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TRIBAL TROUBLE

[T]hese tribes . . . not only defend themselves with obstinate resolution, but attack their enemies with the most daring courage . . . [T]hey possess fortitude of mind superior to the sense of danger or the fear of death.

British official commenting on the Nagas, circa 1840

I

THROUGH THE 1950s, while the government of India was seeking to maintain its hold on the Valley of Kashmir, its authority and legitimacy were also being challenged at the other end of the Himalaya. This was New Delhi's 'Naga problem', much less known than its Kashmir problem, even though it was as old – even older, in fact – and easily as intractable.

The Nagas were a congeries of tribes living in the eastern Himalaya, along the Burma border. Secure in their mountain fastness, they had been cut off from social and political developments in the rest of India. The British administered them lightly, keeping out plainsmen and not tampering with tribal laws or practices, except one – headhunting. However, American Baptists had been active since the mid nineteenth century, successfully converting several tribes to Christianity.

At this time the Naga hills formed part of Assam, a province very diverse even by Indian standards, sharing borders with China, Burma and East Pakistan, divided into upland and lowland regions and inhabited by hundreds of different communities. In the plains lived Assamese-speaking Hindus, connected by culture and faith to the greater Indian heartland. Among the important groups of tribes were the Mizos, the Khasis, the Garos, and the Jaintias, who took (or gave) their names to the mountain ranges in which they lived. Also in the region were two princely states, Tripura and Manipur, whose populations were likewise mixed, part Hindu and part tribal.

Among the tribes of north-east India the Nagas were perhaps the most autonomous. Their territory lay on the Indo-Burmese border-indeed, there were almost as many Nagas in Burma as in India. Some Nagas had contact with

Hindu villages in Assam, to whom they sold rice in exchange for salt. Yet the Nagas had been totally outside the fold of the Congress-led national movement. There had been no *satyagraha* here, no civil disobedience – in fact, not one Gandhian leader in a white cap had ever visited these hills. Some tribes had fiercely fought the British, but over time the two sides had come to view each other with mutual respect. For their part, the British affected a certain paternalism, wishing to 'protect their wards from the corrosive corruptions of the modern world.

The Naga question really dates to 1946, the year the fate of British India was being decided in those high centres of imperial power, New Delhi and Simla. As elections were held across India, as the Cabinet Mission came and went, as the viceroy went into conclave with leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League, in their own obscure corner of the subcontinent some Nagas began to worry about their future. In January 1946 a group who were 'educated Christians and spoke expressive English formed the Naga National Council, or NNC. This had the classic trappings of a nationalist movement in embryo: led by middle-class intellectuals, their ideas were promoted in a journal of their own, called *The Naga Nation*, 250 copies of which were mimeographed and distributed through the Naga country.[1]

The NNC stood for the unity of all Nagas, and for their 'self-determination', a term which, here as elsewhere, was open to multiple and sometimes mutually contradictory meanings. The Angami Nagas, with their honourable martial tradition and record of fighting all outsiders (the British included), thought it should mean a fully independent state: 'a government of the Nagas, for the Nagas, by the Nagas'. On the other hand, the Aos, who were more moderate, thought they could live with dignity within India, so long as their land and customs were protected and they had the autonomy to frame and enforce their own laws.

The early meetings of the NNC witnessed a vigorous debate between these two factions which spilled over into the pages of the *Naga Nation*. A young Angami wrote that 'the Nagas are a nation because we feel ourselves to be a nation. But, if we are a Nation, why do we not elect our own sovereignty? We want to be free. We want to live our own lives'. . . We do not want other people to live with us.' An Ao doctor answered that the Nagas lacked the finances, the personnel and the infrastructure to become a nation. 'At present', he wrote, 'it seems to me, the idea of independence is too far off for us Nagas. How can we run an independent Government now?'

