

Why the 'Idea' of a Peace Process is Not Easy in Northeast India

Namrata Goswami May 5, 2014

A soldier guards the function on the occasion of the 33rd Republic Day of NSCN (I-M) in March, 2012. Photo: The Hindu

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Thuingaleng Muivah (right) and Isak Chisi Swu, General Secretary and Chairman, respectively, of the NSCN (I-M) seen seated with their spouses at the organisation's 33rd Republic Day function. Photo: The Hindu

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A newly recruited thirteen year old boy with his 9mm pistol smiles during NSCN (I-M)'s 33rd Republic Day function. Photo: The Hindu

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In the 2007 file photo, an NSCN (I-M) cadre guards Camp Hebron, NSCN (I-M) headquarters, near Dimapur, in July, 2007, on the eve of the historic peace talks between NSCN (I-M) and the government of India, after a 10-year ceasefire. Photo: The Hindu

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Jawaharlal Nehru speaks to tribals in Kohima in March, 1953. Photo: The Hindu Archives

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Members of the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) sit on a protest demanding Frontier Nagaland State, at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi in December, 2011. Photo: The Hindu

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B.P. Chaliha, then Chief Minister of Assam, is greeted on his arrival in Kohima by Rev. Michael Scott and Nagaland church leader in 1964. Chaliha had arrived for talks with members of the Peace Mission, for ending hostility with the Nagas. Photo: The Hindu Archives

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In multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Northeast India, talking peace requires to be more transformational than mere negotiatory, argues Namrata Goswami. Conflicts as longstanding as these will not get resolved for the long haul unless the conditions that gave rise to them are not dealt with.

One of the regions of India that has witnessed unending low intensity conflict since Independence in 1947 is the Northeast of India. Most of the conflicts have been waged to assert for a different ethnicity, culture, identity, political empowerment, optimal utilisation of resources and to ensure protection of ethnic minority rights. The political goals of the armed conflicts have differed, ranging from demands for greater political autonomy, more transparent political rights and institutional structures to outright secession from India. The response of the Indian state to the conflicts has varied over the years. In the beginning, when the Naga ethnic movement for secession turned violent in the 1950s under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo, the state responded with a massive show of force by deploying the Indian military on the Naga Hills. Also, laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 were imposed equipping the armed forces with powers that compromised the fundamental rights of citizens. Over the years, the state has dabbled with the framework of negotiations, with the Nagaland Peace Mission established in 1964 as one of the most serious and visible efforts to peacefully resolve issues. Negotiations were also utilised with the Mizo National Front (MNF) after 20 years of bloody conflict that witnessed the State employing the painful people displacement strategies under

the “grouping of villages”, uprooting the local Mizos from traditional villages thereby creating memories of deep social hurt with no apologies offered for the costs to the human spirit.

The longest ongoing negotiations are between the Indian state and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu (NSCN-IM), ongoing since 1997. Resolution, however, seems long in the making as both actors have divergent goals; the NSCN (IM) demands territorial unification of Naga inhabited areas in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland as well as Naga sovereignty; the Indian state is willing to offer greater political rights but only within the Indian Union. Moreover, uniting Naga inhabitants areas across Assam, Manipur and Nagaland is politically risky due to the deep-seated resistance of the Assamese, the Meiteis and smaller ethnic communities like the Dimasas or the Kukis, to such a plan.

In this backdrop, it is interesting to note that the ongoing Lok Sabha elections in Nagaland and Manipur have been dominated by claims and counter claims of political parties on the all-important issue of the Naga peace process. The Congress has listed out its achievements of past ceasefire agreements with Naga factions and bringing the NSCN (IM) leadership to the negotiating table. The Naga People’s Front (NPF) promises to ‘work for peaceful solution to the Indo-Naga political issue’ and ‘work for integrating all contiguous Naga inhabited areas under one administrative roof’.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly the NPF has fielded its own candidate, Soso Lorho, for the Outer Parliamentary Constituency of Manipur. Lorho hails from Senapati district of Manipur. Earlier in 2009, the NPF had fielded candidates from the two Naga inhabited districts of Arunachal Pradesh (Tirap and Changlang) for the state Assembly elections. As per reports on polling day in Manipur, the NSCN (IM) cadres allegedly campaigned for the NPF candidate in Naga dominated districts of Manipur in contradiction to their opposition to ‘Indian held elections’. The NPF has, in turn, complained to the Chief Electoral Officer of Manipur, accusing Kuki militants of rigging polling stations in Churachandpur district of Manipur.

