

THE POSSIBLE NATIONS: ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF IDEAS AND IMAGES IN NORTH-EAST INDIA (1940-1950)

Sajal Nag

The forties of the last century was a period of awakening and resurgence in the hill areas of North-East India. The sudden advent of the Second World War, which saw global military powers fight for supremacy outside their doors (north east India was one of the major theatres of the war) and even dragging them into this bloody war, was a rude shock to the hill people. It, on the one hand, brought devastations to their habitat but on the other hand opened the floodgate of new ideas and images. There was a massive traffic of ideas and images in which the tribal saw themselves submerged as well as confronted. These experiences, ideas and images were bewildering as this was the first time they had them. This was not all. The 'new time' had placed them in new political context where they had to make choices, they had to imagine a future, to construct a discourse and had to struggle for a realization of that utopia. This presentation is about this changed times, about the unforeseen transition, sudden transformation and the massive traffic of ideas that inundated the remote frontiers of Indian subcontinent through out the 1940s and the trajectories that were altered during its encounter with a mighty post-colonial Indian nation state.¹ The emphasis is of course on ideas, images and discourses that were articulated; actual developments constitute the backdrop.

NAGA HILLS: THE EXISTENTIALIST CRISIS AND A FAILED INSURANCE AGENT

Until the Second World War broke out and reached this part of the world, the hill areas of the North-East, including the valley of Manipur, had hardly any illusion about the trajectory of their life. The Naga and Mizo tribal communities had surrendered to the idea of a vanquished nation and begun to enjoy the peace, tranquility and stability that they were experiencing under the colonial regime and the patronization of the Christian missionaries. British colonialism had exposed them to the so-called civilized world, put an end to their traditional lifestyle and at the

same time confined them to their own areas through devices like Inner Line Regulations and Excluded Area, etc. These tribes were subdued and subordinated but not considered important enough to be integrated into the socio-economic and political life of the rest of the British Empire in India. While colonialism tried to keep them isolated from rest of the country, within the confines of their own world a rapid social revolution was taking place through the spread of Christianity which had begun to transform their life and value systems. The people had no complaints to such transformations as it was liberating them from the oppression of expensive rituals, unsympathetic priests and pressures of kinsmen. Even for the administrators who had fought a hundred years war to subdue the tribes, things were almost perfect. "By the time Japan started, the Naga problem did appear to have been solved. Apart from the Kacha Naga trouble...which was largely economic, the District was quiet, the people contented, poor but with enough to eat and administration was running smoothly on well tried lines."² The trouble the Deputy Commissioner of Naga hills was referring to was the millenarianistic uprising of sub-tribe of the Nagas, known as the Kacha Nagas all through the 1930s and the Kuki Uprising during the First World War which was due to the "overzealous recruitment of Kukis in the south".³ In fact, the Nagas of Naga hills were loyal throughout the First World War and large numbers served in a labour corps in France. The largest number of recruits were from the Sema Nagas.⁴ "Above all the Naga hills district was a happy district. There was no political bitterness, no agitation. There was no oppression and interference by minor officials. The only real hardship was the liability of villages to forced labour to carry loads from the plains to Mokokchong to provide materials for the maintenance of Government buildings away from the main road and to carry the belongings of touring officers. The imposition was not heavy and often volunteers were not available. The burden was carefully shared out and until roads and bridges had been provided some imposition was inevitable."⁵ Such then was the general picture when the Second World War began.

Indeed, the march of the Japanese forces into Burma and then into the North-East region of India along with the Indian National Army changed all that. In the words of a colonial official, "But the effect of the war was instantaneous. The framework of the labour corps, which had not materialized, was utilized to form a labour corps to keep open the road to Burma when our tired army was coming out. They were the only labour which remained steadily at work until the evacuation was completed, a faced not recognized at the time or since. Thousand of Nagas widened the Burma Road to two-way traffics standards. Recruitment to the Assam Regiment and to a lesser extent to the Assam Rifles was increased...when

in April 1944, the Japanese invaded the Naga Hills, the Nagas were entirely loyal. The information given to the British forces was invaluable. No British force was ambushed by the Japanese and the only help given was given under duress. Had the Nagas gone over to the Japanese the task of the British forces would have been much greater. Their loyalty was rewarded by the gift of a new hospital from the Viceroy Lord Wavell.⁶ Although the Deputy Commissioner dismissed the advent of the war and its impact in few lines, much profound developments had taken place during the war.

During the war, a lurking fear that disturbed the colonial officials was that the Nagas might join the Japanese, as they belong to the same racial group (Mongoloid), to overthrow the British. The “atmosphere in those days was one of distrust and hostility to imperialism. Leaflets were being distributed urging the Nagas to rise and destroy the British. Once the British had gone all would be well and peace would follow.”⁷ The leaflets were distributed by the Indian National Army (INA) from helicopter with Gandhi’s photo on it. The leaflets campaigned against the British and allied army and asked people to support the INA and the Japanese army and, as a result, a huge number of Nagas, Kukis and Meitheis had already either joined the INA or turned informers. To counter this, the British government commissioned the services of a European female anthropologist who had by then amassed considerable influence among the Nagas. This British anthropologist named Ursula Graham Bower was working amongst this tribe gathering ethnographic materials immediately after the Uprising among the Kacha (Zemi Nagas). The assignment of the lady was to use her influence and raise a Volunteer Force of the Nagas which would be a paramilitary force as well as work as a network of intelligence gatherers. Miss Graham Bower managed to keep her own head on, and won the friendship of the Naga Chieftains. The plan worked absolutely fine and it was the work of this V Force that was to a large extent responsible for the victory of the allied forces in Naga Hills. When the Japanese army surged across the Burma border and threatened to spill into India, Miss Graham-Bower declared war on Japan. She placed herself at the head of the mobilized Nagas. By her orders, guards were posted on main and secondary trails, a watch and warn system was established. Over these trails, thousands of evacuees, deserters, escaped prisoners and bailed-out airmen fled from Burma to India. Miss Graham Bower also directed Naga to ambush the Japanese search parties.