Meanwhile the moderate wing had begun negotiations with the Congress leadership. In July 1946 the NNC general secretary, T. Sakhrie, wrote to Jawa-

harlal Nehru, and in reply received an assurance that the Nagas would have full autonomy, but *within* the Indian Union. They could have their own judicial system, said Nehru, to save them from being 'swamped by people from other parts of the country who might go there to exploit them to their own advantage'. Sakhrie now declared that the Nagas would continue their connection with India, 'but as a distinctive community' . . . We must also develop according to our own genius and taste. We shall enjoy home rule in our country but on broader issues be connected with India.'[2]

The radicals, however, still stood out for complete independence. In this they were helped by some British officials, who were loath to have these tribes come under Hindu influence. One officer recommended that the tribal areas of the north-east be constituted as a 'Crown colony', ruled directly from London, and not linked in anyway to the soon-to-be independent nation of India.[3] Others advised their wards that they should strike out for independence, as the state of India would soon break up anyway. As the Superintendent of the Lushai hills wrote in March 1947,

> My advice to the Lushais, since the very beginning of Lushai politics at the end of the War, has been until very recently not to trouble themselves yet about the problem of their future relationship to the rest of India: nobody can possibly foretell what India will be like even two years from now, or even whether there will be an India in the unitary political sense. I would not encourage my small daughter to commit herself to vows of lifelong spinsterhood; but I would regard it as an even worse crime to betroth her in infancy to a boy who was himself still undeveloped.[4]

In June1947 a delegation of the NNC met the governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari, to discuss the terms by which the Nagas could join India. The two sides agreed that tribal land would not be alienated to outsiders, that Naga religious practices would not be affected and that the NNC would have a say in the staffing of government offices. Next, an NNC delegation went to Delhi, where they met Nehru, who once more told them that they could have autonomy but not independence. They also called on Mahatma Gandhi, in a meeting of which many versions have circulated down the years. In one version, Gandhi told the Nagas that they could declare their independence if they wished; that no one could compel them to join India; and that if New Delhi sent in the army, Gandhi himself would come to the Naga hills to resist it. He apparently said, 'I will ask them to shoot me first before one Naga is shot.'[5]

The version printed in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* is less dramatic; here, Gandhi is reported as saying, 'Personally, I believe you all belong to me, to India. But if you say you don't, no one can force you.' The Mahatma also advised his visitors that a better proof of independence was economic self-reliance; they should grow their own food and spin their own cloth. 'Learn all the handicrafts', said the Mahatma, 'that's the way to peaceful independence. If you use rifles and guns and tanks, it is a foolish thing.'[6]

The most vocal spokesmen for independence were the Angamis from Khonomah, a village which, back in 1879–80, had fought the British army to a standstill and whose residents were 'known and feared' across the Naga hills.[7] A faction styling itself the Peoples' Independence League was putting up posters calling for complete independence, in terms borrowed (with acknowledgement) from American freedom fighters: 'It is my living sentiment, and by the blessing of God it shall be my dying sentiment – Independence now and Independence forever' (John Adams); 'This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom' (Abraham Lincoln); 'Give me liberty, or give me death!' (Patrick Henry).[8]

Meanwhile, the British Raj departed from New Delhi and the new Indian state began to consolidate itself. The secretary to the governor of Assam told the Nagas that they were too few to successfully rebel against a nation of 300 million. Writing in the *Naga* Nation he related the story of the dog with a bone in his mouth who looked into the water to see a dog with a bigger bone staring back at him; he chased after the mirage, dropping and losing what he had. Concluded the official: 'Why lose the bone of "autonomy" to try to get the bone of "independence" which it is not possible to get.'

The parable did not go down well with the educated Nagas. 'Bones, bones,' remarked one angry NNC member. 'Does he think that we are dogs?' However, the same warning was issued in more palatable form by Charles Pawsey, the departing deputy commissioner and an official whom the Nagas both loved and admired. Also writing in the *Naga Nation*, Pawsey underlined that autonomy within the Indian Union was the more prudent course to follow. For, 'Independence will mean: tribal warfare, no hospitals, no schools, no salt, no trade with the plains and general unhappiness.'[9]

II

As the Naga intelligentsia was struggling to define its 'independence', the Constituent Assembly of India was meeting in New Delhi. Among the topics for discussion was the place of tribals in a free and democratic India. On 30 July 1947 Jaipal Singh informed the Assembly of 'some very unhappy developments' which were brewing in the Naga hills. Jaipal had been receiving 'a telegram per day', the 'latest telegram becoming more confounded than the previous one. Each one seems to go one step further into the wilderness.' As he saw it, the Nagas had been 'misguided' into the belief that their status was akin to that of the princes, and that like them they could reclaim their sovereignty once the British left. When the Naga delegation had come to Delhi to meet Nehru and Gandhi, they had also met Jaipal, who apprised them of the 'blunt fact that 'the Naga Hills have always been part of India. Therefore, there is no question of secession.'[10]

