

North East

A Comparative Analysis of Naga,
Mizo and Meitei Insurgencies

Sajal Nag[?]

The word insurgency, despite its rampant use in the modern day, has not been given a separate entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Language* until recently.¹ It equalizes insurgents as 'rebels'. *The Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* too does not include it as an independent item. *The Random House Dictionary* defines insurgency as an act of rejection. It is further amplified to mean an insurrection against an existing regime by an aggrieved group. Modern states view it from a standardised legal perspective. The *Dictionary of International Law* defines 'insurgents' as 'rebels', resistance, detachments or participants in a civil war or national liberation war who control certain territory in their country, wage struggles against colonialists, dictatorial fascists and other anti-democratic regimes for self-determination

[?] Sajal Nag teaches Modern History at the Assam University, Silchar. Earlier, he was associated with the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, and the Centre for Social Studies, Surat.

¹ H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, based on Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 1977. The Dictionary has the word insurgent but not insurgency.

of their people and have been recognised as ‘insurgents’ by other subjects of international law.²

Academically, ‘insurgency’ has been defined “as a struggle between a non-ranking group and ruling authorities in which the former consciously employs political resources and instruments of violence to establish legitimacy for some aspect of the political system it considers illegitimate.”³ Here legitimacy and illegitimacy have been used to refer to whether or not existing aspects of politics are considered moral or immoral by the population or selected elements amongst it. Hence, insurgency may break out against a particular regime, particular persons of a regime, particular structures and salient values a regime upholds, or particular policies or biases of a regime. In all such possible cases, the prime objective of insurgents would be to capture power and replace the political community. The broad categorisation of all the above-mentioned cases could be nationalistic, ideological, factional or preferential.⁴ Insurgency can take two broad forms: *Conspirational* and *Warlike*. The latter includes terrorism, *coup-de-etat*, guerrilla tactics, kidnapping, hijacking and so on. Insurgency has been classified into six types – Secessionist, Revolutionary, Restorational, Reactionary, Conservative and Reformist.⁵ There is however complete agreement among scholars that insurgency is a form of political violence and is a means to achieve any of the above mentioned ends. The variables that determine the fate of insurgent movements include popular support, organisational cohesion, external support, geography and environment.⁶

India’s Northeast has been a minefield of insurgent activities. Although the Naga insurgency was the first to rise, similar movements in Mizoram and Manipur followed it. From the 1980’s onwards, virtually the entire Northeast has been plagued

² Cited in B Sharma, ‘Review of Government and Politics in Manipur’ in Souvenir published on the 95th birth anniversary of Comrade Irabot Singh, September 30, 1991, pp. 4-6.

³ Bard O’Neil *et al*, eds., *Insurgency in Modern World*, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A.D. Smith, “The Formation of Nationalist Movement” in his *Nationalist Movement*, London: McMillan, 1976, pp. 1-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*

by such activities with a very large proportion of ethnic groups in the region forming insurgent outfits of their own. However, the Naga, Mizo and Meitei insurgencies assumed prominence and were of a more serious nature in the sense that they set the examples and patterns of insurgency in Northeast India. It is, consequently, of theoretical as well as practical relevance to make a comparative study of these three movements. This will enable us to understand why the Mizo movement, despite having started off with a *coup d'état* against the Indian state, had easily settled down to peace and development, whereas the other two did not. In other words, the Naga movement despite the signing of three major agreements, failed to usher even a modicum of peace, while Mizoram succeeded in a massive way. As far as Manipur is concerned, even an eagerness to come to the negotiation table has not been exhibited thus far.

The Origins

The Naga, Mizo as well as the Meitei insurgencies had their origin in the colonial period and were a part of an all India political process.⁷ The imminence of Indian Independence was characterised by two opposite trends – one, a pan-Indian sentiment seeking to integrate and be a part of a single Indian nation-state; two, another regional, religious or ethnicity based sentiment which sought to secede from the prospective Indian nation-state and seek its national destiny independently.⁸ Thus, while, on the one hand, most areas and peoples wanted to merge with the Indian identity, some groups and princely states were pronouncing separatist claims. These claims were headed by the Pakistan demand as well as restorative claims of some large princely states.⁹ In fact, like these princely states, the Naga and Mizo movements were also restorative.¹⁰ Both wanted to revert to their pre-colonial political status after the British withdrawal from

