



Title: Boundaries and History of the Eastern Nagas: Unraveling the Transnational Identity and Political Consciousness

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Abstract: This paper explores the formation of the Naga identity as a political reaction to colonial intrusion in the Naga Hills, focusing particularly on the Eastern Nagas who were isolated and labeled as "Free Nagas" or "Unsurveyed Areas" by the British. The study examines the partitioned Eastern Naga tribes along the Indo-Myanmar Border and their status as transnational citizens and a community. It highlights how national boundaries and territorial sovereignty have disconnected and obscured the pre-existing regional ethnic unity forged by the Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo since 1947. Despite the creation of an "artificial boundary" along the Indo-Myanmar border, the Nagas refuse to acknowledge it, invoking the idea of supranational citizenship as a potential solution to overcome political and territorial divisions.

Keywords: Border, Naga identity, Eastern Nagas, Indo-Myanmar border, transnational citizens

Introduction

Borders are commonly understood as spatial demarcations with political significance, serving as tangible markers of territorial divisions. They are visually represented through various symbolic elements like flags, signboards, and boundary stones, while physical barriers such as fences and gates reinforce their presence on the landscape. The enforcement of borders is typically carried out by military personnel, who maintain security and control over the movement of people and goods. Crossing borders involves undergoing customs inspections and complying with passport requirements. These borders are 'continually shaped, altered, undermined, and re-inscribed by numerous social actors'¹, including local communities, ethnic groups, state authorities, and transnational interests. These actors engage in activities such as borderland trade, migration, cultural exchange, and territorial claims, which challenge and redefine the boundaries, blurring their fixed nature. This paper endeavors to critique and expand upon the traditional conceptualization of borders, which primarily focuses on visible and physical demarcations on political maps. Instead, it seeks to shed light on the presence of less apparent "borders" that significantly shape the lives of Naga tribes inhabiting the Indo-Myanmar border region. By emphasizing the less tangible yet impactful dimensions of borders, the paper aims to challenge the dominant discourse and contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances inherent in borderlands.

The term 'border' has multiple meanings, and, therefore, has been used to refer to a number of ideas, ranging from a geographically demarcating borderline to its use as a metaphor for cultural and other 'borderlands' of post-modern discourses such as gender, race, social and psychological border.² If borders are amongst the 'most

paradoxical of human creations'³ this is because they often either join 'what is different or divide what is similar'. It is seen that the study of borderlands and borderlanders in South Asia and particularly in India is relatively recent.

A significant portion of research and policy focus in India's Northeast region is directed towards its international borders, particularly following the endorsement of the Central Government's Look-East Policy. This policy aims to establish connectivity between the region and emerging markets in Southeast Asia through the development of road and rail networks. The scholarly attention on international borders reflects a broader recent interest in borders, borderlands, and borderlanders in South Asia. This paper argues that the Nagas should be equally understood as an internal borderland since the region is intersected by various internal borders, not solely limited to political boundaries. Commenting on the question whether India's Northeast is landlocked, Prabhakara noted perceptively:

'While whether the north-east is landlocked or not may be a matter of perspective and interpretation, the most emphatically undeniable reality is that the seven constituent states of the region are internally locked – themselves locked and locking out others, unable to connect with each other physically in terms of poor transport links, and more seriously unable to make connections intellectually and emotionally with their closest neighbours, or even with and among their own people.'⁴

Prabhakara's statement appropriately emphasizes the significance of local connections and internal boundaries within the region, rather than solely focusing on its international borders. This perspective recognizes that the absence or limitations of local connectivity can also impact the landlocked nature of India's Northeast. The paper will illustrate, although mostly in anecdotal form, how state borders, as well as those of autonomous councils within states, constitute crucial sites of contestation in the region. As seen in the context of the Nagas along the Indo-Myanmar Border.

