

# The Naga National Council

## Origins of a Separatist Movement

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*It is the purpose of this article to explore the factors which may account for the development of the Naga National Council as a separatist movement in the north eastern portions of Assam.*

*For a number of years after 1947, this movement engaged the Government of India in what at times took on the dimensions of a civil insurrection and which ultimately forced the Indian Government to create a separate State of Nagaland.*

*The new State, India's sixteenth, is its smallest with an area of only 6,000 square miles and a population of 350,000 to 400,000 people.*

*The demand for an independent Nagaland was not supported by all the contiguous tribes residing in the hills of Assam, nor was it even supported by all Naga tribes.*

*The western most Naga tribes supported the movement, while the eastern tribes - the Konyahs and Kalyo-Kengyus of the Tuensang Division of the North East Frontier Agency refused to support the Naga National Council.*

*A comparison of the Nagas with other tribes in Assam, and a comparison of the eastern and the western Nagas may help us to understand the factors which entered into the creation of a separatist movement.*

THE most obvious contributory factor to the separatist movement is the differences between the Nagas of the hills and the plainsmen. The fact that the Nagas, with mongolian features, look different from the Aryan plainsmen, tended to separate them in social situations and other contacts. This was intensified by the association of the Naga, in the mind of the plainsman, with a head-hunting, "primitive" tribe whose customs were radically different from those of other people. It is not insignificant that the Council was made up of a number of youths who were unable to adjust to the schools of Assam and the cities of India. Ethnographic differences were further accentuated by differences in language. By mid-twentieth century, it was necessary for educated Nagas to learn three or four of their own dialects or languages in order to matriculate in Naga schools and this made it difficult for them to learn the languages of others, if for no other reason than the limitations of time. Since few of the Assamese or Bengalis were able to speak even one Naga language, the linguistic problem was intensified, with the result that Nagas were denied opportunities in the plains on the basis of their inability to speak the language. The extent of the problem can be seen by comparing the number of Nagas who could speak either Assamese, Bengali, or Hindi,

with the speakers of the same three languages among the two other large Assamese tribes, the Garos and the khasis (see Table 1.).

The reason why so few Nagas speak any of the languages of the plains is largely due to the linguistic differences within the tribes themselves. The Khasis and Garos, each with a uniform tribal language, were able to devote much more time to the study of non-tribal languages before and after venturing away from the hills. The fact that the Nagas were not conquered until 1890, a half-century after the

annexation of the Khasi and Garo Hills also meant that they were late-comers in applying themselves to the task of learning non-Naga languages.

### Antipathy Reciprocal

The differences between Nagas and plainsmen can also be seen, in the area of religious beliefs. While the plains districts, like the rest of India, had traditionally been almost exclusively populated by Hindus and Muslims, the Naga Hills came to include a Christian population of 45 per cent. Moreover, few Nagas ever converted to Islam or to

TABLE 1 : Tribal Speakers of Plains Languages

Tribes	Total Population	Assamese Speakers	Hindi Speakers	Bengali Speakers	Total	% Population
Western Nagas *	205,950	1,264	809	1,774	3,847	1.8
Khasis	386,143	15,276	7,916	16,145	39,337	10.2
Garos	242,075	9,651	1,605	19,086	30,256	12.5

Calculated from : *Census of India, 1951, XII, II-A, 79.* Figures relating to English speakers are not available.

\* The figures given for the Nagas do not include the eastern Naga tribes since the census was not conducted in these areas.

TABLE 2 : Religions of Assamese Tribals

Tribes	Christians		Hindus		Muslims	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Nagas Western	93,443	45	8,661	4.2	3,168	1.50
Khasis	110,086	29	57,430	14.8	520	0.13
Garos	39,302	16	40,189	16.3	10,778	4.4

Calculated from : *Census of India, 1951, Ibid., pp 106-07.*

Hinduism, and when they did, it was tinged with traditional Naga animism. The contrast presented by the (faros and khasis is again striking (see Table 2).

These differences can be partially attributed to the fact that the missionary efforts among the Garos and Khasis were not as intense as those among the Nagas. But they are also due to the fact that Hinduism and Islam were real competitors in the Khasi and Garo Hills. In the case of the Khasis, the presence of Shillong, the capital of Assam, in the hills meant that the tribals were more constantly in contact with religions of the plains. The Garos, the westernmost Tribe in Assam, had been in contact with the plains even before the advent of the British and had been somewhat assimilated.