Jaipal Singh was, of course, a tribal himself, one of several million such whose homes lay in the hilly and forest belt that ran right across the heart of peninsular India. Known as 'adivasis' (original inhabitants), the central Indian tribals were somewhat different from those that dwelt in the north-east. Like them, they were chiefly subsistence agriculturists who depended heavily on the forests for sustenance. Like them, they had no caste system and were organized in clans; like them, they manifested far less gender inequality than in supposedly more 'advanced parts of the country. However, unlike the Nagas and their neighbours, the tribes of central India had long-standing relations with Hindu peasant society. They exchanged goods and services, sometimes worshipped the same Gods and had historically been part of the same kingdoms.

These relations had not been uncontentious. With British rule, the areas inhabited by tribes had been opened up to commercialization and colonization. The forests they lived in suddenly acquired a market value; so did the rivers that ran through them and the minerals that lay beneath them. Some parts remained untouched, but elsewhere the tribals were deprived of access to forests, dispossessed of their lands and placed in debt to money lenders. The 'outsider' was increasingly seen as one who was seeking to usurp the resources of the adivasis. In the Chotanagpur plateau, for example, the non-tribal was known as *diku*, a term that evoked fear as well as resentment.[11]

The Constituent Assembly recognized this vulnerability, and spent days debating what to do about it. Ultimately, it decided to designate some 400 communities as 'scheduled tribes'. These constituted about 7 per cent of the population, and had seats reserved for them in the legislature as well as in government departments. Schedule V of the constitution pertained to the tribes

that lived in central India; it allowed for the creation of tribal advisory councils and for curbs on moneylending and on the sale of tribal land to outsiders. Schedule VI pertained to the tribes of the north-east; it gestured further in the direction of local autonomy, constituting district and regional councils, protecting local rights in land, forests and waterways and instructing state governments to share mining revenues with the local council, a concession not granted anywhere else in India.

Jaipal Singh thought that these provisions would have real teeth only if the tribals could come to forge a separate state within the Union. He called this putative state Jharkhand; in his vision it would incorporate his own Chotanagpur plateau, then in Bihar, along with contiguous tribal areas located in the provinces of Bengal and Orissa. The proposed state would cover an area of some 48,000 square miles and have a population of 12 million people.[12] The idea caught the imagination of the youth of Chotanagpur. Thus, in May 1947, the Adivasi Sabha of Jamshedpur wrote to Nehru, Gandhi and the Constituent Assembly urging the creation of a Jharkhand state out of Bihar. 'We want Jharkhand Province to preserve and develop Adivasi Culture and Language', said their memorandum, 'to make our customary law supreme, to make our lands inalienable, and above all to save ourselves from continuous exploitation.'[13]

In February 1948 Jaipal Singh delivered the presidential address to the All-India Adivasi Mahasabha, an organization that he had led since its inception a decade previously. He spoke here of how, after Independence, 'Bihari imperialism' had replaced 'British imperialism' as the greatest problem for the adivasi. He identified the land question as the most crucial, and urged the speedy creation of a Jharkhand state. Notably, he simultaneously underlined his commitment to the Indian Union by speaking with feeling about the 'tragic assassination of Gan-dhiji', and by raising a slogan that combined local pride with a wider Indian patriotism: 'Jai Jharkhand! Jai Adivasi! Jai Hind!'[14]

The Adivasi Mahasabha was now renamed the Jharkhand Party, and after several years of steady campaigning fought under that name in the first general election of 1952. With its symbol of a fighting cock, the party met with success beyond its own imaginings, winning three seats to Parliament and thirty-three to the state's Assembly. These victories all came in the tribal regions of Bihar, where it comprehensively trounced the ruling Congress Party. At the polls at any rate, the case for Jharkhand had been proved.

III

Jaipal Singh and his Jharkhand Party offered one prospective path for the tribals: autonomy within the Indian Union, safeguarded by laws protecting their land and customs and by the creation of a province in regions where the tribals were in a majority. The Naga radicals offered another: an independent, sovereign state carved out of India and quite distinct from it. Among the Nagas this view was upheld most insistently by the Angamis and, among them, by a certain resident of Khonomah village, yet another of those remarkable makers of Indian history who is still to find his biographer.