In Assam, the Congress claimed credit for peace talks with the ULFA. Interestingly, in a departure from the past, both the pro-talks and anti-talks factions of the ULFA did not issue an election boycott notice this time around. While a surrendered ULFA commander, Naba Kumar Sarania alias Hira, has put himself up as a consensus candidate of non-Bodo organisations in Kokrajhar, the ULFA peace talks per se lacks the required consensus due to the opposition from the ULFA Commander-in-Chief, Paresh Barua. Given this, it is critical that whoever comes to power at the Centre will have to envision a viable framework of negotiations, both with the NSCN (IM) and the ULFA, for a resolution that not only aspires to end the violence but also addresses the core issues raised by these armed groups. It is also pertinent to start a process of peace with the major armed groups in Manipur, the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLFF) and the People’s Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA).

The complexity of these armed conflicts, the terse and, at the same time, close relations that they enjoy with their social networks perhaps makes a strong case for exploring the idea of peace negotiations with these groups. Peace negotiations, if rightly implemented as a framework of both managing and resolving the differences that led to conflict, offer the promise of ending violent ethnic conflicts of this nature. However, given the distrust that exists between the State, the armed actors and the societies they represent, peace processes in the Northeast have never been easy and have been rather dysfunctional at times. It is pertinent that the first step to be adopted in this context is to establish the human connection between the two (the State and the armed actor), especially given the fact that the asymmetry of power between the state and the ethnic armed actor is rather stark. It is critical that State representatives are seen as legitimate and willing to go beyond transactional hard core bargaining to more transformational conflict resolution. Transformational conflict resolution is a process that not only conducts negotiations but also, at the same time, is sensitive to the root causes that led to the conflict. It is rather important to acknowledge that conflicts do not occur only because there are material interests or goods to be gained but also because there is a fundamental mismatch between what a State stands for and what the conflicting group aspires as its future.

Peace processes are highly complex with divergent interests, actors and emotions in play made even more difficult due to the overarching factor of violence. In a conflict situation, the category of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ takes centre stage with other identities relegated to the background, especially in areas where the conflict is wrapped around notions of ethnic identity.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the language used to describe the other is negative and the worldviews are narrow and parochial. These categories are very much entrenched in Northeast India where there are multiple competing groups

claiming to represent people's aspirations and their politics. Since in conflict situation, people's basest needs to be guaranteed are their physical safety and survival, it makes them focus on how the public sphere mostly constituted by an elite core addresses these issues. In these situations, the needs and aspirations of the other side, the perceived enemy or adversary, is not given any weightage and is mostly absent from the dominant public sphere discourse.<sup>3</sup> Presumably, if there are moderates from the dominant actor in the conflict, they, willingly or unwittingly, adopt the voice of those on the extreme due to the hidden influence of power and an unconscious compulsion to showcase ethnic loyalty that determines public expressions for fear of being sidelined.

With regard to the public spheres in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, the idea of a peace process is alien due to the lack of experience with the process.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the armed actors in Manipur (the UNLF and the PLA) that represent the same community (the Meitei), are informed by a strict sense of Meitei ethnic identity that is exclusionary. The ideology that constitutes them, the language they use to describe their politics, and the lenses through which they view their horizon is always based on a negative process of "us versus them". This "us versus them" dichotomy is questioned when a peace process starts because the basic preferences for a particular kind of politics gets challenged. In other words, the discourse that has shaped the politics of the UNLF or the PLA and which has been accepted as a natural state of being gets challenged.<sup>5</sup>

The peace process framework does two things that can be empowering and disorienting at the same time. By coming in contact with others, ideas and thoughts are exchanged, which could be empowering. But it questions the earlier formulations of one's identity based on a particular exclusivist discourse, the preferences that the discourse gave shape to, the identities that it generated, and the politics it encouraged. This impact could be rather disorienting. This questioning would need one to broaden one's horizon and mind, which is both empowering and disorienting because one's identity has been shaped by the past and by a particular narrative that was dominant, was encouraged by the hidden dimension of power in the public sphere, and one that is now no longer adequate to use as a referral point if the peace process has to succeed. This is what is called an epistemological crisis, when the old ways of doing things are no longer valid; or the old ways of understanding no longer capture a present reality.

Dwelling specifically on the Meitei public sphere of ethnic exclusivity in existence in Manipur and within which the PLA and the UNLF functions, it is rather obvious that this public sphere has been responsible for shaping perceptions, aspirations and the lenses through which the Meitei public view the Indian state and ethnic others. There is an acceptable discourse and there are discourses/ideas that are frowned upon. The idea of deliberation is not much encouraged; deliberation that is both critical, empowering and which questions the old ways of understanding the other. For instance, the Meitei discourse today is mostly about how the Meiteis are threatened by the other more dominant minority community in Manipur, the Tangkhul Nagas. Hence, the Naga identity is seen as antithetical to the Meitei identity. Even if there is an acknowledgment of the Nagas by the Meiteis within Manipur, it is more about how the Manipuri kings were pluralistic, how Nagas and Meiteis had shared cultural norms and ideas when the kings of Manipur were in power, how the Meitei language was accepted earlier by the Nagas, and how, after 1947, the pluralistic identities have been torn apart due to the politicisation of identities as a result of the modern Indian state that has encouraged group identities.