The feeling of antipathy was reciprocal in that the plainsmen also thought of the Nagas in separate terms. Until independence, the Nagas were considered a "frontier tribe" and classified with the unadministered tribes on the border, in contrast to the Khasis and Garos who were considered to be an integral part of the plains districts.

#### Exploited by Plainsmen

The Naga tribes were never integrated more closely with the plains districts largely because the Naga Hills were not as accessible to the plains people as were the Khasi and Garo Hills. Also, since the Khasi and Garo Hills contained more natural and commercial resources than the Naga Hills, they offered greater opportunities to trading plainsmen. The accessibility of the Khasi and Garo Hills to plainsmen also led to a greater degree of economic development among these two tribes than among the Nagas. This can be seen when viewing the progress of cultivation from 1921 to 1951. Between these years, the average net area sown increased by 18% and 31% respectively among the Khasis and Garos, while the corresponding figure for the Nagas was only 4.2%.

A more complete view of the extent to which the Nagas were economically neglected can be gained by a study of Table 3, relating to the amount of money spent on public instruction. In this case the British government spent more than six times as much in the Garo Hills and nearly eight times as much in the Khasi Hills as was spent on the

**TABLE 3 : Expenditures on Public Instruction : Assam Tribes**

Tribe	Source of Expenditure (Rs)			Total
	Government	Municipal Boards	Fees and Misc	
Nagas	35,493	—	5,115	40,608
Khasis	151,965	7,918	154,363	314,246
Garos	104,687	7,816	133,921	246,424

Source : *General Report on Public Instruction in Assam, 1940-41*, Shillong, Assam Secretariat, 1942.

Nagas. This meant that the Khasis and Garos were being taught by more people from the plains and thus were more likely to be instructed by those who had a favourable view of plains people and culture. At the same time, the Nagas were getting their education from alien American Baptist missionaries who did not know the plains people and did not approve of the majority of their customs.

#### British Offer of Crown Colony

The differences between Nagas and plainsmen and the instances of conflict between them, even taken together, could not have been solely responsible, however, for the separatist movement since such conflicts and differences existed also between non-Naga hillsmen (including the Khasis and Garos) who eventually agreed to inclusion within the Indian Union. Though the differences produced a more pronounced feeling of separatism among the Nagas than among the Khasis and Garos, they were still differences only of degree and, taken alone, might not account for the independence demand. However, events during and immediately following World War II, peculiar to the Naga Hills and the western Naga tribes alone, shaped the extremist position of the Naga National Council. Not only was the war fought solely in the Naga Hill areas of Assam, but also the Nagas alone were offered a separate crown colony by the British government and were subject to a great deal of freedom from Indian administration after independence.

After the war, educated Naga leaders made extreme demands on government. When the Governor-General-in-Council rewarded the Naga war effort with the promise of a modern hospital at Kohima, a number of Nagas protested that it was insufficient reward and asked for educational and economic deve-

lopment schemes as well as some measure of self-government. British administrators, including Professor Coupland, reacted by proposing the formation of a British crown colony comprising the Naga Hill Areas and the Naga areas of the North East Frontier Agency. The Britishers argued that these areas were not yet ready for independence and that the special conditions prevailing in the hills warranted their being severed from India. Naga leaders who were the original members of the Naga National Council were called together for the purpose of discussing the crown colony idea. They were attracted by a proposal that sought to join all of the Naga tribes; promised the eventual transfer of government to Nagas; offered plans for educational and economic development; and would sever them from the administration of the plainsmen. Thus when the British abandoned the idea of a crown colony and withdrew from India, they left the Council with its expectations heightened by the discussion of a crown colony, and face-to-face with the prospect of being incorporated into the regular administration of Assam.