The man in question was Angami Zapu Phizo, with whose name the Naga cause was to be identified for close to half a century. Born in 1913, Phizo was fair and slightly built, his face horribly twisted following a childhood paralytic attack. Educated by the Baptists, and a poet of sorts – among his compositions was a 'Naga National Anthem' – he sold insurance for a living before migrating to Burma. He was working on the docks in Rangoon when the Japanese invaded. Phizo joined the Japanese on their march to India, apparently in return for the promise of Naga independence should they succeed in winning their war against the British.[15]

After the end of the war, Phizo returned to India and joined the Naga National Council. He quickly made his mark with his impassioned appeals for sovereignty, these often couched in a Christian idiom. He was part of the NNC delegation that met Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi in July 1947. Three years later he was elected president of the NNC and committed the Nagas to 'full Independence'. He quelled the doubters and nay-sayers, who wanted an accommodation with India. Many young Nagas were willing to go all the way with Phizo. Travelling in the area in December 1950, the Quaker Horace Alexander met two NNC members whose 'minds are obsessed with the word "independence", and I do not believe that any amount of argument or appeals to the [Indian] constitution, still less any threat, will shake them out of it'.[16]

Phizo was a man of great energy and motivational powers. Through 1951 he and his men toured the Naga hills obtaining thumbprints and signatures to a document affirming their support for an independent Naga state. Later it was claimed that the bundle of impressions weighed eighty pounds, and that it was a comprehensive plebiscite which revealed that '99.99 per cent had voted in favour of the Naga independence'.[17] These figures call to mind similar exercises in totalitarian states, where, for example, 99.99 per cent of the Russian people are said to have endorsed Stalin as Supreme Leader. Still, there is no

doubt that Phizo himself wanted independence, and so did numerous of his followers.

By now India itself had been independent for four years. The British officers had been replaced by Indian ones, but otherwise the new state had not had much impact on the Naga hills. Busy with healing the wounds of Partition, settling refugees, integrating princely states and drafting a constitution, the political elite in New Delhi had not given these tribes much thought. However, in the last week of 1951 the prime minister was in the Assam town of Tezpur, campaigning for his party in the general election. Phizo came down with three compatriots to meet him. When the NNC president said the Nagas wanted independence, Nehru called it an 'absurd demand which attempted 'to reverse the wheels of history'. He told them that 'the Nagas were as free as any Indian', and under the constitution they had 'a very large degree of autonomy in managing their own affairs'. He invited Phizo and his men to 'submit proposals for the extension of cultural, administrative and financial autonomy in their land'. Their suggestions would be considered sympathetically, and if necessary the constitution could also be changed. But independence for the Nagas was out of the question.[18]

The NNC's response was to boycott the general election. After the elected Congress government was in place, Phizo sought another meeting with the prime minister in New Delhi. In the second week of February 1952 he and two other NNC leaders met Nehru in Delhi. The prime minister once more told them that, while independence was not an option, the Nagas could be granted greater autonomy. But Phizo remained adamant. At a press conference he said, 'we will continue our struggle for independence, and one day we shall meet [Nehru] again for a friendly settlement' (as representatives of a separate nation). The free state he had in mind would bring together 200,000 Nagas in India, another 200,000 in what he called 'no-man's land', and 400,000 who were presently citizens of Burma.[19]

Afterwards the Jharkhand leader Jaipal Singh hosted a lunch for Phizo and his group. A journalist present found the NNC president to be a 'short, slim man with [a] Mongolian look, with spectacles that hide the fires of dedicated eyes'. He also heard Jaipal say that, while he sympathized with the Naga cause, he 'abhorred any further fragmentation of India in the form of a new Pakistan'. He advised Phizo notto ask for a separate sovereign state, but to fight for a tribal province in the north-east, a counterpart to the Jharkhand he himself was struggling for. His guest answered that 'Nagas are Mongoloid and thus they have no racial affinity with the people of India'. Phizo said he hoped to unite the Nagas on this side with the Nagas on the Burmese side to form a

country of their own. But, as the journalist on the spot observed, ‘according to the official view in Delhi, such a State cannot be viable, and as those haunting hills form a strategic frontier between nations, it would be dangerous to let the Nagas loose’.[20]