Van Schendel aptly points out that the tectonic plates of South Asian politics shifted abruptly with the end of British colonial rule in 1947, which gave birth to several nation-states in the subcontinent.⁵ This study will concentrate on the Eastern Nagas residing in the borderland between India and Myanmar, and its main argument is that borders should not be understood solely as fixed boundaries that delineate the territories of states. Instead, borders encompass a complex interplay of relationships and significances. This is due to the observation that while the physical structure of a border may be stationary and unchanging, the communities inhabiting the border area are active, mobile, dynamic, and engaged in multifaceted networks of connections.

Nagas in History

The term Naga is a generic term denoting a community of people who inhabit the mountainous ranges spread across northwest Burma on the east, the Tirap Frontier Division of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the north and the broad valley of the Assam plains in the west. The 'Naga Identity, akin to all modern identities, is historically contingent, constructed, and continually debated.'⁶ The term "Naga" is as a matter of fact largely an outcome of political consciousness which developed in the course of contacts and conflicts with the outsiders or others. The creation of the Naga identity was itself a political reaction to the intrusion of the tribes in the Naga hill by the colonial rulers. Much has been written on the Naga Hills but little was written of the Tuensang Area or the Eastern Nagas in colonial accounts. In particular, as the Eastern part of Nagaland was put under un-administered area, they were isolated from the rest of the other Naga inhabited areas.

The English East India Company officers first encountered the Naga communities in 1823 when Capt. Jenkins and Pemberton carried out an expedition to survey road communication between Assam and Manipur, and met with stiff resistance from the Angamis. With the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 and the subsequent annexation of Assam, the British made contact with the hill communities of the northeast frontier of Bengal in a sustained manner, which included the Nagas as well. Though the colonial policy in the initial years was one of non-interference towards the Naga Hills, continuous raids on the plains of Assam and the need to protect colonial economic interests in Assam, made it inevitable for the British to move into the Naga inhabited areas.

Therefore, in 1866, an outpost was established at Samaguting as the headquarters of the Naga Hills. By 1874, surveys were carried out to establish political control over the Naga inhabited areas. Gradually several expeditions were conducted from 1876 to 1910 in the Naga Hills, wherein most of the Naga tribes came under the British control. In 1912, the Naga Hills District became part of the Assam Province.⁷ However, The Government of India Act of 1929 declared the Naga Hills District a 'Backward Tract.' Later, following the Nagas memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 and the subsequent recommendations thereafter, the Naga Hills were officially designated as 'Excluded Area' by the India Act, 1935.

Anthony D. Smith "National identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components —ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal-political. They signify bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions that may or may not find expression in states of their own but are entirely different from the purely legal and bureaucratic tics of the state."⁸ The Naga ethnic conflict has a long historical trajectory tracing back its roots to 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club by 20 members of the Naga French Labour Corp, who had served in World War I in Europe. The few Nagas who had come in contact with the European battlefield were motivated to politically organize themselves as a distinct ethnic political identity. The local British administration in Naga areas did not dissuade this move. The Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929, in which it stated that the people of Naga areas and that of mainland India had nothing in common between them. —"We should not be thrust to the mercy of the people who could never subjugate us, but leave us alone to determine ourselves as in ancient time."⁹ This view was supported by John Henry Hutton, the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills, and N C Parry, Superintendent of Lushai Hills, in 1928 and 1930, respectively. Hutton, presenting the case of the Nagas to the Simon Commission asserted that the tribes of Northeast India were racially, linguistically, culturally, politically, and economically distinct from the Indians. He believed they would suffer by joining a people of irreconcilable culture in an unnatural union that would harm them and the people of the plains too.

