

KONFERENZEN

Konferenzbeiträge

The Naga issue seen from the theory of conflict

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The ethnic conflict in the Naga Hills which began after the emergence of India as an independent state is well known. This conflict reached its climax after 1956 when the Naga Federal Government as the representative of this tribal society was created and declared Nagaland as a sovereign and independent state.

In this context there are some very interesting questions about the genesis of this conflict. For instance about the early leadership, power constellation and aims of the Nagas during that time, or the question which measures from the Indian side prompted the Nagas to fight for independence, or questions of conflict management and so on.

After strong struggles between the Naga rebels and the Indian Army resulting in thousands of victims on both sides, the conflict seemed to be solved in 1963 with the creation of Nagaland as a state within the Indian Union. But soon after this event it was clear that the conflict was not solved. The riots went on. Different guerilla groups continued their fight against the Indian central government. Their aim was an independent Nagaland which should include all Naga tribes in India and Burma.

A new intersection was the agreement of Shillong in 1975 where some guerilla groups recognised the Indian constitution and got rehabilitation. But the years after this agreement have shown that till today resistance groups are alive and the conflict is smouldering. We have to deal with a latent conflict.

These guerilla groups are seen by many Nagas with sympathy, even by some Naga politicians. Their demand for a greater Naga state independent from India and the expulsion of all "foreigners" is still popular. And this goes on after an enormous amount of development aid was granted by the Indian central government and after a considerable progress of development in Nagaland.

The question I want to ask is: Why does this conflict continue to smoulder? And is a new eruption possible? To find reasons for this latent conflict I try to analyze the current development in Nagaland. There are three points of interest: the socio-economic development, the cultural development and the social development.

1. The socio-economical development

Even nowadays the majority of the Naga population is living in traditional houses and working in agriculture as *jhum* cultivators. Because of governmental rural development programmes the percentage of permanent cultivators is increasing.

These programmes are connected with the award of credits, seeds and fertilizers. But many Nagas are not interested in these programmes because they imply considerable socio-cultural change. Often rich Nagas belonging to the intelligentsia and the political elite use these programmes for their own benefit.¹ Within these programmes there are also planned resettlements of Naga villages from the top of the mountains into the valleys along all-weather roads. These new settlements running as administrative centres are provided with water pipelines, electricity, community centres and so on.²

Today nearly every Naga village has a primary school. Various training centres and high schools exist in Nagaland.³ In Naga villages there are today also shops run by Indians from other parts of the country. They are selling household articles, clothes and food. The once self-sufficient Nagas today do not produce enough rice for their living.

According to Indian papers Nagaland has currently to import 70% of its daily used products. Every month more than 9000 mt of rice have to be imported into Nagaland.⁴ The reasons have to be seen in the declining number of cultivators, in the growing number of inhabitants of Nagaland and in the beginning shortage of land. In 1981, only 73% of the Nagas were working in agriculture, 2% worked in industrial jobs and 25% had other occupations, mainly in the administration.

In 1951 Nagaland had a population of 212,000 inhabitants. Forty years later in 1991 there exist 1,215,573 people (one million more!). Although the inner line regulation exists and although there are laws to protect Naga landownership, a growing number of members of other ethnic groups is currently successful in settling in Nagaland and making a living. For instance Sikhs, dominating the traffic system, Bengalis, Nepalese and others. The greatest number of non-Naga people is registered in the area around Dimapur near the Assamese border.

The percentage of the scheduled tribal population (Angami-, Sema- and Zeliang-Nagas and Kukis) is here only 53%. Besides them exists a large number of people coming from other parts of the country.⁵ Nagaland has only a few industrial plants which are mainly controlled by Indians from Assam, Bengal or Punjab. The market for fruits, tea and coffee is in the hands of non-Nagas too. Of reasonable economic importance are the trade with wood and the oil production. Their profits are going into the hands of a few Naga-businessmen who work together with Indian partners. Rising ecological problems like soil erosion and droughts are the result of excessive wood cuttings.⁶

Despite the poor economic basis there is a lot of money circulating in Nagaland. This is due to on the enormous grants from the central government which Nagaland gets every year. Compared with these large sums the results of development are poor. Especially simple Nagas living in areas far from the administration centres do not see so much of this money. Large amounts of these grants are slipping into dark channels.

2. The cultural development

A distinct change is going on in the cultural life of the Naga people. Here I shall give only some examples, for instance clothes. Many Nagas today wear cheap clothes imported from the plains. Whereas in the past every Naga woman wove

her own cloth with special colours and patterns different from village to village, this handicraft has lost its importance nowadays.⁷

Besides it is currently no longer possible to wear traditional clothes like short skirts because of the permanent presence of outsiders like staff members of the army and the bureaucracy or traders and because of Christian influence. Young Naga people also prefer to wear modern clothes.