#### Distrust of Assam Government

The events of the first four years after independence contributed to the Naga distrust of the Assam Government. First there was a misunderstanding about the nature of the Hyderi Pact, an agreement reached in 1948 between the leaders of the Naga National Council, the Governor of Assam, and the Chairman of India's Constitutional Sub-committee on Assam Tribals. The Council interpreted the pact as a ten-year treaty, after the expiration of which the Nagas would decide whether or not to join the Indian Union. They were thus surprised to find that they were, included in the Indian Union when the Constitution was promulgated. In addition the Assam Government discontinued the policy of

'Exclusion,' maintained by the British until 1947. Under this policy, those areas designated as 'Excluded Areas' were administered by the Central Government through the Governor of the Province, but they were not integrated into the Province.

Though the Nagas wanted economic development, they viewed with alarm the end of 'Exclusion' and their fears were borne out when the end of Exclusion resulted in an influx of merchants and usurers from the plains in larger numbers than ever before, a situation made worse by the introduction of cheap cloth which contributed to the breakdown of cottage industry. Moreover, the Government proclaimed its intention of instituting a policy of "detribalization" designed, in the words of one Governor of Assam, "to bring the people of the hills to the same level of the plains people within as short a period as possible." It was reported that this policy meant, among other things, the teaching of Assamese in all tribal schools. Finally, the Nagas feared that a strong provincial administration would mean enforcement of the Assam Reserve Forest Act and would prohibit many of the homeless Naga families from clearing forests to build new homes.

#### Administrative Vacuum

The Council was able to gain widespread support for its opposition to the Indian Union because of the Naga fear of excessive Assamese administration. Yet the Council would not have been able to organize as well as it did but for the lack of administration that accompanied independence and partition, a situation that made it impossible to administer properly the Naga Hills or to undertake development schemes. The failure of the Assamese to extend their administration into the Naga Hills gave the Council an opportunity to administer the area itself and to establish at least a semblance of a unified Naga Government. In this endeavour it was aided by the Assamese Government which recognized Angami Zanu Phizo, the N N C president, as the representative spokesman of all Naga tribes and even referred to the N N C on some occasions as a legitimate Government.

Once again the contrast to the Garos and Khasis is striking. While the Naga areas were always 'Excluded Areas,' the Khasi and

Garos Hills became "Partially Excluded Areas" in 1935. This meant that the Khasis and Garos were allowed to elect two representatives to the Assam legislature and were placed under the administration of a special Ministry in the Assam cabinet. Moreover, local councils were elected in some villages on an experimental basis. "Partial Exclusion" served to draw the Khasis and Garos closer to the people of the plains. They were in constant contact with the Provincial Assembly, and they grew accustomed to presenting their demands to Government to this body. In sharp contrast was the case of the Nagas where the administrative arrangements and the period of war had caused the Assam Government to lose contact with the tribals and thus help to strengthen the Naga National Council. Since the war did not spread to the Khasi and Garo Hills, regular administration, drawing the tribals closer to the Government of Assam, was carried on until 1951 when the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution replaced the existing arrangements. But while the Khasis and Garos accepted the Constitution of 1951 and were organizing to contest elections, the Nagas were rejecting these same arrangements, having already organized to demand independence.

#### Why Eastern Nagas Kept Out

The Naga demand for separation can thus be attributed to historical differences between Nagas and plainsmen, coupled with instances of conflict with the peoples of the plains and the lack of administration following independence. But what then accounts for the failure of the eastern Nagas to support the organization? Why did the western Nagas form an organization designed to achieve separation while the eastern Nagas did not join the movement? The remainder of this study is an attempt to answer this question and to conclude with some observations about organizational creation among the Nagas.

The policy of both the missionaries and of government served to change traditional Naga society among the western tribes. One of the first effects of the intrusion of the British was the increased interaction among the various tribes and villages. Due to the expansion of communications — roads, railways

and even bridlepaths — previously isolated units came into contact with one another more frequently. Indeed, because of the need for porters, cooks and houseboys, the British administrators aided in increasing the interaction of the various tribes even further. Educational work carried on by missionaries and Government schools, made possible by the abolition of intertribal head-hunting, was a further contributing factor.

