached.

Flying the Solution Flag

Major sticking points are that the NSCN wants to fly its own flag and enforce its own 'Yehzabo' (constitution). "Without these two core issues solved, any solution would be far from honourable because Nagas' pride and identity is deeply entrenched here," the NSCN said.

Sources tell me that the government may allow a pan-Naga Hoho (assembly) if it sticks to tribal, cultural and religious matters, but will not budge on the flag or constitution and the Nagas' demand of 'shared sovereignty'. How can it after Kashmir? As they say, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

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