IV

In October 1952 the prime minister spent a week touring the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). He already had some acquaintance with the tribes of the peninsula, whose artistic traditions and zest for life he greatly admired. That past June, addressing a conference of social workers in New Delhi, Nehru had condemned those who wished to make stribals ‘second-rate copies of themselves’. He thought the civilized world had much to learn from the adivasis, who were ‘an extremely disciplined people, often a great deal more democratic than most others in India. Above all they are a people who sing and dance and try to enjoy life, not people who sit in stock exchanges, shout at one another and think themselves civilized.’[21]

Nehru’s first extended exposure to the north-east renewed this appreciation of the tribals. As he wrote to a friend in government, his visit had been ‘most exhilarating’. He wished these areas ‘were much better known by our people elsewhere in India. We could profit much by that contact.’ Nehru found himself ‘astonished at the artistry of these so-called tribal people’, by their ‘most lovely handloom weaving’. However, there was the danger that this industry would come into competition with uglier but cheaper goods made by factories in the plains. Nehru came back with ‘a most powerful impression that we should do everything to help these tribal folk in this matter’.[22]

The prime minister wrote a long report on his trip, which he sent to all chief ministers. There was, he noted here, a movement for ‘merging’ . . . the tribal people into the Assamese’. Nehru thought that the effort rather should be ‘on retaining their individual culture’, on making the tribals feel ‘that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives and to develop according to their wishes and genius. India to them should signify not only a protecting force but a liberating one.’

The NEFA adjoined the Naga district and indeed had many Nagas within it. While dismissing the demand for an independent Naga nation as ‘rather absurd’, Nehru ‘had the feeling that the situation in the Naga Hills would have been much better if it had been handled a little more competently by the loc-

al officers and if some officers who were notoriously unpopular had not been kept there. Also, any attempt to impose new ways and customs on the Nagas merely irritates and creates trouble.'[23]

Even as Nehru was urging the officials to behave more sympathetically towards the Nagas, the NNC was issuing him with an ultimatum. This was carried in a letter dispatched to New Delhi on 24 October, while the prime minister was still in NEFA. In it, Phizo and his men insisted that 'there is not a single thing that the Indians and the Nagas share in common . . . The moment we see Indians, a gloomy feeling of darkness creeps into our mind.'[24]

Six months later Nehru visited the Naga capital, Kohima, in the company of the Burmese prime minister U Nu. When a Naga delegation wished to meet Nehru to present a memorandum, local officials refused to allow them an audience. Word spread of the rebuff, so that when the prime minister and his Burmese guest turned up to address a public meeting in their honour they saw their audience walking out as they arrived. In one account the Nagas bared their bottoms as they went. In another, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, said into a live microphone: *'Papa, wo jaa rahe hain'* (Father, these people are all leaving), to which he answered, wearily, *'Haan beti, main dekh raha hoon'* (Yes, child, I can see them go).[25]

The Kohima walkout, it was said later, hardened Nehru against the Nagas. In truth, Phizo and the NNC had set their minds on independence anyway. They were already collecting arms and organizing groups of 'home guards in the villages. The state, for its part, was moving platoons of the paramilitary Assam Rifles into the district.

By the summer of 1953 the top NNC leadership had gone underground. Searching for them, the police raided Angami strongholds, further alienating the villagers. Apart from local knowledge and local support, the rebels had one great advantage – the terrain. It was indescribably beautiful: 'The scenery was the loveliest I have seen, remarked one British visitor. 'Range upon range of forested hills which change their grouping continually as we climb and climb. The tops rise out of the mist like islands in a white sea.[26] It was also perfectly suited for guerrilla warfare: as a veteran of the Japanese campaign observed, this was 'a country where a platoon well dug in can hold up a division, and a company can hold up an Army Corps'.[27]

This was a war conducted completely out of the vision of the wider world. No outsiders were allowed into the district, and journalists least of all. Reconstructing its history is a difficult task, relying as it must mostly on narratives gathered later by reporters and scholars. From these it appears that in 1954 things took a turn decidedly for the worse. In the spring of that year an

army officer riding a motorcycle in Kohimah accidentally knocked down a passer-by. A crowd collected in protest, whereupon the police fired in panic, killing a respected judge and NNC member.

