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State Control, Political Manipulations, and the Creation of Identities: The North-East of India

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Abstract

When the Indian subcontinent was colonized, a complex process of labeling and conferring of identities was initiated by the colonial powers to control and to make sense of the huge mass of complexity facing them, where appearances, languages, and cultural traits seemed diverse and kaleidoscopic in nature. Yet contemporary ethnographic efforts to come into direct contact with such entities more often than not ends up in the realization that most of the so-called boundaries are ephemeral and often dissolve into nothingness, and people seem to have been moving, sharing, marrying, and absorbing each other and evolving identities that seem more dynamic than static and more situational than primordial. In anthropology, creation of boundaries had been reinforced by theoretical perspectives that were both engendered by and nurtured in corroboration of the colonial rule. Thus structural functional theory imagined isolated and well-defined units that were being questioned even in the heyday of this perspective by scholars such as Leach and Sahlins, who had shown that people often moved from one form of political system to another (Leach 1954) and from one group to another (Sahlins 1961). Channa's (2013) on the Jad Bhotiyas, a supposedly, identifiable community on the borders of the Himalayas discovered that this so-called 'community' was a myth. In that process it was found that many other ethnographers had come to

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the same conclusions about the people they studied. In this paper, taking data from tribes of North-East, the notion of 'a tribe' is being problematized to show that most of such so-called bounded entities are results of historical processes and not of very great antiquity. In this sense the contemporary evolution of identities such as 'Naga' and 'Mizo' also appear in a new light.

The State and its People: Who are they?

In 1851, the French political theorist Pierre Joseph Proudhon observed that 'to be governed is to be noted, registered, enumerated, accounted for, stamped, measured, classified, audited, patented, licensed, authorized, endorsed, reprimanded, prevented, reformed, rectified, and corrected in every operation, every transaction, every movement' (c.f. Schulz 2014: 35).

The above statement aptly describes the technologies of the state to control, manipulate, and account for its subjects. One major problem for any state machinery is to identify, name, and label, who and what needs to be governed? To bind and name entities and to create typologies and classifications is an overtly administrative agenda of political control and management. One reason is that while those who are to be governed present quite often an undifferentiated mass, the entity that is to govern, namely the state, is likewise equally amorphous. Thus, while it tries to draw boundaries around people and places, the state is simultaneously making attempts to define and structure itself. Lacking any other form of legitimacy the state makes itself felt in its effects, most of which are of the kind that Proudhon describes.

Although at one point of time, scholars including Radcliffe-Brown were ready to dispense with the state as an entity, but Gellner (2013: 3) quoting from Trouillot (2001) points out that the state is far more intrusive today than it was in the past. As the nation states are becoming highly complex and tensions of identity are becoming more manifest, we find that machinery of controls are becoming more sophisticated and controlling, like

the recently introduced Adhaar card of the Indian government and the already-in-place Social Security Numbers (SSN) in the USA. But it is no longer a one-way relationship. The technologies (satellites, internet, media etc.) used for state control are also being used by the people to enter into a more dynamic relationship with the state. The earlier fuzzy and remote frontiers are gravitating towards the centres of power and are at the same time demanding their rights as members of the state. The processes of actualizing the demands are also initiating a parallel effort at identity formation from the governed. Thus the state bestows identities that it would like to see exist and control, and the people create identities that they feel would fulfil their aspirations and sense of self.

It is not necessary however that the two kinds of identities or labels coincide. Thus, what is imposed by the centres of power need not be endorsed by the entities on which such labeling is conferred. Such contestations may often end up in conflict. Gellner (1997:10) points out that the word 'communalism' is often used in the context of South Asia to put down any self-conceived group sentiment that is seen as detrimental to the so-called national unity. But the 'nation' is defined by those who hold power and therefore communalism remains state-defined as is of course 'terrorism' and dissent.

At the same time one need not take the identity evoked by the constituent groups as the 'real thing' as is often done by scholars, activists, and those holding political ideologies negative to the state. One may also take a critical look at the role of the ethnographers who always strove to 'seize their objects as a totality' (Axel 2002: 22), thereby creating many entities that had no ontological existence but which nevertheless became a part of the archives of knowledge. From the colonial period onwards we see this kind of a comfortable relationship between the state and the theoreticians, where although taking a critical stance on the policies and performances of the state, the intellectuals rarely questioned the existence of those they were defending.

The ethnographers also consolidated the nature of an 'ethnic group', a community that was often opposed to the 'individual' or the individualistic way of life (Strathern 1992) that also became paradoxically associated with modernity and western liberalism/capitalism. Thus modern nations such as the Euro-American countries were seen as governing individuals, while those like in South Asia were seen as having to deal with 'communities', including tribes and ethnic groups. The existence of ethnic groups within the modern nations was seen as representing the 'backward' and less developed sections of the nation, an attitude rapidly assumed by the modernizing and developing countries such as India. 'Whilst national identity is now-a-days usually thought of as natural and universal, ethnicity, though seen as equally primordial, is very often considered unnecessary and backward in modern society' (Gellner 1997: 11). Thus an ethnic or group identity, like that of a 'tribe', used in India carry with them a hidden implication of being 'backward' and less developed.

