

Breaking News

Spoke only for 10 minutes at rally, didn't know farmer Gajendra

Naga peace talks: Need to guard interests of diverse sections

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The secretive peace talks between the government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) have dragged on for around two decades.

But, in the meantime, the government's decision to hold exclusive negotiations with the Manipuri Tangkhul-dominated NSCN-IM has marginalised the people of Nagaland in the peace process.

The continued relevance and the eventual success of the peace process will depend on its sensitivity to the interests of different sections of people of Nagaland, including small indigenous tribes such as Kachari, Kuki, and Zeliang.

Nagaland is home to 18 recognised indigenous Naga (including Zeliang) and non-Naga (including Kachari and Kuki) tribes that account for about 86 per cent of its population. While the largest Naga tribe has a population of about 2,50,000, the population of the two smallest non-Naga tribes put together is barely 2,500.

The populations of Kachari, Kuki, and Zeliang tribes range between 15,000 and 75,000. Given the wide disparity in sizes and persistence of historical territorial boundaries between tribes, the assembly seats allotted to a tribe's

traditional stronghold reflects its political power.

Each of the six large Naga tribes controls between four to 10 seats in the 60 member legislature, whereas the smaller tribes control between zero to two-and-a-half seats.

At present, Zeliangs dominate two seats and Kacharis and Kukis have no political presence. Most small tribes have built alliances to overcome their size disadvantage. For instance, one large and five small Eastern Naga tribes came united under the banner of the Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation.

However, Kacharis of Dimapur, Kukis of Dimapur and Peren, and Zeliangs of Peren have remained relatively isolated. The problems of these three tribes need special attention.

These three tribes share a number of common features. First, their traditional strongholds are located in southwestern Nagaland sandwiched between Assam and Manipur. This area attracts Naga tribes from the hills as it contains most of the fertile plain area of Nagaland.

Unable to bear the pressure, many Kacharis have sold their land and migrated to Assam. Kukis had to abandon their land. Zeliangs too complain that larger Naga tribes are gradually occupy their territory.

Second, these tribes are located close to both Dimapur, the economic capital and the only functional railhead, and Kohima, the political-administrative capital.

Surprisingly, this locational advantage has not translated into better infrastructure and economic gain for these tribes. Third, all three are underrepresented in government jobs.

The under-representation of Kukis is surprising because they are Nagaland's second most literate community. Moreover, Kukis and Kacharis have remained unrepresented in the state assembly since the late 1980s.

However, factors other than small size explain the marginalisation of these tribes. First, each of them belongs to a larger tribal conglomeration, a majority of whose population is located outside Nagaland.

While the bulk of the Kuki and Zeliangrong population is located in Manipur, Kacharis are concentrated in Assam. The first two have a small population in Assam as well. Zeliangs are part of the Zeliangrong community. Second, their kin outside Nagaland have been demanding separate Dimasa (Kachari), Kuki, and Zeliangrong states that would include parts of southwestern Nagaland.

Ethno-religious differences

For instance, Dimasas claim Nagaland's most important town Dimapur, formerly the capital of the medieval Kachari kingdom. Third, ethno-religious differences also contribute to their marginalisation.

Hindu Kacharis and Christian Kukis are non-Nagas, whereas the overwhelmingly Christian Zeliangrong Naga community continues to support pockets of tribal religions including Heraka. Fourth, insurgency is another important factor. The deterioration of Naga-Kuki relationship in Nagaland is a byproduct of the NSCN-IM's genocidal attacks on Kukis of Manipur and Nagaland.

These attacks forced the Kukis to sell or even abandon their land. The NSCN-IM does not enjoy a cordial relationship with Zeliangrongs either. The Naga National Council, the NSCN-IM's forerunner, was opposed to Rani Gaidinliu, who was committed to Heraka and to a resolution of the Naga political problem within the Constitution's limits. She later championed the cause of Zeliangrong state.

Unsurprisingly, there is some opposition to the State Government's proposal to build a memorial dedicated to her in Kohima. Incidentally, 2015 is the year of her birth centenary.

While Zeliangs have a relatively secure place within Nagaland by virtue of being a Naga tribe, Kukis and Kacharis have also been tolerated for different reasons. Kukis were signatories to the Naga Club's memorandum to the Simon Commission (1929).

The memorandum is the bedrock of the Naga political movement. Interestingly, a majority of the Naga tribes were not signatories to that memorandum. In the late 1950s, Kukis and Kacharis participated in the Interim Body that midwifed Nagaland state. More recently, Kacharis received indirect support from Naga tribes opposed to sections of Angamis, who claim multi-ethnic Dimapur as their historical territory. But otherwise, larger tribes have not shown interest in the problems of these three tribes.

Unfortunately, these tribes cannot freely voice their concerns because of the fear of reprisal and for some reasons their shared predicament and historical ties have failed to bring them together on a common platform. But just as the small state of Nagaland deserves a fair arrangement within the country, these small indigenous tribes deserve a similar treatment in their home state. The government has to protect the legitimate interests of smaller tribes. Five steps can be taken in this direction.

First, Peren (including Athibung) and Dhansiripar (Dimapur) should be given financial packages to address longstanding social and physical infrastructure deficits. Second, the forest lands of these tribes should be protected against encroachment by larger tribes.

Third, special effort should be made to preserve their historical sites. Fourth, Athibung and Dhansiripar should be designated as tribal headquarters of Kukis and Kacharis, respectively. Fifth, state government jobs and an assembly seat each should be reserved for Kukis and Kacharis.

(The writer is Assistant Professor of Economics, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru)

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