With the partition of 1947 and the transferred power to Burma by the British in 1948, the Nagas in Burma were given a choice to enter into Penang Agreement to form a part of Burma. The Burmese Nagas refused to enter into such agreement. Thus, rejecting the Penang Agreement, the Nagas in Burma formed the Eastern Naga National Council (ENNC). However, realizing the need to play a bigger role and higher aspiration for the people, ENNC in 1952 merged with the Naga National Council (NNC) as one political entity.¹⁰

Eastern Nagas in History

Historically, the eastern Naga inhabited areas and the trans-Dikhu Naga villages received limited administrative attention and resources. From a legal perspective, nominal British control was established over the region in 1902. In the Government of India Act of 1935, the area known as Tuensang was designated as a "tribal area" within India. However, it is crucial to note that the Tuensang Area, which encompasses much of present-day Eastern Nagaland, was not considered an extension of the Naga Hills at that time. Instead, it was placed under the jurisdiction of the North-Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), which extended into the northern areas now known as Arunachal Pradesh. Only in 1963, the Tuensang Frontier Division was separated from NEFA and merged with the Naga Hills District to establish the new state of Nagaland.

Nagas, however do not live in Nagaland alone. They also reside, in large numbers, in Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh (as well as across the border in Myanmar). While the Indian Constitution provides certain leverages of autonomy to Naga inhabited areas outside Nagaland, these are nowhere as explicit and extensive as within Nagaland. Consequently, Nagas living inside Nagaland enjoy comparatively higher levels of state protection and the opportunity to arrange their everyday lives in accordance with traditions and customary dispositions compared to Naga communities residing outside the state, even though these communities may be equally Naga.

Jibon Krishna Goswami, in his note to the author the novel *Remains of Spring: A Naga village in the No Man's Land*, writes:

‘The No Man’s Land is a political geography, created due to the formation of two nations, India and Burma (now Myanmar). However, people had been living in this region since ages. It has been their land, socially and historically, and not the No Man’s Land. They carried that history in their hearts and minds. Unfortunately, that history was maintained orally. It could not withstand the sword of colonialism, which bifurcated them on the day the two nations were born. In reality, three nations were born that day, one without a land of its own. It was the No Man’s Land. This land became a world of its own. Its people lived on either side of the border...’¹¹

This No Man’s Land (a term somewhat poorly chosen as just because a land does not belong to a state does not make it belong to non-one) refers to a region that has a geographical, cultural, and historical coherence but which became divided politically and its peoples fragmented by processes of colonial and postcolonial governance¹². The geographical region referred to as 'No Man's Land' can be seen as largely aligning with A.Z. Phizo's portrayal of the 'untouched Nagas' as he articulated during the formulation of his argument for Naga independence in the 1950s. Phizo's description emphasized the pristine nature of the Naga people and their distinct identity, untainted by external influences. This construct of an untouched Naga society forms the basis of Phizo's case for self-governance and liberation from external control.

‘The Nagas were divided by the British administration into three major units. About one fifth of the Naga population with that much in proportion of our land were administrated from British India. About the same proportion as administrated by British Burma. And approximately sixty percent of the population occupying a territory of about seventy percent of Nagaland [Naga lands] were left untouched and undisturbed, who were absolutely independent’¹³

This is said to be the case for Nagas with nationalist Naga groups demanding the physical integration of Nagaland with parts of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh to create a larger territorial unit called Nagalim, a prospect that the governments of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh reject as an assault on its territorial integrity. Complexities and contestations are many, and if a redrawing of state boundaries does not happen, Nagaland’s Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio stated: “there could be emotional integration of Naga people”¹⁴. Such “emotional integration” would allow Nagas to nourish a common sense of belonging and destiny – which could, in Rio’s view, then in some way be institutionalised – without altering existing state boundaries. Instead of boundaries hewed in stones and check-posts, this “emotional” rather than “physical” integration would first and foremost be a matter of the senses, of popular imagination, creating a territory of affection.