Policies and actions of global agencies are conditioned by these values. Thus, Palsson (2007: 158) says with reference to the debate regarding 'genetic' property, that the notion of 'group consent' used for indigenous communities, 'not only naturalized "ethnic" units and boundaries, it also seemed to paternalistically undermine the rights of the autonomous individual which were applied at the time in most Euro-American contexts'. This opposition of 'collective' to the 'individual' also gives rise to an interesting division of academic labour. Thus professional services of the anthropologists are confined to these 'ethnic groups' or 'backward' collectivities, while the economist takes charge of the rest of the 'advanced' population of rational, self-driven individuals. The individual within the 'ethnic group' finds little recognition.

Thus one needs to question the ontological status of a unit just as one may question the status of the whole. Neither the nation nor its constituents are to be taken for granted but to be assessed and evaluated in the context of political, economic, and

historical processes of which they are both products and producers. A danger that often arises in considering a 'collective' is that only some dominant voices from within this unit may be taken to represent the whole. Moran (2014: 361) quotes from Ronald Niezen (2003: 99) to say, 'Experiences of corruption and rights abuses were widespread across indigenous communities, according to a grassroots national Aboriginal organization, and the problem was that victims had no real avenue for redress, because of the provisions of the Indian Act and government's reluctance to interfere with Aboriginal self-governance.' Such observations also put a question mark on the myth of internal homogeneity of people dubbed as a tribe or as indigenous.

In the context of the above arguments let us now proceed to examine the entity called Nagaland, the identity of the Naga, and the relationship they have with the so-called nation state of India.

The Naga and Their Land

A nation state in the course of putting together its identity and drawing up its boundaries is often faced with what Scott (2009) calls the 'Zomia'—the regions that refuse to be incorporated within the mechanisms of the state. The North-Eastern part of India[1] has been such a zone for long where not only are the people not happy with the label of being dubbed 'Indians', there are also considerable fracturing of identities along the 'official' and the indigenous versions. This region is representative of the 'highlands' recognized by Scott as less amenable to rule by the state and where identities are often contested and negotiated; where there is often a disjunction between what is presumed or imposed by the state and what the people perceive. Moreover, the myth of the warring tribes and violent traits such as head-hunting, often attributed to the North-East, also served to fix an evolutionary identity, that of 'primitiveness'; an opposition to civilized and harmonious living

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[1] For an exact description of North-East of India one may refer to Ramirez (2014), chapter 1.

that could be used to justify both administrative action and transformative proselytization.

The paradox of sudden incorporation into an alien world of politics and culture quite different from their indigenous ways of life led to confusion and consequent unrest in this region. By creating maps with fixed lines, the administration had tried to take away the reality of a 'fleeting zone' (Palsson 2002: 53) and replace it with the illusion of a finality, a 'fixed line' (ibid). Joshi (2013) has described the 'shifting' and fuzzy nature of the Inner Line that had first been used to demarcate roughly the so-called 'tribal' areas of the North-East from the plains. Although this was a line 'between a known territory beyond which lies as yet unknown land' (ibid: 165), the British interest in exploiting this rather inaccessible and at that time 'dangerous' region was the lure of vast natural resources there; an interest that is shared by the present Indian state. The location of this region on the critical frontiers separating India from its neighbours as well its rich natural resources has been incentive enough for the state to keep a tight hold on this region.

This process of incorporation and labeling began with British colonization and as Mathur (2013: 76) observes, 'Britain's interests, it was believed, could be best served through the accurate measurement and mapping of the territory under control, by etching out neat frontiers.' As a result of such 'neatness' in mapping and arbitrary drawing of lines, contestations arose that are yet to be resolved as seen from the frequent disagreements that keep arising regarding mapping of borders of both groups and their presumed territories. The creation of a map attempted to stamp a final decision in favour of the Indian state in the dispute over borders that had its genesis in a 'historical accident' (Maxwell 1980: 3), when the North-Eastern region became part of the Indian nation state.

As a case in point, we can look into the emerging identity of what today constitutes the Naga, incorporating many indigenous identities. With the constitution of the state of India, the Nagas

found themselves reluctant members, a position that they have been contesting ever since. But along with the primary allegiance to the Indian state, another matter of dispute has always remained regarding the boundaries of the region that the Nagas can call their own. A major bone of contention was and remains the demarcation of what constitutes Nagaland?

In a paper written a couple of decades back, Ambrose Lurstep (1992), a student from Nagaland at Delhi University, gave a map of Nagaland (see map), which according to him was closer to the Nagas' conception of where they belong, than the manner in which the colonial and later Indian government had divided them up. The name itself has raised many controversies both within and outside of Naga land. But to refer to the present discussion the map is of greater interest as it indicates a complete disjunction between the cognitive map and the actual political situation. Nagas, as they identify themselves, are found in both India and Mynamar, and in India too they are spread over four states: Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. The contestations over map of 'Nagaland' continues even today and gives rise to sporadic violence as is often seen across the Nagaland–Manipur border.