This incident created great resentment among the Nagas; it 'increased the depth of their hatred of the "unwanted Indians" and precipitated the revolt'. The extremists gained control of the NNC; petitions and demonstrations were abandoned, and preparations made for an armed uprising. The rebels began transporting weapons to a safe haven in the Tuensang area. In June 1954 the Assam Rifles attacked a village believed to be sympathetic to the guerrillas. In September some rebels declared the formation of a 'federal government of Nagaland'.

By now killings and counter-killings were occurring with fair regularity. There were villages loyal to the government which were targeted by the rebels; villages sympathetic to the freedom struggle which were attacked by the authorities. A division of the Indian army was called in to quell the revolt, reinforcing the thirty-five battalions of the Assam Rifles already in action. In March 1955 a bitter battle broke out in Tuensang; when the firing ended and the smoke cleared, sixty houses and several granaries were found to have been burnt down.[28]

Despite the civil war, some channels of communication were still open. In September 1955 Phizo himself went with two colleagues to meet the Assam chief minister. No details of the meeting are available and after it was over the Naga leader returned to the jungle. However, one of his key aides, T. Sakhrie, had come round to the view that the Nagas could not ever hope to defeat the Indian army. Having made their point, the NNC guerrillas should lay down their weapons and their leaders seek an honourable settlement with the government in New Delhi.

Phizo, on the other hand, had pledged himself to a 'war that would not admit of truces, retreats or compromises'. The suggestion that he negotiate offended him greatly; not least because Sakhrie was, like him, an Angami from Khonomah, indeed from the same *khel* or clan of Merhuma. 'Phizo was absolutely furious with Sakhrie's softening posture', which came when many young men were flocking to the rebel cause, with the guerrilla army at an all-time high of 15,000 members. But Sakhrie was convinced that they still stood no chance against the mighty Indian nation. He began touring the villages, preaching against Phizo's extremism and warning that violence would only beget more violence.[29]

In January 1956 T. Sakhrie was dragged out of bed, taken to the jungle, tortured, then killed. It was widely believed that Phizo had ordered the murder,

although he denied it. In any event, the message had gone home – this is how betrayers to the cause would be treated. In March afresh announcement of a federal government of Nagaland was made. A national flag was designed and commanders appointed for the different regions of the designated homeland. Then, in July, occurred a killing that hurt India's image as much as Sakhrie's murder had hurt the NNC. A group of soldiers, having just beaten off a rebel ambush, were returning to Kohima. The town was under curfew; no one was supposed to be out on the streets. Catching sight of a solitary old man, the soldiers ordered him off the road. When the man protested the *jawans* beat him with rifle-butts and finally pushed him off a cliff.

The walker that the soldiers had so callously killed was a doctor named T. Haralu. He was, in fact, the first allopathic practitioner in the Naga hills and, as such, known and revered in and around Kohima. His killing dissipated any propaganda advantage the Indians might have received from Sakhrie's murder. For if that death had 'intensified defections from [the NNC] to New Delhi, exactly the reverse happened by the killing of Dr Haralu'.[30]

Meanwhile, the army presence had increased considerably. The newly named Naga Hills Force consisted of one regiment of mountain artillery, seventeen battalions of infantry and fifty platoons of Assam Rifles. The rebels also had their own military structure – headed by a commander-in-chief (a brilliant strategist named Kaito) with four commanders under him, their troops grouped into battalions and companies. The Nagas were equipped with British and Japanese rifles, and with Sten guns and machine guns, all part of the massive debris left behind after the Second World War. The rebels also used locally made muzzle-loaders and, in hand-to-hand combat, the traditional Naga sword or *dao*.

To add to the regular Naga forces there were highly effective bands of irregulars, divided into 'volunteer parties', 'courier parties' and 'women's volunteer organizations'. The last-named were nurses who could, when called upon, fight very well indeed. And there was also the silent support of the ordinary villager. As part of their counter-insurgency operations, the Indian army brought isolated hamlets together in 'grouped villages'; the residents had to sleep here at night, going out in the morning to work in the fields. Intended to break the chain of information from peasant to rebel, this tactic merely increased the army's unpopularity among the Nagas.[31]

By the middle of 1956 a full-scale war was on in the Naga hills. In a statement to Parliament in the last week of July, the home minister, Govind Ballabh Pant, admitted that the Indian army had lost 68 men while killing 370 'hostiles'. Pant accused Phizo of murdering Sakhrie – whom he called the

