

Naga Nationalism: Out of the Box Settlement?

By Abraham Lotha:Published on 29/02/2012

Out of the box. Muivah is fond of saying that the Indo-Naga conflict will be solved out of the box. Whether the conflict is settled within or outside the Indian Constitution, one has to give credit to the Government of India (Gol) and the NSCN (IM) for venturing to discuss various options to settle the Naga problem out of the box. For this, international experts on constitutions have been consulted and subsequently proposals have been made and are being re-adjusted in the negotiations.

For instance, Muivah's comments, "We also have to understand India's position," seem to show a softening of, indeed to belie, the original demand of 'all or nothing.' On the other hand, the Gol's offer of a 'broad-based political package,' or 'Christmas gift,' or a 'supra-state' status, even if they are only vague hints, is a starting point for further negotiations. The current impasse in the negotiations can then be considered as a creative tension.

At this juncture, both the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) have a tendency to want to know, in advance, the outcome of the talks. This curious positioning reminds one of the times when the IM leadership calls for the Naga public's prayer and fasting for God's guidance. The call would be fine except for one small detail: the decisions have already been made, which means that the prayer and fasting being requested are really not for guidance at all.

My point is that the talks have to be open-ended, and both parties have to respect each other's position and be committed to the outcome. As I stated in an earlier article, the right of the Indian government to consider the Nagas as part of India should be respected. So also the Nagas' right as a people should be respected. No party wants to lose. The Government of India and the Nagas should not underestimate the other, nor should they ask people to give up their dream. At the moment, unfortunately, both parties are asking from the other what they don't want to give. This is because the negotiations are being done strictly within the foredoomed framework of the Indian nation-state versus the "break-away" Naga nation.

Sovereignty, or the denial of it, has been the bone of contention between the Nagas and the Gol. But like most situations in life, it is important to note that the way we conceive of nation or sovereignty is very much shaped by our experiences of history. The lack of meaningful progress in the negotiations has shown that the hegemonic effect of the nation-state's defining episteme, namely sovereignty, has made it difficult for both the Gol and the IM to think of alternative relations to those dictated by it. Both parties are locked in the mindset and structure of governance derived from a fundamentalist interpretation of the nation-state, thereby reducing their relationship to one of inevitable antagonism between winner/loser and ruler/ruled reminiscent of colonialism, instead of making the relationship into one of mutually beneficial postcolonial co-existence.

Thomas Biolsi reminds us of the possibility of this latter positive alternative when he refers to the nation-state's "circulation not only as an obligatory but also as a liberatory category in the global public sphere," a category which lends itself to "both political realities and subversive political imaginaries." Neither the Gol nor the IM has explored the untapped potential that Biolsi speaks of. Both seem unaware that seeing the sovereign state as the only modular form available to them makes difficult, if not impossible, the need to visualize other forms of sovereignty and other forms of being a nation in the twenty-first century. Such blindness can become an impediment for good governance and state-building. It will serve both sides well to heed Michael Seymour's warning, that, failure to "conceptualize nations in different ways, one can then be led to adopt a negative attitude toward legitimate forms of nationalism, and these attitudes may in turn have enormous political consequences, sometimes even leading to violence."

Sovereignty, then, has to be thought of in inventive ways. As Sanjib Baruah says, "Unlike political scientists of a generation ago that took the modern idea of absolute and indivisible sovereignty as normal and

desirable, many today look to shared sovereignty as an aspect of the usable past that could provide a framework for resolving many stubborn territorial disputes of today.” The challenge for India as a nation-state, then, is how to govern with issues of heterogeneity and diversity, and for the Nagas, it is how to be a unique nation among nations.

In multi-ethnic states, the challenge for both the state and the nations within the state is to realize that there are different ways of being a nation just as there are different ways of enacting sovereignty. Non-state nations have been influenced by the popular thinking that each nation should be entitled to its own nation-state. But homogenous nation-states are becoming a rarity especially in terms of territory and ethnicity. Besides, as Ottaway says, “nationhood, or a sense of common identity, by itself does not guarantee the viability of a state.” Along the same lines, Donald Horowitz argues, proving the Naga experience, that secession from states as a means to self-determination by ethnic groups is almost never an answer to the problems of ethnic conflict and violence. For Horowitz, as a sovereign Nagalim might learn too late, the most likely scenario is that the minorities in the new states become oppressed and their rights are not likely to be respected. The right direction, Horowitz suggests (something Gol should pay attention to), is for states to seek internal accommodation including devolution of power by means such as regional autonomy or federalism.

Fortunately, unlike the nation-state’s sovereignty there are no modular forms for state-building, so each multi-ethnic state can innovate according to their particular contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all model of state building. Conceptually, scholars such as Mark Berger suggest that, “the term nation-building is increasingly being substituted for the less problematic concept of state-building.” Thus, in multi-ethnic states, as Ottaway opines, “the goal of nation building should not be to impose common identities on deeply divided peoples but to organize states that can administer their territories and allow people to live together despite differences.” That is to say, force and armed repression are the proven way to a failed state; they won’t do. Rather, consensual democratic methods are the preferred ways for countries that would aspire to greatness.

It is clear then that just as there is no one definition of nation and nationalism, there is also no one way of being a nation or a state. There can be other ways of being a sovereign state and a nation than the supposedly irreconcilable nations-within-state paradigm handed down by colonialism. In the Indo-Naga case, one innovative postcolonial example is worth a mention: China’s ‘one nation two systems’ model under which Hong Kong functions as a Special Administrative Region. Though directly under the authority of the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China for foreign and defense affairs, Hong Kong enjoys a high degree of autonomy including separate visa and passport agreements.

Should the Chinese practice seem unappealing to the Gol, there are other models. Puerto Rico as Associate State of the United States, the relationship of Gibraltar to the UK, the relationship of the Cook Islands and Niue to New Zealand, Liechtenstein’s status as a dependent territory of Switzerland, or Monaco with France. These are some examples of alternative types of sovereignty within nation-states. Incidentally, the Gol’s ‘supra-state’ concept has in it something of the Nordic Sami Convention.

Considering these types of sovereignty mentioned above, where the nation-state is only one among political geographies, Biolsi suggests that political entities “see these heteronomous or nonnation-state geographies not as anomalies or exceptions to the nation-state rule, but as concrete realities in which many people live and think about their rights and interests”. In other words, ethnic-driven states can co-exist with and not displace a sovereign state model.

Serious nation building is an everyday commitment, and the first task is to prevent political differences from spiraling into violence. The Indo-Naga relations have been that for too long. The time for violence and apathy has long past. Now is the time to negotiate an actionable, workable framework. The challenge of nation-building, as Ottaway says in another context, “need not become a quagmire as long as the effort

has clear goals and sufficient resources.” Both Nagas and the Government of India need to come up with proposals for a win-win situation. “Poor eyes limit your sight; poor vision limits your deeds.” Let these words of Franklin Field not be repeated by posterity about the present generation of Indian and Naga leaders.