⁷ Sajal Nag, *Nationalism, Separatism, Secessionism*, Delhi: Rawat Publishers, 2000, pp. 160-220 for details.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For the entire process that took place in these areas see, Sajal Nag, *India and North East India: Mind, Politics and the Process of Integration*, Delhi: Regency, 1999.

these hills. This was an attempt to put the clock back, which was resisted by the new social group – the respective middle classes which had emerged in the hills as a result of the advent of modernity. In Mizoram, this middle class resistance was very strong and hence eventually triumphant. The new Mizo middle class saw that the restoration of the old order meant the reversion to the oppressive rule of the Chiefs and the endless continuation of their tyranny on the commoners. This enlightened middle class formed a political party called the Mizo Commoners Union (subsequently called Mizo Union) and organised a social movement for integration with India as it would mean the abolishment of the institution of the chieftainship which was a promised agenda of the Indian National Congress. The traditional elite of the Chiefs formed the United Mizo Freedom Organisation and propagated a position against merging with India. However, in the face of popular support and the massive social force of the Mizo Union, these restorative elements failed miserably.

Like Mizoram, in the Naga Hills too, there were two coeval trends – one seeking to merge with India at least for some time and the other seeking to restore the old order of Chiefs. The former was led by enlightened leaders like Aliba Imti – the founder of the Naga National Council and T. Sakhrie, while the latter was led by former Naga Chiefs turned Dobashis (interpreters) of the colonial period. In Nagaland, it was the traditional leadership who won against the new elite, not only because of the weak numerical strength of the supporters of the new order, but also because of the Indian state's tackling of the whole crisis. The initial resistance of the new middle class against the old leadership's insistence on outright sovereignty was not weak, but the Indian state's dealing with the Naga issue isolated these enlightened groups. In fact, there was a time when the leader of the restorative elements – Phizo was so cornered within the Naga National Council that he left the party and formed a separate group called the Peoples' Independence League. However, the new group faded into oblivion and Phizo returned

as the messiah of the Nagas after the NNC-Akbar Hydari Nine-point agreement fiasco.¹¹

In Manipur too, there was a distinct pan-Indian sentiment. But, since it was a princely state that was going through an intense internal crisis, it required time and political processes to form in order to effect its integration with the Indian Union. However, the growing Communist activity within Manipur and along its border with China and Myanmar prompted the panicky Indian state to push the merger through in a dubious manner.¹² It can, therefore, be said that while the Naga insurgency emerged out of restorative ambitions, in Mizoram, it was distinctly due to the failures of the Indian state.

In Mizoram, after a successful struggle against the dispensation of the chiefs, the Mizo leadership settled down to peace and order within India. However, the Indian state failed to meet the aspirations of this new middle class. Constituted as a district within Assam, the Assamese leadership ignored the developmental needs of the tribals. Despite its promise, the Indian state delayed abolishing the institution of Chieftainship. While the Centre threatened to impose Hindi, the province tried to force Assamese; the District Council was a glorified debating society without any financial empowerment. Lastly, when the periodic bamboo famine stalked the hills resulting in starvation deaths, the

¹¹ The Akbar Hydari nine point agreement of June 26-28, 1947, with the NNC 'recognised the right of the Nagas to develop themselves according to their freely expressed wishes'. However, the agreement soon was a matter of dispute over clause 9. This particular clause reads: The governor of Assam, as Agent of the Government of (the) Indian Union, will have a special responsibility for a period of ten years to ensure the due observance of this agreement; at the end of this period the NNC will be asked whether they require this agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of the Naga people be arrived at.' The NNC claimed that it implied their right to self-determination after 10 years. On the other hand, the Government of India felt that the terms of the agreement had been subsumed in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. As a result, Phizo, who was one of the founding members of the NNC, overruling the majority in the NNC who wished to give the agreement a trial, declared independence on August 14, 1947, one day before India attained independence. See B G Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Delhi: Konark, 1996, pp. 87-88. For a text of the agreement see South Asia Terrorism Portal; Nagaland; Documents; Akbar Hydari Agreement; www.satp.org.

¹² For the entire process that took place in these areas see, Sajal Nag, *India and North East India*.

Assamese leadership appeared unconcerned. All these developments prompted the traditional leadership to re-emerge and vigorously propagate the idea that their apprehension that the marginal tribes like the Mizo would always be treated unevenly by the Indian state had proven to be true. While the modern leadership lost face among their people, the traditional leadership converted public fury into their support base and successfully revived their demands of sovereignty.