Against the backdrop of the larger Indian nation, contestations of identity of 'being Naga' and 'belonging to Nagaland' are actualized at several levels. The first level of conflict concerns the conflation of the identities of 'being Naga' and 'being Indian'; the second level is addressed to the geopolitical question regarding the boundaries of the entity called 'Nagaland'. From the point of view of the Indian state both the questions are decided from the top and by the state machinery. From the point of view of the Naga people, it is *they* and not the state that should have the agency of decision making and they question the very legitimacy of the state and its control over them. And lastly, there are questions and doubts regarding how the inner constituents of the 'Naga' name themselves? How do the various people contained within the overarching 'Naga' label identify their own kin and community? The three questions are passing through

various historical levels of manifestations and transformations and continue to throw up various identity debates especially with regard to the last aspect.

In the initial period, the identity of 'being Naga' was consolidated in the face of the common enemy 'The Indian Nation' (Tünyi 2012: 19). Over the nearly seven decades after the 'historical accident'(see above), the contemporary generation of Nagas have accepted to a large extent their ascribed identity to be able to say 'I am a Naga', irrespective of the constituent group to which they belong. But still almost all will say, when catching a flight from Dimapur, "I am going to India". It seems the acceptance of an externally imposed Naga identity is more in tune with their own conceptions of who they are, than being Indian. Both the conjunction and the disjunction are results of lived realities and political exigencies. The larger Naga identity gives them a broader platform to fight their political battles, and at the same time it takes care of all the discrepancies of naming, that accompanied their classification into the so-called different 'tribes'.

'Naga' is what we may call an 'oppositional identity', one formed in opposition to the collectively conceived 'Other' (Tünyi 2012: 29) than one having any indigenously evolved roots. There is a general consensus that a 'Naga' is not necessarily 'Indian'. The reluctance of the common people of India to accept the people from the North-East as their own and the sometimes painful outcome of this distrust, has not made the process of acceptance of an Indian identity easy for the people of the North-East. The embodied 'racial' difference, and the fact that they do not fit in with the 'normal' Indian look, has created situations of alienation. It is the author's personal experience that a colleague from the North-East has been referred to as Korean, by members of the university staff and many highly educated Indians still suffer from all kinds of stereotypes about 'people from the North-East'. At the local level, from experience of the students who live in PG accommodations around the university campus, it is observed that they are routinely charged extra amounts for boarding and

lodgings and face discrimination because of their 'strange' food habits.

The continued discriminations and the rejection at the ground level by the local communities, especially in some parts of India, has caused the people of the region to cluster and form social support groups. Beginning from close kin, these groups extend to people of one's own 'tribe', clan, region, and finally to those of the larger North-East identity. Therefore when in India, they are all from North-East. This includes the upper-caste Assamese who are otherwise more comfortable with a Hindu mainstream identity as well as the Hindu Meiteis (Subba and Ghosh 2003: 4). Thus, even while the Nagas may agree to some extent that they are part of the North-East, they would not be comfortable to be equated with a Meitei or an Assamese caste Hindu. But they would at least claim familiarity with the latter than they would with north Indians or with people beyond the Deccan. Thus many uneasy relations may be compromised for situational advantages.

Although the tribe–non-tribe identities are prominent on all locations, on their own turf the tribes do not identify at all with either Hindu Assamese or the Meiteis from Manipur. Within Manipur, for example, the conflict between the dominant Hindu Meiteis and the predominantly Christian tribes is quite overt. Similarly the level of comfort with a Naga or Mizo identity is more outside of the region they inhabit. In peninsular India, referring to themselves as from the North-East, the generalized tribal and Christian identities are foregrounded as against the specific local identities. This is in response to the stereotypical vision of the North-Easterner as largely Christian, westernized, and 'pork eating'. An upper-caste Vaishnavite Meitei and an Assamese Brahmin does not fit into this stereotype. Thus identity constructions work both ways: those whose identity is being constructed often feed into the imagination of the dominant group, acting out parts for the benefit of the others, illustrating the 'dialogic nature of identity' (Moran 2014: 357).

One may refer to the model of complimentary opposition used by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) in analysing the political

organization of the Nuer. The larger and more distant the enemy, the broader is the base on which people unite. When opposed to a larger body of Indians, they may prefer to be called, 'North-East' people; when compared to other people from North-East, they prefer the label of Nagas; but when in Nagaland, many other local level identities, not necessarily benign to each other, may be evoked. Away from the Indian nation, the Naga view their identity as not confined to Nagaland or to the Indian North-East but as inclusive of clans and lineages spread across a wider region as indicated in the map provided by Lurstep. But exclusions and inclusions are always subjective and situational. The Naga scholar, Tünyi, agrees that this identity is a 'political' one. It is also not static but one that, 'contemporary Naga are continuously creating and recreating' (Tünyi 2012: 16). Thus at the larger political level they may include as Naga, people from across the border, that is Mynamar but at the level of a socially relevant community, they break up into their constituent 'tribes' or clans.