In the past, Naga houses were built of wood. Every house had fine carvings or paintings which show special religious or status symbols. Modern houses now built are more simple. Also the once splendid *morungs*, the houses for the young men, lost their function and are declining.

Many of the Naga festivals, for instance the feast of merit, combined with special meals, clothes, dances and songs lost their meaning. In the past the community was of great importance for the Naga society. Nowadays individuality has more importance. As a result the moral values within the Naga society have changed. Alcoholism, prostitution and problems with drugs are affecting Naga society today.

This cultural change as a whole is seen by the majority of the Nagas as a loss.⁸

3. The social development

The current Nagas are no more a homogeneous primitive tribal society. Comparing the different Naga tribes to each other, one sees that some Naga tribes like Angami-, Ao- or Sema-Nagas, on the one hand, gain more profits from the development measures than others. These tribes are supplying also many politically active members. Ao- and Sema-Nagas are closely associated with the Congress Party, the Angamis more with the Naga National Democratic Party and the Naga Peoples Council.

On the other hand there are tribes like the Konyak- and Tangkul-Nagas, which do not benefit very much from the development measures. They are the main recruiting ground for the guerilla organizations like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland and the Zeliangrong movement.

Many Nagas still adhere to the traditional pattern of the Naga society. In the peripheral areas traditional village elders still enjoy a high reputation. Apart from them a group of young and intelligent Nagas has increased. They distinguish themselves from the old traditional pattern of living and thinking. These people make up the majority of the Naga-bureaucracy. They are identical or connected with the growing group of market oriented agriculturists and businessmen in the technical and industrial sector.

Often they are connected with Indian businessmen who benefit from the period after 1963 in Nagaland and from the support by the Indian central government. This group is benefiting most from the development aid but also from corruption and misappropriation of governmental money.⁹ They exploit today other Nagas as well as Assamese, Nepalese and other immigrants in their enterprises.

This group is the economically strongest group of the Naga society and identical with political elite. But this group is also split into different fractions with various political aims. The majority of them has recognized that a secession of

Nagaland from the Indian Union would not be in their interest. But they nevertheless are supporting the demands of the guerilla movement, for instance the creation of a greater Nagaland with all territories inhabited by Nagas in Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Burma. This would increase their power and influence. Moreover, this group dislikes the "Indians" on whom they depend.

Tribalism also affects the Naga elite. Every tribal or political group within Nagaland is fighting for more influence and power, is interested to gain more benefit from the economic resources as well as from the development aid, and to capture the posts in the administrations.

Oppositional groups try to strengthen their position through their connection with the guerilla movement. It is also said that some Naga politicians are interested in the continued existence of the guerilla because it guarantees them further development aid from the central government.¹⁰

On closer examination of the economic, cultural and social development since 1963 as a whole it will be clear that an enormous change has taken place in Naga society within just one generation.

The traditional primitive tribal economy was considerably influenced by a market orientated development. The result was a deformation of the socio-economic development. This is shown by the uneven development of the different tribes, the insufficient interest of Nagas in technical and industrial development and the excessive growth of the bureaucracy.

The forced change from *jhum* cultivation to permanent cultivation is also of great importance. This process is connected with the transition of collective land belonging to the village, the clan or the family to privately owned land as well as the beginning process of land alienation.

There is a drastic loss of cultural identity in the Naga society. There are regional differences. In marginal rural areas this process is going on step by step, in urban centres it is taking place very fast. The once homogeneous society of head hunters and *jhum* cultivators has developed into a society which includes both *jhum* cultivators as well as modern technocrats. In the past, every individual in this homogeneous social community had a particular place according to his age and social reputation. Nowadays the social structures are split. Instead of their traditional authorities the majority of the Nagas are now confronted with a power elite which is corrupt and in league with the "foreign" power.

4. Conclusion

In my opinion the Nagas have to fight currently against a deep identity crisis. Naturally they try to find solutions to overcome this dilemma and to defend themselves against this development. In spite of the above mentioned development measures like setting up schools, electrification, building water pipelines and roads there exists a discontent with their current situation and sympathy with the guerilla movement and its aims.

In this context one has to assess the attitude of the Nagas to the Indians. This attitude is especially influenced by the presence of the Indian army and its actions. Its strength in Nagaland was still 150,000 men in the eighties. There were reports on the army's brutal actions in Nagaland like village re-groupings, burn-

ing of villages and crops, collective fines, tortures and rapes in the case of suspected support for the guerilla.

Even in 1986, 108 villages in the Tuensang and the Mon District were directly controlled by the army.¹¹ The army is a main power in Nagaland. The army and its actions are identified with India by the ordinary Nagas. Relief actions sponsored by the army for the population like medical aid receive less attention than they deserve.

Non-Nagas are also working in the civil service in Nagaland and take part in controlling industrial enterprises and the exploiting of natural resources like wood and oil. Within the Naga population there is a widespread feeling that "the Indians" exploit Nagaland.¹²

The Indian central government is not given due credit for its development aid, because a large amount of this aid does not reach the people and is going into the pockets of some privileged groups (Nagas and non-Nagas).