In Manipur, the secessionist movement also grew out of relative deprivation and was led by the new middle class youth. Inspired by radical ideologies, these youth witnessed the arrogance and indifference of the Indian state towards the plight of the Meiteis, abhorred the corrupt practices of their old leadership now turned politicians, resented the growing impoverishment of their people, their own unemployment and hegemony of the Indian state as well as of the non-Meiteis within Manipur.

Nature and Composition

As analysed above, the secessionist movement had a distinct class character. In both Mizoram and Nagaland, the separatist movement was spearheaded by the old tribal autocracy – the chiefs and his rank members, as they feared that, under a promised republican government, they would lose their power, prestige and status. Also significant were economic privileges like land rights. It needs mention that, though both the Mizo and Naga society were tribal formations, they were by no means egalitarian. Land was communally owned only in theory. In practice, the chiefs assigned every household a plot of land for cultivation. Hence, the chiefs and his rank members used the best lands. Although the tribal mode of production in these hills was in various stages of advancement, these were the general features. Politically too, the chiefs were hereditary and fiercely patriarchal and society was stratified.

In Manipur, the neo-middle class who lead the separatist movement was a product of the post-colonial transformation of Manipuri society. This emerging middle class had the support of the general public, and initially led the merger movement. But the

same pan-Indian feelings turned into antipathy due to the failure of the leadership, as also the indifference of the Indian state.

Although the Mizo Separatist Movement was led by the old chiefly ranks, it was able to mobilise almost all echelons of society due to the growing disappointment with the Indian state. This enabled the leadership to transform their agitation into a social movement. The other reason, which made it a relative success, was the convergence of all the sub-tribes into a generic Mizo Nationality. In other words, for the myriad sub-tribes inhabiting the Mizo Hills, the generic Mizo identity and the Lushai (Dulian) language became easily acceptable. The integration process that took place with the formation of Mizo Union was almost complete by the 1960's. Hence, there was neither factional fighting nor inter-tribal hostility for hegemony within the Mizo separatist movement. In Manipur, the Meitei was one single ethnicity-based nationality facing no dissension. By contrast, the Nagas had at least twenty-three sub-tribes within the Naga Hills territory and a few more in Manipur and Assam. Although the Naga identity was generic and acceptable to all the sub-tribes, the construction of this identity went through perpetual shifts. For example, in the 1940's, the Naga identity included even the Karbi and Nepalis but excluded all the Naga sub-tribe of Manipur. With the changing structure of the movement, this identity continued to be reconstructed and expanded.¹³ A number of the tribes struggled to establish its hegemony over the Naga movement. Initially it was the Angami, Sema and then the Tangkhuls.¹⁴ Consequently, right from the onset, the Naga movement was plagued by acute factionalism. While the Naga National Council has organised factions, even the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) has at least two major factions.¹⁵ The ethnic composition therefore made the Naga movement truncated, weak and sporadic. This factionalism also made negotiations between the Indian state and the Naga leadership unsuccessful. There were at least three major

¹³ Sajal Nag, "Naga Identity: Formation, Construction, Expansion" in C. J. Thomas *et al*eds., *Dimensions of Development in Nagaland*, Delhi, 2002.

¹⁴ M. Horam, *Thirty Years of Naga Insurgency*, Delhi: Cosmo, 1980, pp. 4-10.

¹⁵ While Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah lead one faction, the other is led by S. S. Khaplang.

agreements between the two parties but each gave rise to more factionalism and fuelled insurgent activities. As against this, the Mizos had one successful negotiation resulting in the Mizo Accord of 1986.¹⁶

Seeking Hegemony, Spreading Insurgency

Right from the beginning, the Naga separatist leadership tried to spread the movement to other areas of Northeast – not because of any empathy with other ethnic groups but to strengthen the Naga movement itself. As early as June 1947, Phizo, along with Sakhrie, visited the Mizo Hills to enlist the support of the Mizos in their movement.¹⁷ Phizo even proposed to the Mizo leaders that the Mizos and Nagas could launch a joint struggle against India, so that a sovereign state comprising the Mizo and Naga Hills could be established. He even agreed to accept the Lushai language to be the state language of this new state.¹⁸ However, the Mizo leadership was quick to reject this proposal. When the Mizo National Front (MNF) commenced an armed separatist movement for secession from India two decades later, Phizo again met Laldenga and pledged support. Though Laldenga welcomed the moral support he preferred to go alone. Much later, in the 1990's, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) inspired various insurgencies in the Northeast and even provided them with arms and military training. Thus the Assam-based groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (now known as Bodo Liberation Tigers or BLT), the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV), the Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), the Meghalaya-based Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC), and the Tripura-based National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), owe their origin to

¹⁶ The Mizo Accord was signed between the Union Government and the Mizo National Front led by Laldenga on June 30, 1986. For full text of the Accord, see South Asia Terrorism Portal; India; States; Mizoram; Documents; www.satp.org.