In bits and pieces, such a territory of affection has already materialised; the Naga Hoho, for instance, is a Naga apex body that seeks to represent all Nagas irrespective of the states they reside in. The Naga Student Federation (NSF), too, considers as its jurisdiction all Naga-inhabited areas, and not merely the state of Nagaland (although the NSF has been fractured in recent years by the creation of the Eastern Nagas Student Federation (ENSF). For Rio, however, such emotional connections could even work across the international boundary with Myanmar, where a large numbers of Naga reside. Noting that the material conditions of Nagas across the border are comparatively lagging behind, Rio argued that Nagas on the Indian side of the border should work for the welfare of Nagas living in Myanmar.¹⁵

Frontier Nagaland:

In a twist, there is a growing demand of the Eastern Nagas in Nagaland for a separate state. Besides narratives of neglect, there was also a historical backdrop, as the projected boundary between ‘Nagaland’ and ‘Frontier Nagaland’ largely coincided with the erstwhile colonial division between ‘administrated’ and ‘unadministrated’ Nagas.¹⁶

The reasoning for the demand of ‘Frontier Nagaland’ did not condemn colonial rule, but lamented its historical absence among them, as this had, they explained, thwarted their educational attainments and wider upliftment.

Chingwang Konyak, a prominent politician from the area narrated thus: 'It is a process of civilization that administration extends from administered to "un-administered areas", but whereas the Naga Hills District gradually came under British administration from 1866 onward "there was a big tract of land between the Naga Hills and Burma which was not administered".'

In colonial documentation, Eastern Naga villages frequently appeared in connection with incidents involving raids and plundering in areas under British administration. These villages were often described using adjectives such as "trans-frontier," "trans-Dhikhu" (referring to the Dikhu River, which served as a general boundary marking the end of British-controlled territories), or "free Nagas". Eastern Nagaland's prolonged non-state existence also has ramifications in terms of Naga nationalist narratives, in the context of decades of bloodshed and misery, that the Eastern Nagas should not have joined the Naga Movement given that they were already de facto independent:

We were called 'free-land' and 'free-Nagas' and we belonged to no-tax land. When the British left they advised the Indians; you should cater to them for a few years and after that they can be on their own. But then A.Z. Phizo came to our Chang area and propagated an independent Nagaland consisting of both administrated and non administrated Nagas. Because our forefathers were mostly illiterate, they did not understand the implications of Phizo's plan and followed him, thus we ended up fighting for an independence and freedom we already had.¹⁷

Despite the aforementioned assessment, this evaluation aligns with Elwin's observation that 'the leaders of the Naga National council, and those who follow them by conviction, are not the Nagas who have had least to do with the outside world, but those who have seen most of it'¹⁸. That the present-day Eastern Naga tribes should fall outside British administration Elwin had deemed bad policy in the first place:

Even after the Naga Hills District had been brought under ordered Government, the wild and rugged tract to the north-east remained. It was populated by martial tribes; there were no communications and no money to build or maintain them; and despite constant urging that it was inconsistent to develop one part of the hills and neglect another. The Supreme Government felt that until there were men and funds available it would be better to leave this territory alone for the time being.

However, according to Chingwang Konyak, the unity facilitated and negotiated by the Naga People's Convention (NPC), which included participation from Eastern Naga leaders, was not based on equal terms or conditions:

[When Nagaland State was created in 1963] there were hardly any graduate from Tuensang [Eastern Nagaland]. Even Matriculates were very few, so people of the present ENPO areas could not get in the Government Services. But from the present advanced tribes, many were recruited into the Nagaland Civil Service, Nagaland Police Service, and other services.¹⁹

In other words, if the colonial division and dismemberment of Naga territories lies at the crux of demands for sovereignty and integration, the demand of 'Frontier Nagaland' has roots in a history of colonial absence and of experiences of post- Nagaland statehood marginalisation.

Conclusion

The Eastern Nagas provide a striking illustration of how the establishment of national borders and territorial sovereignty has effectively disrupted and concealed pre-existing regional ethnic cohesion that was forged by the Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo after 1947. Despite the creation of an "artificial boundary" along the Indo-Myanmar border, the Nagas persistently reject its legitimacy. The findings of this paper, in light of the Indo-Myanmar border's perception and responses, suggest the proposition of 'supranational citizenship'²⁰ as a potential mechanism to overcome existing political and territorial division.

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