#### Village Political Organizations

But while tribes were tending toward unity, the traditional village political organizations were being torn apart. The abolition of head-hunting, for instance, undermined the control of the chiefs and elders whose primary function had been to determine the time for a raid or an expedition against a neighbouring village. The power of the village leaders was further undermined when their judicial powers were usurped by British political officers. The work of the missionaries served to weaken the force of the taboos and the traditional system of social control. Probably the most serious instance of this was the tendency for boys to refuse to serve at the *mo rung* (bachelor's house). The missionaries forbade Christian youths to enter the *morung* because of the excessive amounts of rice-beer consumed there. But this created a serious gap in the social and political organizations in that there was no disciplinary agencies to take the place of the *morung*, nor any other means of recruiting future rulers.

While British policy and missionary activity destroyed and weakened the traditional tribal organizations, it also served to introduce to the Nagas new forms of organization. The increased interaction of villages and the unification of diverse dialects made possible multi-village organizations. These were forthcoming in the form of "workers associations" and "Christian societies," instigated by the missionaries to combat Naga "laziness" and "sabbath-breaking." Naga women's clubs and Naga student groups were also formed in an effort to provide a more familiar social environment in which the missionaries could operate. By World War II, these new social groupings were common to the western Naga Hills-

### **Educated Elite Replace Tribal Rulers**

With the breakdown of the traditional political systems, tribal chiefs, elders and councillors lost their authority, though they were able to maintain their positions until independence because of the presence of British administrators. When the British left and Assamese were unable to replace the administration, the tribal rulers gave way to a new set of rulers; an educated elite, capable of providing the skills and knowledge necessary to form a unified Naga Government that could promise some hope of achieving the new expectations. The result was a new form of political organization. The voluntary associations that had come into being prior to World War I were combined with other newly formed organizations into one bureaucratic structure, the Naga National Council. This new association attempted to be a Naga central (Government. In a sense it replaced British administration: it collected taxes, provided a judiciary and began planning the development of the Naga Hills. Moreover, it provided a vehicle which the new elite could use to exercise its new-found authority and which tribal rulers could use to replace that aura of legitimacy that had been lost with the withdrawal of the British. This accounts for the Council's success. It controlled the populace of the Naga Hills to such an extent that it was able to carry out a boycott of both the 1951 and 1957 elections, was able to battle 12,000 Indian troops to a five-year stalemate, and eventually to force the central government to grant Naga statehood-

That the conditions of war played a large part in shaping Naga concepts of organization can be seen from the fact that the structure of the organization was almost identical to that of the *Azad Hind Fauj* (the rebel I N A of Subhas Bose), to which many Naga leaders had belonged. In addition, the military wing of the Naga National Council, the Home Guard, derived its name and structure from the local Allied Army Units that had been set up in 1943

### **No Cultural Absorption**

The reason for the failure of the Council organization to spread to the Konyaks, and Kalyo-Kengyus was that these two Naga tribes had avoided the process of change that

had taken place among the western Nagas. The missionaries had tried to evangelize the Konyaks in 1838 but had abandoned the attempt after two years. By 1931, the Assam census listed only two Christians among the Konyaks and none among the Kalyo-Kengyus. The British had classified eastern Naga territory as an "unadministered area" and only one visit had been made to the tribes by an administrator during the entire period of British rule. The first attempt at administering the eastern Nagas, therefore, came in 1951 when the Indian Government attempted to place them in a single administrative unit, the Tuensang division of NFTA. But in this case the administrators were forbidden to interfere in tribal matters, to encroach in any way on tribal lands, or even to collect taxes.

The Government of India was able to maintain friendly relations with the eastern Nagas by following tribal customs. In 1956, when the Naga National Council began its campaign of violence, Lieutenant-General K S Thimayya toured the entire Tuensang division and concluded a peace with each powerful chief (*Ang*). The *Ang* did not feel that he was relinquishing any of his authority, however, since he viewed the ceremonies merely as a mutual pledge of *peace* on the part of the Indian Government as well as his own village. Although the eastern Nagas were in theory thus constitutionally incorporated into the Indian Union, in fact the *Ang* still ruled his village and the tribal political system remained intact. Thus, right up until the present day, the eastern Naga area can still be termed "virgin jungle in the midst of head-hunting country." I Anupani Dhar *Ten Years' Progress in NEFA*. Calcutta: Sree Saraswaty Press. 1957 p. 25.) They have managed to maintain their traditional system of political and social organization, their self-sufficient village, economies, their customs and religious beliefs. There is little or no trade, no inter-village or intertribal communication and no common language. Not even the war affected the eastern Naga tribes, for the Japanese invaded to the south of their territory where roads and paths made travel possible.

