



Inserting Hindutva in Nagaland

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Governor of Nagaland, B.P. Acharya (left), at the inaugural function of the Hornbill festival in Kisama Heritage village in the outskirts of Kohima on Dec. 01, 2014. - PHOTO: RITU RAJ KONWAR

The Naga resistance, which is as old as Indian independence, has consistently fought for a homeland. South Asia's longest running political conflict has only been tempered by ceasefire agreements between the Indian government and specific Naga groups.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visited Nagaland during the annual Hornbill Festival at Kisama in December 2014, there was a general sense of excitement. “Silent on insurgency, Narendra Modi woos Nagaland”, said the national newspaper, *The Times of India*; “PM Modi Graces Hornbill Fest 2014”, said the local *Nagaland Post*, reflecting this positive proclamation.

Modi's presence was all the more interesting as his audience was comprised of not only Nagas and various official dignitaries, but also included international tourists, who had come not simply to listen to Modi, but also to visualise and participate in the Hornbill Festival. The confluence of these audiences along with Modi's presence highlighted the fact that Nagaland symbolised the colour and diversity of India. He came to celebrate, but importantly, he also came to promote a new vision of the Union government's approach in Nagaland.

There were two things on people's minds as Modi's arrival became imminent. First was the expectation that Modi would alleviate the cash-starved State machinery by providing a substantial economic package. Rather than provide economic overtures to the State government of Nagaland, he made a general gesture towards economic development for the whole of the northeast of India, calling the region a "Natural Economic Zone (NEZ)".

Contrasting this notion with Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that are largely man-made, Modi's vision is to develop the region in terms of these NEZs, making the northeast the capital of "organic agriculture" in India. The Prime Minister announced a number of packages ranging from establishing agricultural colleges and garment manufacturing centres, to strengthening the railway infrastructure to help boost tourism and to realise the potential of Nagaland and other northeastern States. He also introduced, with characteristic flourish, the idea of setting up schemes for Northeast students under "*Ishan Uday*" and "*Ishan Vikas*". These would, respectively, create around 10,000 scholarships for students from the northeast, and enable around 2000 students and 500 teachers yearly from this region to visit, and learn from, different educational institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), National Institutes of Technology (NIT), and National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT).

The second expectation was that he would make a statement about the long drawn out Naga nationalist movement and its desire for sovereignty. The movement has its genesis around the mid-1940s, headed by the charismatic Angami Zapu Phizo (1903-1990) of the Naga National Council (NNC). In 1997 the Government of India, headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, also from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the main Naga nationalist group, now the National Socialist Council of Nagalim Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), signed a peace agreement. This enabled talks to be held at the highest level, addressing the long drawn out conflict and issues relating to Naga sovereignty. One of the preconditions for this peace agreement was the recognition by the Vajpayee government of the "uniqueness of Naga history" as a political issue; previous Union governments had treated the "Naga problem" primarily through security and military perspectives. This recognition gave the NSCN-IM some leverage but it also became the basis through which a consensus between the two parties was achieved. The question that occupied the popular mind during Modi's visit in 2014 was: what have 18 years of peace talks accomplished? Would Modi continue Vajpayee's recognition? They wanted an answer from Modi. But the Prime Minister was silent.

When addressing the crowd in Kisama, the site of the Hornbill Festival, Modi spoke to the audience in English, departing from his normal practice of speaking in Hindi, even during foreign visits. As one commentator put it in the local daily *Morung Express*, "...he made an exception to address the Naga public in English. Given that the Hindi language is quite alien to the Nagas, it was a welcome gesture on the part of the Prime Minister to respect the Naga people's sentiment, their history and culture". Moreover, the most striking element at the end of his speech was the use of the Naga nationalist slogan "*Kuknalim*", meaning "victory to Nagalim/Nagaland". Like a front man in a rock concert, he encouraged the crowd to participate in the chanting, in place of the characteristic nationalist chant "*Jai-Hind*" (victory to India).