There are currently three patterns of conflict in Nagaland. And all these three patterns of conflict are merging into each other.

1. *The political conflict*

The first conflict is due to the Naga quest for autonomy. A partial solution was reached by concessions from both sides which lead to the foundation of Nagaland. Further concessions from the Indian side were the government's willingness to negotiate with the guerilla and the development aid for Nagaland in the following years.

But this conflict is still kept alive because of the presence of the Indian Army and the growing number of non-Naga immigrants into Nagaland. The large number of soldiers in Nagaland seems to show the insecurity of the central government with regard to the loyalty of the Nagas. And indeed the idea of independence has advocates not only within the guerilla. As to the growing number of outsiders two points of view should be considered. First of all it was necessary for the process of modernisation to get competent people from other parts of India. On the other hand, a lot of these people were also interested in profiting from this situation, and there were illegal immigrants ignoring the inner line regulation. For the Nagas just emerging from a society of primitive cultivators the economically better trained and successful outsiders are seen as a threat.

2. *Tribalism*

The conflicts between the different Naga tribes are going back to the times of the head hunters. During the period of the armed struggle against the Indian Army these conflicts were pushed into the background.

Through the different socio-economic development and the uneven share in the economic and political power these conflicts are breaking up again. This is seen in the struggle for power between the political parties of Nagaland based on tribal bias and the support for the guerilla movement by some tribes.

3. *The identity conflict*

This conflict increased through the forced development after 1963, concerning more or less the whole culture and the way of life of the Nagas especially in urban centres. The reasons have to be seen in the abrupt change from a primitive

to a modern society. It is certainly not so that the majority of the Nagas refuse to change their life style. They accept many of the new improvements such as water pipelines, electricity and so on. And even Hindi films are very popular. But within a short time they lost values which are called nowadays "primitive". And they do not see that the new values associated with the "foreigners" are better for them.

But it is difficult for the Naga people to conceive of a future in which the positive side of development can be combined with the preservation of their cultural traditions. And for the Indian government the Naga people count mainly as an object of development instead of a subject. On both sides there are so far no practical ideas about the process of integrating the Nagas into India as a multi-ethnic state. The majority of the Nagas sees India represented by the army, the bureaucracy and the businessmen as a threat. But many Nagas recognize that there is no alternative to cooperation.

As a matter of fact, all three patterns of conflict are amalgamated. They are different expressions of the process of nation building in India and especially in the Northeast. That means they are influenced by movements for autonomy, movements against "foreigners" and the socio-political development in this part of India.

As I have tried to show, it is necessary to see the Naga problem in its complexity and to assess it as a conflict in the context of nation building and not primarily as a result of external influences and interests or as power struggles between different political groups. So far there is no adequate conflict perception on both sides. This should be the first step for a future conflict management.

As I have shown there were only some attempts at managing the first type of conflict. The second type - the problem of tribalism - can be solved only within the process of social development and nation building. The third type of conflict - the identity crisis - can only be managed by means of constructive work in a spirit of mutual consent. The Naga problem cannot be solved very quickly, and it will be with us for quite some time.

- *) Discussion paper in the panel "Violence, Conflict and Conflict Resolution" at the 12th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Berlin, 23-26 September 1992

Notes

- 1) Jamir, R.L., "Agricultural development in Nagaland", *Journal of social research*, 27 (1984 Ranchi) 1, p.68-70; *The Times of India*, 27.4.1981.
- 2) *The Times of India*, 6.9.1978 and 24.2.1984.
- 3) The percentage of literates in Nagaland is very high. According the Census of 1991 61,3% of the population of Nagaland were literates. See: *The basic facts of Nagaland*, Kohima: Government of Nagaland, Directorate of Information and Public Relation, 1991, p. 6.
- 4) *Nagaland*, Kohima: Government of Nagaland, Directorate of Information and Public Relation, 1991, p. 22.
- 5) *Rural development plan of selected blocks in Nagaland*, New Delhi 1979, p. 38. It is suspected that this numbers are referring to the Census of 1971.
- 6) Sema, H., *Emergence of Nagaland*, Delhi 1986, p. 177.
- 7) J. Jacobs, *The Nagas*, London 1990, p. 172.
- 8) *Statesman weekly*, 3.11.1979, p. 4; *India today*, 31.7.1989, pp.66-69.
- 9) *India today*, 31.7.1989, p. 67; *The Times of India*, 1.8.1988, 6.8.1988, 27.12.1988 and 10.1.1989.
- 10) *The Times of India*, 27.4.1981.
- 11) *Ibid.*, 4.4.1986 and 8.1.1989.
- 12) *Ibid.*, 27.4.1981; *India today*, 31.7.1989, p. 69. It is interesting to remark that also in the present time though living in India a lot of Nagas do not see themselves as Indians.