The common narrative generally agreed upon by Naga scholars and common people alike is one of oppression by the Indian state with which their only interaction in the initial phase had been in the form of a brutal military intervention and which is today sustained by the continued existence of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). But these sentiments too are not inscribed in stone and are transforming.

The feelings of pure hostility have changed as new generations of Naga people have moved to the Indian mainland and come across people, even from the army, who are sympathetic and empathetic and to whom they relate as fellow human beings. As already mentioned when they come together under the blanket category of North-East, many are included who resemble the mainstream population of India. There are Hindus among the North-East people and there are Christians among the mainland Hindus.

Their interaction with the state is also conditioned by some of the privileges and resources to which they are entitled and

through which they are merged with many other people of the Indian nation. For example, classifying many of the people from the North-East as 'tribes' includes them under the label of Scheduled Tribes, and they become eligble for positive discrimination policies available to such a category. But this identity is shared with large number of communities with whom the North-East tribes may have nothing in common. Anthropologically, the label 'tribe' has been put under the scanner as an arbitrary and fuzzy category with derogatory, racial, and colonial overtones. But administratively it works fine, especially as it entails many privileges. Paradoxically, to access such privileges the Naga and other people from the North-East have to admit that they are Indians, although for most it remains a reluctant identity.

The Inner and the Outer

There does not appear to be any intellectual support for any kind of identity having an objective ontological rationality. Bayart indicates on the basis of his sustained research into the construction of identities that although a 'cultural' rationale is usually evoked for claims to identity, often in a dynamic fashion, there is no necessary empirical basis to any kind of identity that remains, 'at best a cultural construct, a political or ideological construct; that is ultimately, a historical construct (2005: ix). When people evoke what they consider their own conception about their self-identity, the information that is fed into this construct may be more in the nature of a political/situational strategy; although to the people asserting this identity it appears to be real and rational. One may thus question Bayart, on the basis of the emotional response to the so-called 'constructions'; that even if they are constructs, the emotions and sentiments that they evoke are real. Thus war, conflict, and bloodshed that takes place on the basis of the apparent clash/contestations of identities are responses to real historical conditions. Given that the evocation of 'culture' as a justification may be contrived yet it is these cultural symbols that act as powerful 'motivators' for action.

Some identities are accepted for the sake of negotiations, privileges, and economic and political gains. They are rarely the ones that evoke high emotional responses. The ones that evoke emotional responses are those that are close to the sense of an inner self, a sense of belongingness where one feels attached from within.

The acceptance of a North-East identity or even an Indian one does not mean that most people have a sense of 'belonging' (Pfaff-Czarnicka and Toffin 2011: xi); that is at the level of emotion and sentiments they feel as being a part of this segment of society. 'To belong is to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it and to have a stake in the future of such a community of membership' (Anthias 2006: 21). The question then arises: does the identity of being a Naga or any other blanket identities evoke such a sense of belonging? As rightly recognized by ethnographers, such a sense of belonging may well be dynamic and shifting but unlike identity that has a negotiable, political character to it, the sense of belonging is more personal, closer to one's inner self. Czarnecka-Pfaff and Toffin (2011: xv) point to three parameters of belonging, namely: 'commonality, mutuality and attachment'. However these are only generalizations, such that when we talk of commonality, it varies as to what kind of characters may be evoked to establish such commonality, how one may express mutuality, and in what ways is attachment realized and felt. Thus students from the North-East may feel some common bonds with their classmates, their hostel mates, and with their teachers, but at other points they may feel alienated. A sense of belongingness also changes with one's own life experience and status; thus well-placed officers and those employed in high status jobs, like university teachers and Indian Administrative Officers, may feel a greater sense of security and belonging than say a new arrival from the interior regions of Manipur to Delhi.
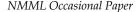
A greater sense of power and control increases the range of a person's sense of belonging, for as already mentioned, two important criteria of belonging are those of a 'feeling of safety'

and of "having a say" Czarnecka-Pfaff and Toffin (2011: xv). Thus overt symbols of identity such as clothes and appearance also change with one's sense of control and belonging. While young students from the North-East rarely come out in traditional Indian clothes, it has been found that young IAS officers from the North-East often prefer to wear 'Indian' clothes; because their power is derived not from their identity as belonging to North-East but as an Indian citizen, even though a tribal one.[2] Here is a quote from one young woman IAS officer who spoke while dressed in an Indian outfit,

> When I came as a young student from Nagaland, my mother had made me promise that I will never marry an Indian, never wear Indian clothes and not give up my Christian religion. However today I wear Indian clothes quite proudly as I hold an important position within the Indian Administrative Service and my mother too does not mind.

Even young teachers and other official position holders do not on some occasions mind identifying as Indian, at least overtly.