For many in the local audiences, Modi's visit was nothing but exemplary in the way he handled himself. There was no enigma to unlock. The subsequent headline in the local *Morung Express* — "Modi has done his homework well" — echoed this perspective. Analyses of his speech in the *Morung Express* focused on how he avoided interfering

in the Naga nationalist struggle, viewing it as an internal matter rather than one requiring outside intervention. He was thought to show intelligence and foresight into the economic situation. He hadn't fallen "for the feather dances and the songs but wants the State to revisit its achievements and failures". This is an encouraging sign from Modi, suggested one of the commentators. Analyses by commentators seemed to indicate that Modi was someone who understood the pulse of the people and wanted mass based organisations and movements to shape the destiny of people's progress, rather than relying on corrupt officials. The message, at least to some ears, was clear and loud. Modi wanted positive change!

Was this visit carefully managed, or was it a straightforward willingness to participate and acknowledge the unique place of Nagaland in India? Reflecting on this question requires one to ask if there might be more to read into this visit. Do the implications of his interaction with the people in Nagaland and the Northeast point to larger issues that were not immediately obvious in his speech? It is here that the story becomes more interesting.

A more centralised model?

In the larger scheme of things, Nagaland, he said, would benefit, but in the microcosmic world of political sound bites, Modi's speech signalled the balance of power away from these regional margins to a more centralised model. The larger strategy was in its effect, its intention. One way the speech resonated with those I spoke to was that it was seen as a bruising judgement on the state of affairs in Nagaland. People acknowledged that Modi was completely aware of the economic dependency on Union finances that has enabled a small section of elected officials to become richer by diverting public money for their own benefits, while the poor become poorer. The lack of a specific economic package for the State reflected Modi's new approach for doing business with Nagaland. The broader question on many people's minds was this — would Modi's approach to Nagaland matter in the larger scheme of political strategising? Would he, for example, visit another State in India with a large constituency and refuse them an economic package? More questionable still was to treat the entire northeast as one unitary economic block. Perhaps size and representation does matter! If one thinks about Nagaland, it is a tiny fiefdom within a larger scheme of territorial politics with one representative in the Lok Sabha and one in the Rajya Sabha, compared with 80 and 31 respectively from Uttar Pradesh, the largest State contributing to the Houses of Parliament.

The inconsequential reality of electoral representation reverberated in some quarters of the intelligentsia, who lamented this fact and deliberated whether Modi was here to teach the Nagas a lesson in fiscal discipline and to crush the Naga nationalist movement by not pandering to its long-standing demands for sovereignty. Perhaps there were political signs to his silence.

While he was thoroughly complimentary about Nagaland in his speech in Kisama, Modi's off-stage behaviour was puzzling. Indeed, it might be thought to show a certain irritation towards the State's attempts to entertain him. According to the *Nagaland Post* and the *Morung Express*, he did not meet the State cabinet, nor did he have official dinner with the State council of ministers. Even at Kisama he skipped the official lunch organised for him, instead eating, reportedly, inside his helicopter. This ambiguity is interesting in the context of his visit. Why would he reject hospitality, which in the Naga context is associated with honour and custom? One wonders if, for once, Modi's political antenna was tuned to the wrong station. Contrastingly, he gave an audience to the State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members, and curiously to leaders of the Zeliangrong Heraka Association, a non-Christian religious movement with backing from the Hindu right, particularly the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

It is no secret that Modi was an RSS worker before he was elected to political office, so he will be aware of the fact that the RSS network extends even to Nagaland. For instance, the appointment of Padmanabha Balakrishna Acharya as Governor of Nagaland in July 2014 after the BJP's sweeping national mandate, signalled a larger RSS geopolitical strategy in Nagaland. Acharya isn't shy about wearing his RSS credentials on his sleeve. Nor did he shy away from controversy, as he demonstrated recently when he imprinted the image of *Bharat mata* (Mother India), an RSS national symbol, in the official programme held at the Governor's residence, Raj Bhavan, during the 2015 Republic Day celebrations. Judging from these actions, it may appear that Modi's idea for India is intrinsically linked to the RSS vision.