‘leader of the sensible and patriotic group’ – and of ‘leading them [the Nagas] to disaster’. The talk of Naga independence he dismissed as ‘mere moonshine’. Pant expressed the hope ‘that good sense will prevail on the Nagas and they will realize that we all belong to India’.[32]

The Indian (and international) press was not covering the conflict, but we can get a sense of its scale from letters written by a Naga doctor to the last British deputy commissioner of the Naga hills, Charles Pawsey. A letter of June 1956 describes a tour in the interior where ‘every night we looked up and saw villages burning in the hills – set alight by either the rebels or the army, no one knows.’ As for the rebel leader,

> Phizo is being absolutely horrible to any Naga Government servant he catches, and even more so to any Naga who was on his council and has left him, as many have, because of his extreme methods . . . Many dobashis [headmen] have vanished and no one knows whether they are in hiding or Phizo’s got them. Of course, their position is very difficult, for if they go about Government business Phizo gets them, and if they don t, the Government gets them.

Two months later, the Naga doctor wrote to Pawsey that

> As I see it, .5 per cent of the Nagas are with Phizo; 1 per cent are more moderate, and want to break away from Assam and come under Delhi, and 98.5 per cent just want to be left alone’ . . . Of course the way the army has behaved and is behaving means that now voluntary co-operation between the Nagas and any Government is beyond hope.

The methods of the army, he added, were such that they ‘will affect Naga/Indian relations for the next 50–100 years’.[33]

In August 1956 there was an extended debate in the Lok Sabha on the situation in the Naga hills. A Meitei member from Manipur recounted how, on a recent visit to the region, the convoy of vehicles he was travelling in was attacked by the rebels. Based on his enquiries, it appeared that ‘it is very difficult to bring them round to our way of thinking and ways of life; more especially, Phizo is a hard nut to crack’. He agreed that the Nagas could not ‘have separate independence’, yet thought that they should immediately be granted a separate state within the Indian Union.

The next speaker was the Socialist MP Rishang Keishing, who mounted a fierce attack on the army for burning villages and killing innocent people (Keishing was himself a Thangkul Naga from Manipur). 'The army men have shown an utter disregard for the sentiments of the local Nagas, for, they have tried to terrify them by carrying the naked corpses of the Nagas killed by them. When Phizo had met Nehru in 1951 and 1952, said Keishing, 'the parties did not try to understand each other's mind and the atmosphere was soon vitiated and tempers lost'. He wished 'that the prime minister had displayed here the same amount of patience and psychological insight for which he is famous in the field of international diplomacy'. In the years since, brutal methods had been used by both sides. 'Who can boast of an untarnished record?' asked Keishing. 'Who can dare fling the first stone and assert that they are not sinners? I ask this of the hostile Nagas as well as of the government.' He recommended 'an immediate declaration of general amnesty', the sending of an all-party delegation of parliamentarians to the disturbed region and a meeting between the government and the Naga National Council. He also appealed to Phizo's men to agree to a truce, 'because the continuation of hostilities means the ruins of innocent citizens'.

The prime minister, in reply, admitted that there had been some killings – including that of Dr Haralu, 'which has distressed us exceedingly' – but claimed 'that by far the greater part of the burning is done by the Naga hostiles'. He argued that the government was seeking the co-operation of the Nagas and that, as he had several times told Phizo, New Delhi was always willing to consider suggestions to improve the working of the Sixth Schedule, which allowed tribal areas great autonomy in the management of their land and resources. He did not, however, think the time ripe for sending a delegation of parliamentarians to the Naga hills. And he insisted that 'it is no good talking to me about independence [for the Nagas] . . . I consider it fantastic for that little corner between China and Burma and India – apart of it is in Burma – to be called an independent state'.[34]

In December 1956 a publication issued by the Indian High Commission in London reported the 'success' of army operations in the Naga hills. It claimed that the military had broken the back of the rebel resistance and was now 'engaged in mopping-up operations'. The news appears to have been swallowed whole, for weeks later the *Manchester Guardian* ran an item with the headline: 'Naga Rebellion Virtually Over'. The Indian government, it said, was taking steps 'to arrive at some understanding with the Naga moderates, whose ranks are swelling steadily'. There was, however, no evidence of any independent confirmation of this new dawn said to be emerging.[35]