¹⁷ Vumson, *Zo History*, Aizawl, nd, p. 249. Also see B. B. Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest: A Study of Politicisation of Culture*, Jaipur: 1979, p. 138.

¹⁸ Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North East India*, Delhi: Manohar, 2002, p. 127.

the NSCN-IM.¹⁹ Even the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) had been provided inputs by the NSCN-IM.²⁰ The NSCN-IM strategy was to destabilise the region through these insurgencies and thereby attract the Centre's attention to the problem of insurgency in the region. The NSCN-IM stands to gain from these both financially – selling arms to these new outfit as well as demanding a 60:40 share of their collection through extortion, taxes and kidnappings²¹ – and politically, establishing its supremacy over other such outfits. It has also tried to establish its hegemony by organising umbrella organisations like Indo-Burmese Revolutionary Front, United National Liberation Front of Seven Sisters, and the Self-Defence United Front of South East Himalayan Region.²² In the process, the NSCN-IM lost the sympathy of the non-Naga people in the region as they plunged the entire region into turmoil, disturbing civil life and reducing an ideological battle into a simple law and order problem. The MNF never tried this and all along received the support and sympathy of intellectuals and radicals of the entire country. In fact, immediately after the Mizo Accord, its chief Laldenga offered to help the Indian state negotiate with the Khalistan leaders in Punjab as well as with the Naga militants, to facilitate the return of peace and tranquillity in the country. Currently, his deputy and present Chief Minister, Zoramthanga, is playing a pivotal role in the peace initiatives between the NSCN-IM and the Government of India. Similarly, although a 'Greater Mizoram' was on the agenda of the MNF, it did not insist on the idea during or after the peace negotiations. But the NSCN-IM's insistence on a 'Greater Nagaland' has created considerable hostility between the Nagas, on the one hand, and Meiteis, Kukis and Assamese, on the other. It has further rendered the peace process complex, as it involves all these neighbouring States as well.²³

¹⁹ For a profile of these groups, see South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org.
²⁰ Nag, *Contesting Marginality*, see chapter on Transformation, pp. 296-312.

²¹ This was first reported in *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, April 26, 1995. Subsequently, it was further substantiated by surrendered cadres of the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC), Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) and other groups. The ratio of share, however, was not same always.

²² Nag, *Contesting Marginality*, see chapter on Transformation, pp. 296-312.

²³ *Ibid.*

Limits to Rhetoric

Independence, as we have just seen, was sought by these communities as a necessity to attain the ability to govern themselves for self-development. The ideal of sovereignty was projected for the people as a remedy for all ills, and one that would lead to a perfect society. The territorial areas that they were, respectively, fighting for were projected as prized possessions, and their economic viability lay at the centre of this vision. The attainment of sovereignty, it was believed, would be the beginning of a happy life, and usher in a society free of exploitation, discrimination, oppression of minority groups and conflicts with neighbouring States. The theoretical and ideal image of independence was presented as a fact. The capacity of the new leadership to fulfil the demands of the people was projected as being unlimited. The envisioned state was also projected as a unified entity without an opposition, despite the fact that the independence movements themselves were already faction-ridden. In fact, all the Naga underground outfits announced that, if they came to power, their party would brook no opposition. The MNF was hostile to the Congress and did not dare go for an outright election. It secured power after the Mizo Accord by making a democratically elected government step down from power. Though it was its first election after the Accord, it could neither sustain itself for the stipulated five-year period, nor could it emerge a victorious party with enough legislators to form the Government. In Manipur, despite wide sympathy, the insurgents could never bring about a poll boycott and often had to resort to threats to accomplish their designs. Though these insurgents fought for their independence, they had little sympathy for others seeking similar goals within their own States or areas of influence. The People's Liberation Army (PLA)²⁴ chief Bisheshwar Singh was vehemently opposed to

²⁴ The PLA established under the leadership of N. Bisheswar Singh on September 25, 1978, aims to organise a revolutionary front covering the entire Northeast and unite all ethnic groups, including the Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis, to liberate Manipur. See South Asia Terrorism Portal; India; States; Manipur; Terrorist Groups; PLA; www.satp.org.