Sidelining the Christian narrative

How can these be married to Nagaland and its needs given its overwhelming Christian population, especially in light of its tempestuous history with India since independence?

First, let us look at the notion of sovereignty demanded by the Nagas and how it is understood by the RSS. Unlike the different Naga nationalist groups, the RSS position has always been that Nagaland is an integral part of India both politically and culturally. The imagery of *Bharatvarsh*, as part of the larger Hindu imagination, an RSS worker said, not only incorporates the subcontinent but also Tibet and Myanmar. This automatically includes Nagaland. There is no clarity on where the RSS draws textual sources to legitimate these territorial claims, but there is a sense in which the ancient Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*, provides important links. Through the use of different characters and geographical references to existing places, the RSS argues for continuity between the *Mahabharata* narrative and Nagaland and northeast India.

Second, what is the view of the RSS on the presence of Christianity in Nagaland that comprises, according to the 2001 Census, latest available for religion, around 90 per cent of the population? Christianity, from the RSS worldview, encourages secessionism and foreign intervention (the British and Americans are often the prime suspects partly because the Nagas were administered and missionised by them). Therefore, the current Governor of Nagaland and many RSS workers involved with organisations like the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA) have worked to support non-Christian movements to gain strength and to question the dominance of the Christian narrative. In this context, Modi's reception with the leaders of an indigenous religious movement, Zeliangrong Heraka Association (ZHA), is not surprising but hugely controversial for its geo-religious implications in the region.

During Modi's visit to Nagaland the ZHA handed a memorandum stating that their leader, Rani Gaidinliu (1915-1993), must be honoured and recognised by imprinting her image on coins; that an independent Rani Gaidinliu Central University be opened in Nagaland with a department dedicated to the promulgation of the "eternal religion and eternal culture of Nagas", which will also benefit the 287 tribes in northeast India. Other requests included one to rename Nagaland's only airport as the "Rani Gaidinliu Airport" and another that asked for her portrait to adorn the Nagaland Assembly, the Chief Minister's office and bungalow, Ministers' offices and bungalows and the Raj Bhavan. It would not be a surprise if the Governor's hand — who knew Rani Gaidinliu and wrote a booklet on her — and those of other RSS sympathisers have been behind these sentiments. What is interesting is that Rani Gaidinliu is largely represented as an "Indian freedom fighter" who fought against the British as well as the Christian proselytisation, while maintaining her allegiance to both India and her Naga heritage. Indeed, Rani Gaidinliu is represented as the ideal personification of all that is good about the Nagas. In fact one RSS worker tersely remarked, "do you want the image of the terrorist Muivah [the General Secretary of the NSCN-IM] or that of Rani Gaidinliu the freedom fighter imprinted on the map of Nagaland?" It appears as though RSS activities are meant to

sideline the dominance of a Christian narrative in Nagaland by promoting their version of a Naga in Rani Gaidinliu, which is in line with its thinking.

So is there now a way of reading into Modi's silence over the Naga political problem? Indeed, the local newspaper headline "Modi has done his homework well" can be re-read with questioning overtones. Modi's concerns about Nagaland are perhaps coloured by his RSS networks and roots, but it also allows him to play the paternal figure who knows best and the Nagas now have a choice to make - either follow the historical path of secessionism, or embrace the new choice that presents India as progressive. One can concede that Modi's vision for Nagaland is tied in with the different interlocutors and worldviews of people. But it is also important to note that the emphasis on territorial integrity and the privileging of voices other than Christianity is a position maintained for many years by the Hindu right with regard to the tribal areas of Northeast India and is therefore nothing new.

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