Thus power and control also play a key role in one's sense of belonging and identity, an aspect that has not received much attention while discussing identity and belonging. Going beyond the context of the discussion it is relevant to bring up Virginia Woolf's ideas about 'patriotism' and loyalty to a nation, a nation that she felt belonged only to the men. Because men own the nation, they have the power, it is they who should rightly feel 'loyal' towards it, in other words they should have a feeling of belonging and not women with no stakes. In her long essay *Three Guineas* (1993: 234), she wrote, 'as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world'. Thus as long as a people feel they are getting nothing or own nothing in a place, there is not much likelihood

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[2] One may refer to the young Minister of State for Home Affairs, Mr. Kiren Jijiu, from Arunachal Pradesh, in his immaculate Indian attire befitting an Indian minister, who plays a diplomatic role between his identity as a person from North-East and as a minister in the central cabinet.

of their belonging to it. On the other hand, a collective not-belonging may form another kind of negatively constituted identity that groups together all those who do not belong in that particular context. Thus, when Woolf says as a woman she feels she belongs to the whole world she means to the world of those without any power. When all people from the North-East come together under a blanket term, it is in this sense that they do not belong to the core, peninsular identity of the dominant Indian. To be recognized or having a name is also a form of empowerment.

The very fact that North-East, a blanket term, is used to subvert numerous inner identities is another way in which one understands the relative powerlessness of the people of that region as compared to the dominant Indian population. In the construction of the Indian nation many communities and people have been obscured out of existence. It says much that the Nagas have accepted Nagamese as their own, a language with large components of Bengali and Assamese. It is also relevant that the state language of Arunachal Pradesh is Hindi and that of Nagaland is English. Many smaller tribes are fast losing their languages along with their voice. They are not written about and are certainly not heard and not recognized, if seen. For example, even when one is referring to a region, say, Nagaland, one finds that the early administrative interests and also academic attention was focused on the larger and dominant groups such as the Sema and the Angami. The smaller groups were largely ignored in anthropological literature as well as administrative records, the latter often finding it convenient to group together smaller communities under a larger umbrella of typological classification.

In the monolithic construction of 'the nation' these tiny enclaves of humanity are conveniently ignored as they are not really seen as contributing to the mainstream of the nation. At the most, their existence is of curiosity value and adds a touch of exoticism to the so-called 'cultural diversity' of tourism value. Quite often, in historical and anthropological literature we have seen that power gives the right not only to define but quite often

to reconstruct reality in terms of definitions of what exists and who matters.

A young girl from a remote group in the North-East of India came to me some years back and said, 'I want to write a thesis about my tribe.' 'Why?' I asked, 'Because if I write about them they will be recognized, they are not officially recognized as of now.' Another girl from a similarly small yet distinct group told me, 'I feel something break inside my heart when people refer to us as Moyong (name of a larger tribe), we are not Moyong, we are different, *we are a people*.' When the identity of a nation was created by incorporating a large number of units some were not important enough to be recognized. Many of them did not and perhaps still do not exist in official documents. Many times they exist as something they do not recognize as their selves. Thus many times what has been called the 'inner selves' are de-recognized and many have to struggle with an imposed 'outer self'; that are identities to which they do not feel that they belong yet those which they take on because of existing situations of practicality, power hierarchies, and political negotiability (Channa 2013:13). It is possible that in their own reflections the Angami and the Sumi think that they are Angami and Sumi and not just Naga; many may be identifying in terms of their clans and lineages. Yet they will answer to the call, 'Naga' and also do it somewhat willingly.

However, when the resources at the disposal of the people grow and their vulnerability decreases, the larger identities may be discarded at least in some situations in favour of more parochial ones. Thus individual groups now put under blanket categories, Naga being one of them, are finding it difficult to remain united as more power is coming their way. There is a distinct disjunction when they are opposed to the Indian nation (as in case of the AFSPA) and when they are fighting assembly elections as part of the Indian democracy. When it comes to power-sharing a renegotiation of identities emerges. This negotiation is often done with a futuristic agenda like forming alternative interest groups when the earlier interest groups begin

to lose their meaning. Earlier many similar groups had found it expedient to gather under a larger encompassing umbrella of identity but in changed circumstances these identities may tend to fall apart or at least to reassert themselves.

A case in point is the Zeliangrong, a confederation of tribes where each constituent unit has been trying to recreate its identity to fit in with a new sense of belonging. The data on the Zeliangrong was compiled by my student Mary Panmei, herself a Zeliangrong. Zeliangrong is an acronym of the three tribes, 'Ze' from the Zeme, 'Liang' from the Liangmei, and 'Rong' from the Rongmei. The term 'Zeliangrong' was coined in a conference of the Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei, and Puimei of Manipur and the Naga Hills of Assam, on 15th February 1947 at Imphal. As per her compilation of the historical identity confusion,

