

Naga issue and Nehru: A brief note

Pandit Nehru visited the Kohima, in the company of the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu in 1953. When a Naga delegation wished to meet Nehru to present a memorandum however, official refused to allow them audience. Nagas were angered by the attitude of the officials. At the time, Nehru and his guest U Nu turned up to address a public meeting they witnessed their audience (Nagas) walking out as they arrived. Renowned Historian Ramchandra Guha in his book "India after Gandhi" states that in one account the Nagas bared their bottoms as they went. In another, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, said into a live microphone: 'Papa, wo jaa rahe hain (Father, these people are all leaving).

Taking the viewed of "moderate Naga" leaders and Mokochung Convention, wherein the Sixteen-Point Memorandum accepted, the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru enhanced sense of urgency to rush up the creation of Nagaland State (Naga Hills district of Assam). However, the Governor of Assam was continuing to object. Nehru told him: "When a limb has become gangrenous, for God's sake cut it off at once before the whole body is infected. Can't you see you will be doing yourself more harm than good by trying to cling on to the Nagas?" So, Nehru mid-wifed the birth of Nagaland state through a caesarean. However, the creation of Nagaland in 1963 failed to subdue Naga struggle rather the "extremist Naga" leaders took reactionary path by launching insurgency movement.

Since the inception of Naga struggle for political self-determination the North-Eastern region witnessed emergent of several insurgent groups based on ethnicity. The Naga political movement is one of the oldest political struggles in the Southeast Asian region. The Naga people defy the Indian nation building process and its imperial imposition to their ancestral land. Eventually, the struggle took on an insurrectionary form in the early fifties. The armed wing of Naga militia emerged under the organisation of Naga National Council (NNC). Nagas initially fought against the British for intruding their "way of life". The NNC's leader Phizo initiation in fact strengthened and help the various Naga communities came together one common platform of "Nagaism." Today, some writers often referred Naga political issue as the "mother of insurgency" in the North Eastern region.

In the early stage of Naga political movement, the Pandit Nehru is taken the matter very lightly and non-committed. Some scholars pointed out that the tragedy unleashed on the Naga Hills could have been avoided had a serious and consistent effort been made to understand the Nagas' initial demand for "home rule". But pre-conceived notion, arrogance and the heady brew of power prevented the national leaders from trying to see things from the other's view-point even after the NNC's successful boycott of the 1952 election and its plebiscite. After initial blunders, the Indian State did try to respond to the situation in a positive manner by creating the state of Nagaland in 1963. However, creating of Nagaland state in fact, segregate large section of Naga population now fall under the administration of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal.

From the first initiation, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru strongly objected to the concept of an overall independent Naga Hills. However, he promised to accommodate certain demands of the Nagas under the Constitution of India. The NNC insist to be inserted on the form of the 9 (nine) Points agreement (Hydari Agreement) that the Naga would have right to secede if they so desired, after ten years from the date the constitution came into force. But this was totally rejected by Pandit Nehru.

The Naga People's Convention (NPC) with the traditional representatives of different Naga groups belonging to the Naga Hills as well as Tuensang area and also from other Naga areas was organised and held the Convention in Kohim (1957). Nine members Naga delegation met Pandit Nehru and presented the convention's resolution. Nehru assured Nagas to accommodate the proposal through necessary Constitution amendment. The NPC deliberate a 16-Point Plan to establish a Nagaland State within the Indian Union. The Convention under the chairmanship of Imkongliba unanimously endorsed to constitute a

single administrative unit under the External Affairs Ministry of the Government of India. Hitherto, the Clause 13 Of 16-Point Memorandum stressed for the “Consolidation of contiguous Naga areas”. It read as, “The delegation wished the following to be placed on record: The Naga leaders expressed the wish for the contiguous areas to join the new State.”

Indeed, the “16-Point Proposal” between the NPC and Gol under the Ministry of External Affairs opened a new political corridor for the absorption into the Indian Constitution. With this agreement the Prime Minister Nehru introduced the Nagaland Statehood Bill on 28 August 1962 in the Lok Sabha. The article was inserted namely 371 (A)-Special Provision with respect to the State of Nagaland and accommodate many aspects of the 16-Point submitted by the moderate Nagas delegations led by Imkongliba. For instance, “no Act of Parliament in respect of – religious, social practices, customary law and procedure, ownership and transfer of land and its resources.....”Unfortunately, the Pandit Nehru ignored the most important Clauses like-“Naga areas under the Ministry of External Affairs”, and issues related to land and Naga integration (Consolidation of Forest Areas and Consolidation of Contiguous Naga Areas).

The Prime Minister Pandit Nehru obliged moderate Nagas’ viewd but pay no attention to “extremist” Nagas assertion. In this connection, the Government of India adopted a confrontationist approached by imposing Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. One scholar viewed the outcome as the Union government was making extraordinary political concessions to the Naga People’s Convention, leading to the creation of Nagaland, Nehru displayed an uncharacteristic propensity for tough military measures to put down the rebellion. Army atrocities in Naga Hills increased which further deepened Naga hatred to Indian. Ramachandra Guha comment as a small community of rebels had faced the Indian state to send in large contingents of military to suppress it.

As mentioned, Nehru takes the Naga issue very lightly in the beginning. Nehru’s personal secretary Mullik “My Years with Nehru” states that Pandit Nehru, Prime Minister of India, got impression that Phizo was a crank and need not be taken seriously. At the same time, some Nagas had impression of been betrayed as the agreement signed them with Hydari had not been respected. Further, section of the Naga leaders felt betrayed not been fulfilling 16-Points Proposal.

In 1960s and 1970s, there was series of peace talks between Naga leaders and Government of India. This included “Peace Mission” headed by JP Narayan, Michael Scott and BP Chaliha. The peace Mission suggested the Naga hostiles to abandon the dream of independence and settle for autonomy within the Union, all they had to give up is control the Army, foreign affairs, and currency. In all other respects they would be free to mould their destinies as they pleased. Unfortunately, the peace talk ended major breakdown because both the groups are adamant to their stand.

Moderate Nagas’ objective came into reality on 1 December 1963, the date for the inauguration the Nagaland state. As stated by Ramachandra Guha that Nehru would have been keen to inaugurate it himself. But journey to Kohima was long arduous, and perhaps he also remembered the hostile reception he had got there back in 1953.

Indeed, decades of confrontation between Government of India and Naga insurgent, now the two parties called for ceasefire and peace talks. However, there is no any concrete political understanding emerge in the current peace talks. Observing present ethno-politics of the region, Naga issue, which had been simmering since inception of free India, the present trend of peace talks for durable settlement remain “indefinable.” Ramachandra Guha summarised as hidden away from the eyes of the world, unknown even to most Indians, the Naga rebellion was withal a serious headache for the government of India