The complete isolation of Tuensang Nagas accounts for their failure to organize or to be recruited into the Naga National Council. The

eastern Nagas had no fear of cultural absorption; neither the British nor Indian governments had tried to impose direct rule over them. The only threat of absorption came from the Council, and to this they reacted by forming traditional village alliances. The eastern Nagas lacked the skills necessary to run a large-scale bureaucratic structure. None was capable of conversing in several village dialects, none was experienced in organizational affairs, and none possessed the military skills necessary to maintain order over a large geographic area.

### **Breakdown of Traditional Authority**

In contrast, a number of factors can be put forward to account for the organized separatist movement among the western Nagas. To begin with, the breakdown of traditional authority due to the intrusion of Christianity and British administration caused an organizational gap among the western Nagas. This gap was partially filled by the introduction of intervillage and intertribal associations--which eventually culminated in an all-western Naga organization, the Naga National Council. The lack of a commensurate increase in the authority of the British or Indian administration after World War II and the failure of the alien rulers to incorporate Naga villages into a larger political framework gave the Council an opportunity to spread its organization over the entire western Naga Hills.

Geographical factors were also crucial to the emergence of an organized secessionist movement. The rugged terrain and the difficulties involved in transporting Indian troops hampered the Indian Government in its attempts to quash the movement by force while the contiguity of Nagaland to foreign borders made it realistic for the Nagas to demand succession and also made it necessary for the Indian government to use caution in sending troops.

Finally, the Naga war experience was an important factor in that it taught the Nagas military strategy and the use of weapons, brought them into closer contact with other peoples and thus heightened their expectations of political and economic development, and gave them experience in that form of organization which they used to press their demand for independence.

## The comforts of life are spreading



Rising standards of living are finding their way into the remotest village and are coming within the reach of people with quite modest means. Consider Kerosine, for instance, which by bringing illumination to the humblest home is playing a part in this welcome development. By the end of the Third Plan, Burmah-Shell estimates

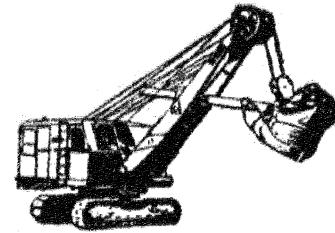
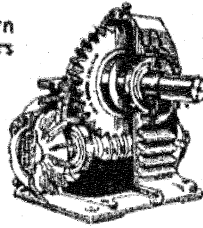
that demand for Kerosine will be around 2.9 million tons, or well over 800 million gallons a year. There can be no question that the first priority should be exploration and the production of indigenous crude oil; the second priority must be to expand refining capacity in India. Oil is essential to economic growth and Burmah-Shell believes that

for tomorrow's needs we must act today

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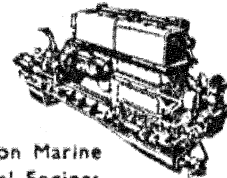
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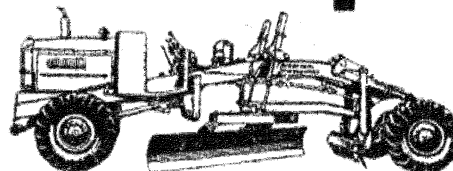
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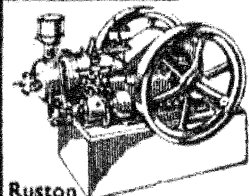
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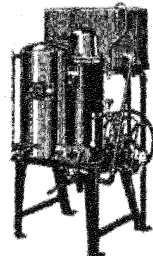
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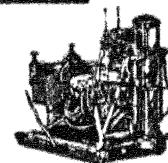
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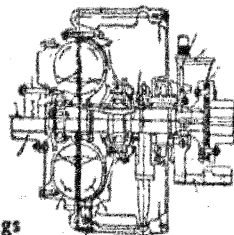
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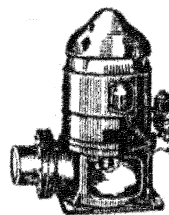
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