> Since the colonial period, there was identity confusion over the common nomenclature of the Zeliangrong. This was due to the imposition of the exogenous names by the Meitei rulers of Manipur, which were recognized by the British Government and the Indian Government. In the nineteenth century, British ethnographers used the nomenclatures like the *Zeme, Aroong, 'Kutcha Naga'* or *Mejhamah* and '*Kachcha Naga Empeo*' to refer the Zemes of North Cachar and Naga Hills (E.R. Grange 1839, J. Butler 1875 and C.A. Soppit 1885). In Manipur, W. McClulloch (1859) and R. Brown (1874) used the nomenclatures like *Songboo* and *Pooeeron* to mean the Kabui (Rongmei) and Puimei. They used Quireng (Lyeng) and Kabui to mean the Liangmei, the Rongmei and Puimei. T.C. Hodson (1911) in his book, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* clarified the confusion and the name 'Kabui' a Meitei word was officially used to mean *Songboo* (Rongmei) and *Pooeeron* (Puimei). Hutton (1921) in his monumental *Angami Naga* explicitly described the ethnic and racial composition of the 'Kacha Naga', that there were three groups namely, Zeme, Liangmei and Maruongmei.
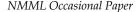>
> The ethnonym, 'Kabui' is a Meitei word used in the ancient chronicles of Manipur, before the British usage of the term. According to the chronicles, the term 'Kabui' is used to

mean the Rongmei and the Puimei. The differentiation between the Rongmei and the Puimei was indicated in the Cheitharol Kumbaba, the royal chronicle of Manipur. During the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1763–1798), the name Kabui Anouba (New Kabui) was used to mean the Puimei. The claim that Puimei was older than Kabui and that 'Kabui' was adopted by the British from Puimei is taken to be completely wrong. The term 'Kabui' which is not a Rongmei word was given by the Meitei to mean the Rongmei and Puimei. Although it has several historical references, Kabui is a misnomer.

Some enquiries show that 'Kacha Naga' is an Angami word derived from 'Ketsa' or 'Ketsu' meaning deep forests or forests dwellers. Originally, it was adopted to mean the Zeme of Naga Hills. Also, it was mean (sic) to the Liangmei who live in the Naga Hills and Manipur. J.H. Hutton and U.G. Bower employed the term 'Kacha Naga' to mean the Zeme, Liangmei and Rongmei. This description is believed to be wrong and not acceptable to the Zeliangrongs. However, in Manipur, 'Kacha Naga' means the Zeme and Liangmei only as per the Scheduled Tribe List (AZSU 2009).

At the end of the British rule in 1947, two nomenclatures 'Kacha Naga' and 'Kabui' remained to mean the Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei and Puimei. To replace the foreign-imposed names, the ethnonym 'Zeliangrong' came to exist. In Nagaland, after the formation of the state 'Kacha Naga' was replaced by Zeliang (Zeme and Liangmei) where Rongmei was barred. Zeliang is given the Scheduled Tribe status under 'Any Naga Tribe' in Nagaland devoid of Rongmei. In Manipur, 'Kacha Naga' (Zeme and Liangmei) and Kabui (Rongmei and Puimei) were declared as Scheduled Tribes in 1956 without the consent of the respective people. In Assam, under the provision of 'Any Naga tribe' only the Zeme is recognized as Scheduled Tribe debarring the Liangmei and Rongmei. Hence, the collective identity of the Zeliangrong which has been imposed and recognized in different nomenclatures is wrong and unacceptable to the Zeliangrong people. (Provided by Mary Panmei)

There are interesting observations that can be made on the basis of the above narration. Firstly it seems that the first chroniclers of the Naga tribes, the British administrators picked up nomenclature not from the so-called 'wild' tribes of Manipur and Nagaland but from the far more 'civilized' sources; namely the royal chronicles of the kings of Manipur and perhaps people from the plains of Assam; that explains why the names used by them were many and differed greatly from their indigenous originals. They had certainly not asked any of the natives as to what they were called or what they wished to be called as. Thus Kabui is said to be a misnomer by the present day bearers of that name, so obviously it did not originate from them. These misrepresented nomenclatures obviously were the products of interactions between one set of power holders with another set of power holders and the concerned people were never consulted. This is however not at all an isolated incidence of such imposed nomenclatures, and even identities. In the post-independence context, identities have also assumed added significance as getting labeled as a separate 'tribe' in the Indian Schedule means that one is entitled to certain benefits. But one must not attribute the search for identities to only a pragmatic goal but also link it to the sense of an 'inner self', a validation of what one believes one's self to be.

The continued struggle of some of the tribes to get recognition on their own terms now involves the educated sections of these tribes and also within a democracy, the universal franchise has given some political weight to the collective voice of a people. The efforts of the Zeliangrongs have been summed up by Mary Panmei:

> In Manipur, since the recognition of Kacha Naga and Kabui as Scheduled Tribes in 1956, there have been persistent demands for the alteration of these two nomenclatures. In 1960, the Zeliangrong Naga Union (ZNU) demanded the government of India to recognize the Zeliangrong. In January 1966, freedom fighter Rani Gaidinliu raised her demand for a Zeliangrong district and for the recognition of Zeliangrong as a separate Scheduled Tribe in Assam,

Manipur and Nagaland (Kamei, 2004). A great conflict took place in Nagaland in 1976, when the Rongmei was excluded in the list of the indigenous tribes of Nagaland. Rongmei as a separate tribe or Rongmei as a part of 'Zeliang' was not considered. In Manipur, the issue was for the change of nomenclatures Kacha Naga and Kabui into the collective name of Zeliangrong.