surrendering the Naga and Mizo inhabited areas to Nagaland and Mizoram to allow the latter to form a State covering their entire population. The Nagas resented the surrender of Dimapur to the Dimachas. They were also opposed to the Zeliangrong Movement²⁵ for a separate State and were hostile to the Kukis. In fact, there has been an acute inter-tribal hostility described as 'tribalism' and this is attributed to be one of the reasons for the failure of the Naga movement. In other words, the insurgent leaders were hostile to the opposition and minorities within their own areas of influence. They took away the independence of minorities and attempted to eliminate all political opposition either by an administrative act or a political device. Even before coming into power, they resorted to the art of undermining minorities. While these leaders projected themselves as the protectors of the Christian population in Nagaland and Mizoram, secularism was not accepted as the guiding principle for the non-Christian minorities. In Manipur, the tribals had to reconcile themselves to being second-class citizens. The possibility that minorities might well demand separate independent States was at times scorned. The insurgent groups never reflected on the fact that minorities were hardly likely to be enthusiastic about their forcible incorporation into a totally alien pattern of social, cultural and political behaviour.

The struggle for independence has always been garbed in romantic idealism and the insurgent leaders of India's Northeast were no exception to this trend. They could not afford to project their goals otherwise. Any talk or challenge, that independence could mean the end of heroism and the fact that sovereignty might become fiction soon, was not encouraged. In Nagaland and Mizoram, any questioning of the economic 'viability' of the proposed units was countered with the proposition that there could be initial problems, but that international aid would see them through the crisis. Besides, the feeling among these leaders was that if other 'worse endowed' countries could survive, they

²⁵ The Zeliangrong movement, a political and revivalist movement, which aimed at bringing together the political and administrative unit of the Zeliangrongs, a synthetic nomenclature symbolising the collective identity of the Zamei, the Liangmei and the Rongmei Nagas inhabiting the area across the common border of Nagaland, North Cachar Hills and Manipur.

could also manage. In other words, all forms of rhetoric were used to create and support the idea that sovereignty would be workable, and could not result in disappointment, and various 'models' were developed to 'demonstrate' that no such possibility existed. It is curious that, though the entire Naga population is ostensibly americanised in its tastes and attitudes, the borrowed political models were that of Socialism and Communalism. India was always projected as a colonial power and aggressor and its developmental efforts in the region were seen as bribery and as unscrupulous attempts towards purchasing the loyalty of the people of the Northeast. And there has also been a sustained counter-propaganda against the Indian family planning campaign that the tribes should have more children in order to increase their population and foil 'Indian attempts' at marginalizing them numerically.

Lessons for Mizoram

Despite the progress of the peace negotiations between the Indian state and NSCN factions, not many people are optimistic about the prospects of peace and stability in the Naga areas. This is because of the history of the Naga Movement itself, which is bound to repeat itself in the Naga Hills. The recent past of the world has indicated that neither are national boundaries sacrosanct, nor are nations and national identities static. Today's nationality might give rise to multiple successor identities, which are either ethnic or national. This is more so because identities are not objective cultural artefacts anymore. They are constructs resulting from the interaction of the state, political processes and political autonomy. The lessons to be learnt are that hegemony, arrogance that is either racial, ethnic or national, oppression and fascist tendencies cannot be sustained. They let loose divisive and disintegrative tendencies. As against this, democracy, republicanism, secularism, federalism and the policy of live and let live with regard to the coexistence of sub-national and ethnic groups, would ensure the solidarity and integrity of a state – national or federal. The Mizo movement was successful, as it had succeeded in integrating all sub-tribal units into a cohesive identity. But having attained dominance, the Mizo nationality has

gradually begun to exhibit tendencies of 'big nationality' in terms of oppression and intolerance. It has already alienated the Hmars²⁶ and Pawis, and the Hmar insurgency is growing in strength. The intolerance of the Mizos towards religious minorities such as the Chakmas and the Brus (also known as Reangs) has also created a potentially violent situation, which has been compounded by the Mizo State's rigid attitude towards these communities. The peace and tranquillity achieved through years of hard work could be vitiated by the revolts of these minor tribes. A federal Mizoram would strengthen its structure or else its strength could turn into frailty.

²⁶ The Hmars migrated from China and settled first in Myanmar and scattered around Manipur, Mizoram and North Cachar Hills in Assam.