The alternative narrative could be that while Meitei kings had connections with Tangkhul Nagas, this did not amount to an assimilation of identities. Nagas maintained their own way of life and customs by paying tribute to the Meitei kings because of the asymmetry of power between them especially after the British supported Meitei expeditions into the Naga areas. Learning to speak Meitei by Nagas did not result in acceptance of the Meitei way of life but was an exigency that was necessary for business purposes. For example, if 'A' (an American) learns Mandarin to conduct business with the Chinese, that can neither be interpreted nor determined as 'A' accepting Chinese culture and politics. That is what is identified as the problem of "over-determination" in the social sciences, when meanings are drawn from certain actions and statements, which are not actually reflective of reality.

The narrative of the other dominant but relatively minority group, the Nagas, is equally based on the conflict dynamics that shapes and determines perceptions and interests. To the Nagas, the Meitei claim that Nagas had so much in common with them is unacceptable as it challenges the narrative of difference that their own conflict is based on. Also, those who participate in the Naga public sphere and have grown up in this discourse are not motivated to question

stereotypes. The dominant Meitei narrative of couching its own political discourse in rather exclusivist Meitei terms do not help broaden the Naga discourse either. The other problem that comes to mind is that the Naga discourse is so accusatory of the Meiteis of being non-inclusive within Manipur that when there is inclusion in practical terms it challenges the original accusatory tone of the Naga discourse and creates cognitive dissonance, which is not equipped to deal with the new reality. There is the lingering suspicion that this cannot be for real.

Juxtaposed into this situation is the struggle that the Meiteis have had with the imposition of Indian administration on a community that had been largely devoid of such politics despite the spread of cultural traits from Hindu India.

Acceptance of Hindu rituals, customs, and practices, especially the reverence of Lord Krishna, do not automatically mean the acceptance of Indian politics. Moreover, given the protracted nature of conflicts in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland where the armed groups function, the public debate is mostly framed around issues of security. While some academics studying these conflicts might wish to see their liberal ideals of inclusion and broad-based cosmopolitan identity formation realised, in situations of conflict where the discourses are narrow and where physical safety is the real deal, these liberal discourses cannot perform the function of emancipation and transformation that they aspire to. Hence, there will only be frustration if the ground reality is not understood well.

The aim should be to deeply understand and study the narratives that led to the conflicts, and a peace process should ideally engage with such issues first: engaging with preferences and existing frameworks that offer justifications for a particular status quo of violence, and how these preferences and frameworks might neither be optimal nor the only way through which a conflict situation can be understood. It is also critical to realise that in a protracted conflict situation, the emergence of new frames of reference may take time and effort as the situation is deeply mired in negativity, anxieties and fears. Conflicts in Assam, Manipur or Nagaland will not get resolved for the long haul if the conditions that gave rise to them are not transformed. The usage of “problem solving workshops” based on dialogue processes between the different public spheres in these areas that reexamine notions of “us” versus “them” will play a significant role in questioning “the fact of the enemy” and the narratives that tied such facts together.<sup>6</sup> For the Indian state to assume that once it signs a ceasefire or Suspension of Operations (SoOs) with armed groups, everything else will fall in place and the coming of peace will be effortless is a thoughtless and shallow proposition. Dealing with divisive issues, establishing solid institutional mechanism that promote a level playing field and promoting liberal education at the school level are the policy choices that will herald in a more hopeful future for states like Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. However, these policy options will take time, patience, commitment and an inspired vision of the future.

References:

1“Nagaland People’s Front Manifesto of 2002 which is carried on as a guide to the 2014 elections can be found at [http://eci.nic.in/.../Constitution\\_of\\_Political\\_Parties%5CCon...](http://eci.nic.in/.../Constitution_of_Political_Parties%5CCon...) (Accessed on April 26, 2014). For their latest agenda, see “NPF Urges Centre to Implement Article 371 (A)”, The Assam Tribune, December 13, 2013 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp...> (Accessed on April 26, 2014).

2Amit Ron, “Peace Negotiations and Peace Talks: The Peace Process in the Public Sphere”, International Journal of Peace Studies, 14/1, Spring/Summer, 2009 at [http://www.gmu.edu/progra.../icar/ijps/vol14\\_1/Ron14n1IJPS.pdf](http://www.gmu.edu/progra.../icar/ijps/vol14_1/Ron14n1IJPS.pdf) (Accessed on September 13, 2013).

3Ibid.

4Observations based on field work by author in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland from 2007 to 2012.

5Ron, n.1.

6Carrie Menkel-Meadow, “Chronicling the Complexification of Negotiation Theory and Practice”, Negotiations Journal, 25, 2009, pp. 415-429.

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