In the year 1975, the Zeliangrong Student Union of Manipur (ZSUM) submitted a memorandum to the Government of India for the collective status of the Zeliangrong as a tribe. Again in 1983, there was a movement by the Zeliangrong People Convention (ZPC) under the leadership of Rani Gaidinliu for the recognition of Zeliangrong as a Scheduled Tribe and to provide a separate homeland. The All Zeliangrong Students' Union (AZSU) and other Zeliangrong organizations of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland underwent several Dharnas and submitted memorandums (1992, 1994, 1996 & 2005) to the Prime Minister of India and other higher officials on their demands of Zeliangrong common identity.

On the recommendation of the Hill Areas Committee, the Government of Manipur decided to recommend the following proposal in respect of the recognition of Zeliangrong as a Scheduled Tribe (AZSU, 2009). Any Zeliangrong tribe includes Zeme and Liangmei in lieu of Kacha Naga, and Rongmei and Inpui in lieu of Kabui. Also, there is a demand for separate recognition of Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei and Puimei (Inpui) by some vested interest groups. Nevertheless, most of the Zeliangrongs as a whole is (sic) against the division policy of the collective identity of the Zeliangrong people.

From the above narrative one finds that slowly the rights to decision-making are passing from the hands of the external elite to that of the indigenous elite, composed mostly of the formally educated, so that we find that students are playing a key role as much as the local politicians. When such new identities are being asserted they are obviously being done as a political strategy and to serve the future political agenda of some people.

When we look at the traits that are being evoked to stake a so-called 'common 'identity, it becomes obvious that, as Bayart (2005) puts it, culture is a 'construct'.

> The Zeliangrong are the descendants of the same ancestors. The common identity of the Zeliangrongs as an ethno-cultural entity is based on (1) Common origin and history (2) Ethnic and linguistic affinity (3) Common social structure based on kinship and lineage (4) Cultural homogeneity and (5) Common political system. Racially and linguistically, Zeliangrong belong to the Naga-Bodo sub family of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group (Grierson, 1903). (Information provided by Mary Panmei)

All the characters evoked above are both sufficiently generalized and also non-challengeable, yet they suffice to create a sense of commonality, if one wishes to believe in it.

This is just one of many such instances of identity contestation and renegotiations. Tünyi (2012: 13) has a similar situation for the Chakesang; an acronym that does less than describe any spatial or linguistic affiliation. 'The term Chakesang, (CHA+KHE+SANG) which is a recognized tribe in Nagaland, is an acronym for three groups of people, or basically linguistic groups, namely, 'Cha' for Chokri, 'Khe' for Kheza, and 'Sang' for Sangtam. However, today Sangtam refers to an altogether different tribe in Tuensang district in Nagaland. Strangely enough, Tuensang district was never a land for the Chakesang people. Sangtam was then inappropriately used to refer to a linguistic community called Pochuri who are today a full-fledged tribe in Phek district. Besides, Chakesang tribe is also constituted by yet another linguistic group known as 'Zhamai' or 'Zavame'.

Thus names and labels are decidedly not derivatives of ground-level realities or represent the self-identities of people. These reflect the convenience as well as administrative requirements of those in power. The fact that these labels are not going unchallenged is illustrative of shifts in power, like the acquisition of a voice by those who were silent earlier. The tribal

elite, the educated, and the powerful can speak in their own voice. This of course does not mean that all the powerless have found a voice but that the power equations and balances are shifting.

The moot questions then are not those belonging to the past but to the present. Whose voices are being heard? Whose interests are being served? These questions are important to be answered whenever new identities are being evoked and old ones challenged. But what remains certain is that constructions are historical processes and are informed by a multiplicity of factors. Thus an ethnographer should be always open to new data and new realizations rather than taking any name of label at its face value. Academic enterprises need to be ever critical and cautious.
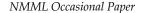
Conclusion

In conclusion one needs to go back to the questions and the issues that were raised in the first section of this paper. The fragments and the totality have a relationship, for each is trying to assess and adjust to the needs of the hour. If the larger entity is acknowledging some identity, then it is part of the historical process of safeguarding its own interests. If the smaller entities are following some rules and readjusting their identities then they too are responding to their own needs and aspirations. Today the question of being 'Naga' is no longer an open one, but what remains is the levels at which this identity will express itself and that is conditioned by the location as well as the occasion. Taking a stand against the rest of the nation as a whole, the identity of being a 'Naga' holds firm as it is a matter of strength and power in a negotiating situation but when it comes to the sharing of resources and to the distribution of privileges, this identity will then begin to fragment and this dissolution will follow and evoke the past but only in the context of the present. The more one shifts from the abstract to the real, the more is the confusion and chaos of trying to locate the 'real' as against the 'fictional'.