V

Through the 1950s the Jharkhand movement carried on its campaign for a province within India run for and by adivasis. When the States Reorganization Commission visited the area in January 1955, they were met everywhere by processionists shouting '*Jharkhand alag prant!*' (Jharkhand must be a separate state). As one participant in the protests recalled, the 'Jharkhand demand was writ large on every Adivasi face'.[36]

Across the country, in Manipur, a struggle was afoot to have that former chiefdom declared a full-fledged state of the Indian Union. Back in 1949 a popular movement had forced the Maharaja to convene an assembly elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. But the assembly was dissolved when Manipur merged with India. The territory was now designated a 'Part C' state, which meant that it had no popularly elected body and was ruled by a chief commissioner responsible directly to Delhi.

Manipur covered an area of 8,600 square miles. There was a mere 700 square miles of valley, inhabited by 380,000 Meiteis owing allegiance to the Vaishnava traditions of Hinduism. The larger, hilly section was home to 180,000 Naga and Kuki tribals. It was one such tribal, the aforementioned Rishang Keishing, who in 1954 began a movement for representative government in Manipur. Keishing and his fellow socialists daily picketed the office of the chief commissioner in Imphal. Thousands of *satyagrahis* courted arrest, many of them women. But the government would not yield. Speaking in Parliament, the home minister said that the time was not ripe for the creation of legislative assemblies in Part C states such as Manipur and Tripura. 'These states', he said, 'are strategically situated on the borders of India. The people are still comparatively politically backward and the administrative machinery in these States is still weak.'[37]

One does not know whether the Naga National Council took cognizance of the struggles for Jharkhand and Manipur, and of New Delhi's reluctance to give in to them. In any case, Phizo and his men were holding out for something much more ambitious – not just a province within India, but a nation outside it. The demand might have been 'absurd', yet it inspired numerous Nagas to abandon their villages and join the guerrillas.

At this time, the mid-1950s, there were roughly 200,000 Nagas in the district that bore their name. There were alike number in the adjoining districts of NEFA, with another 80,000 in Manipur. Half a million Nagas in all, with perhaps just 10,000 of them participating full time in the struggle. However,

weakness in numbers was amply compensated by strength of will. A small community of rebels had forced the Indian state to send in large contingents of military to suppress it.

Few Indians outside the north-east knew of the Naga conflict at the time, and virtually no foreigners. Yet the conflict had serious implications for the unity of the nation, for the survival of its democracy and for the legitimacy of its government. For now here else in the country, not even in Kashmir, had the army been sent in to quell a rebellion launched by those who were formally citizens of the Indian state.

In its first decade, this state had faced problems aplenty – among them oppositional movements based on class, religion, language and region. These had been handled by reason and dialogue or, in very rare instances, by the use of regular police. The conflict in the Naga hills, on the other hand, would not admit of such resolution. There was a fundamental incommensurability between what the NNC was demanding and what the government of India was willing to give them. This was an argument which, it seemed, could be ended only by one party prevailing, militarily, over the other.

Jawaharlal Nehru keenly understood the uniqueness of the Naga situation. Writing to his Cabinet colleagues in March 1955, he alerted them to 'the rather difficult problem in our tribal areas of the North East . . . [where] we have not succeeded in winning the people of these areas. In fact, they have been drifting away. In the Naga Hills district, they have non-cooperated for the last three and a half years and done so with great discipline and success. [38]

A year later, Nehru wrote to the chief minister of Assam that while the army would be deployed so long as the rebels had arms and were willing to use them, 'there is something much more to it than merely the military approach'. While 'there can be no doubt that an armed revolt has to be met by force', said Nehru, 'our whole past and present outlook is based on force by itself being no remedy. We have repeated this in regard to the greater problems of the world. Much more must we remember this when dealing with our own countrymen who have to be won over and not merely suppressed.'[39]

Hidden away from the eyes of the world, unknown even to most Indians, the Naga rebellion was withal a serious headache for the government of India. Otherwise, Nehru's regime seemed secure and stable. It had been democratically elected, with a comfortable majority, while behind its foreign and domestic policies rested a wide national consensus. Soon, however, other challenges were to arise, these not in the peripheries, but in regions considered to be solidly part of India.