There is an agreement among most ethnographers that cultures are fuzzy constructions and ethnicity draws upon more of

fictionalized ancestry than real ones (Fischer 2001:10). One important point that needs reconsideration is the traditional anthropological emphasis upon kinship and marriage as defining social boundaries. In the author's work on the Jad Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi in the Central Himalayas (Channa 2013:15), it has been shown that it is location and the ecological relationships that play a greater role in defining a group identity than their actual descent. Ramirez (2014: xxvi) draws a parallel with the societies of the North-East region of India,

> Patronymic equivalences and conversion rituals allow a smooth flow of spouses between groups of different language and ethnic identity. These observations strongly support the hypothesis that there exists an extended social system beneath or across ethnic divisions and cultural differences … and also that descent is often second to residence and that the identity acquired by an individual at birth is not dependent on his/her parents', but on his house's (sic).

But this again implies that since place of residence is not immutable like descent, one's identity can change so that as among the pastoral communities of the central Himalayas, a person from Niti or Mana can come to a Jad village and become a Jad by marriage or residence; and a person who was born a Jad can go to another village and become, say a Kinnauire in Himachal Pradesh. But that does not mean that anyone can become anyone else.
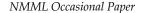
Such transferences are possible only across shared cosmologies and mutually understood speech communities, even if the languages are different. Thus political identities are built up around not simply place of residence, common origins (if any such exist), or even genealogical connections. They are built up around a common frame of reference, a mutually understood cosmos of meanings, and to some, though not necessarily so, on common grounds of interest. People can marry, live, and share identities with those who are *like them*. The points of likeness may vary along various levels. For example, as Ramirez (2014:

xxviii) points out with respect to the difference between people of the North-East from those of peninsular India, 'A first distinction distinguished hill people from plains people and a second one, independent populations from subordinate and dutiable populations.' Similar points of difference and identity were drawn by the people of Uttarakhand, distinguishing them from those of the plains at the height of their separatist movement that resulted in creation of a separate hill state in 2002. The pastoral Bhotiyas and the cultivator peasant Garhwalis came together, against their common enemy the '*plainslog*' (people of the plains), forgetting their earlier differences and the Bhotiyas were conceded a high caste Rajput status (Channa 2010).

Thus the least denominator on which political identities can be built up are a common mode of understanding the world; these can be at a high level of abstraction and be embodied like those based on gender or sexual preferences, or based on inhabiting a common cognitive space and /or a common political space. In case of the people of the North-East, all these could be factors that work at some levels and become operationalized at some historical moments. Their racial difference from the plains population is a common 'birthmark' (Palsson 2007: 53) that unites them and also separates them; there are other considerations of which a primary one is 'marginalization'. As Ramirez (2014: 1) points out, the very term North-East, presupposes a '"center"', either Indo-Gangetic civilization or contemporary political India'. Thus the label in itself is one of pushing them into a 'frontier' category, realized by the historical process of colonization. Further developments on this identity are reflective of various forms and processes by which this pre-conceived marginalization has been working out. Thus identity, especially political identity, as a process is a historical evolution of power relationships; the ontological contents on which these identities are rationalized are to a large extent fictionalized responses to power negotiations.

One needs also to question the theoretical stereotyping that began with the classical work of Durkheim when he made the distinction between organic and mechanical solidarity, imputing an evolutionary 'primitiveness' to the latter. As explained earlier
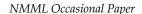
in this paper, this imputation of 'group' and collectivity to those regarded as less 'modern' (read developed) continues to be pervasive in anthropological theory and state level policies as of today. Yet does it bring us closer to reality to take away individual agency from those deemed 'tribe' or indigenous? Are they only subscribing to the collective sentiments? Tünyi's (2012) reflexive paper on his identity as a Naga makes us think otherwise and indeed every man or woman who belongs to any so-called ethnic groups must also have a mind and identity of their own.

At times a larger group identity tends to subvert a less powerful identity. Naga women, for example, often complain that since the state recognizes Naga customary law that is highly patriarchal, they suffer. Similarly the state may look the other way in case of internal factions and struggle of minority factions within the larger ones, preferring not to interfere in such 'internal matters'. Such internal fracturing occurs all across the globe and with respect to indigenous identities, Moran (2014: 361) writes, quoting the observation made by the anthropologist June Nash (1995), that how 'powerful, sometimes corrupt and violent indigenous factions', in collusion with outside power groups, expelled sections of their own people in the Highlands of Chiapo, in Mexico. Thus even as a theoretician there is need to keep an open mind, to assess each situation in its own terms, and to evaluate at least in the last instance, if any, in the perspectives of large human interests. Names and maps are key mechanisms of conferring and establishing identities but these are also key mechanisms for establishing control. There is certainly a requirement to treat every label with caution and every identity as fallible and in the process of being 'made' rather than being an immutable 'finished product'.

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GREATER NAGALAND IN FREE INDIA