Not just the British Government but also the Naga themselves had been impressed by the work of Miss Bower. The manner in which she mobilized, trained and led the ‘rustic’ Nagas against a mighty Japanese army had convinced the Nagas of her leadership quality. Now and then people in the outside world got letters from her, exulting over the pictures

she was taking of primitive dances and ceremonies. Some of the more pretentious Nagas wore a little apron. They begged Miss Graham-Bower to name their babies. She named most of them Victoria Elizabeth. They now had another idea. If the British were withdrawing from the Naga Hills, they wanted her to remain here as the Queen of their country and lead them. The Nagas had heard the name of Queen who was the Empress of the British Empire. Now that the war was over and it was rumoured that the British were going to leave the hills soon they wanted this White woman to be the Queen Empress of the Naga Hills.⁸ They offered Ursula Bower to become the Queen of the Nagas and rule over them. But when Bower, knowing the impossibility of realizing such a dream, declined, the Nagas were left with the only choice: merge with the Indian Nation. But before such an option was exercised there were many existential questions that needed to be resolved. In the words of a Naga leader:

- (a) Are we Indians?
- (b) Are we not a part of India?
- (c) What will be our future provisions?
- (d) What are our safeguards?
- (e) Where do we stand in future?

The questions were many, but answers none.⁹

The Nagas were, to quote T. Aliba Imti's words, 'at the most critical time of their history. They were neither sure of their identity nor their future'.¹⁰ There was a serious debate going on among the educated Nagas over their identity—whether they were Indians or not, and they form a part of India or not.¹¹ The long years of protective exclusion from India and the Indian had inhibited them from identifying with India. But at the same time, they formed a part of the British India. But they know that though India consisted of a heterogeneous people, they were distinctly different from the Nagas in social and cultural terms. The backward Nagas were no political match to them. So there was every possibility that 'thrown among forty crores of Indians' the one million Nagas with their 'unique system of life will be wiped out'.¹² This 'unique system of life' was precious to the Nagas and they desired its perpetuation. While this desire formed the core of the Naga popular perception of 'independence', sovereignty to them meant to be 'left along', to live life in the inherited and customary way, however crude and uncivilized it might seem to others. Joining India, on the other hand, might mean a 'threat to their old way of life, their freedom, their valued traditions, their customary laws, their land (and mystic mountain homes)'.¹³ They were apprehensive that becoming part

India would mean interference in their socio-economic life, an alien administrative set-up, imposition of taxes and inability to develop according to their own free will. Essentially they feared the rule of people 'who had no knowledge about the Nagas'.

Charles Pawsey, a long serving civil servant working in the Naga Hills, had established the Naga Hills District Tribal Council, which united all the Nagas and merged all the Naga Tribal Councils. But the fast changing political scenario in the subcontinent threw Pawsey's plan in a quandary and his incipient Tribal Council had to be turned into the Naga National Council at a meeting held by the representatives of different tribes in Wokha, the centre of Lotha Nagas, in February 1946. It was to be the national body and a platform for all Nagas to deal with the emergent situation. Originally, it consisted of 29 members, representing various tribes, and published a monthly newspaper entitled *Naga Nation*. It marked a momentous event for the Naga people:

Our people were yearning for a change in our way of life because we were aware of the changes that were taking place near and around us but we were still chained to the old way of life and this was the reason why the whole Naga people welcomed the starting of the Naga National Council and freely exchanged our individual views and problems. Public opinion till that period was very much restrained because of the policy adopted by the British power but when the common people saw that the Naga National Council could be their mouthpiece, the spontaneous response was most encouraging.¹⁴

At the same time, they debated amongst themselves whether they were capable of running their own administration and produce enough food for themselves. Good sections of the Nagas were apprehensive that they were not only too unequipped but their economy was too rudimentary to have a self-sufficient sovereign country. The debate took place in the letter to the editor section of the first Naga newspaper, the *Naga Nation*. They felt if they had to depend on India for everything then it is better to be a part of India. Another section felt there could be balance of payment equation between the two neighbours. The strongest fear was, however, that the vast Indians would submerge the tiny Naga population and the identity and culture of the Nagas would be totally lost to history. They had conveyed these fears to the British Government as well as Indian leadership repeatedly in the memorandum submitted to the Statutory Commissioner in 1929 and to the Constituent Assembly. But at the same time they were not in favour of instant severance of all ties with India. T. Aliba Imti, the senior-most leader of the Nagas, felt that it would be 'unwise' for the Nagas to cut themselves off from India at the stage.¹⁵

When all such turmoil was blowing across the hills of the Nagas, a

failed insurance agent was getting trained in nationalist discourses in far off Burma. His name was Zapfu Phizo, an Angami Naga. Never a good student, the school authorities in Shillong were happy when Phizo left the school after appearing in matriculation examination in 1927. Expectedly Phizo failed in the exam. He neither succeeded in becoming a teacher in the missionary school in Kohima nor a clerk in the administration as he wished. Instead he learned a correspondence course in insurance. Initially, he took up the agency of promoting the sale of Thompson Chain Reference Bible but proved a poor salesman. Following which he became an agent of the Sunlife Assurance Company but failed to rope in any Naga insurer. Frustrated he left for Rangoon where he started ventures which included importing canvas shoes, locally made lemonade, rice from Manipur and motor tyre retreading company, but all results were disappointing. Even his attempt to make money during the war-time inflation failed. As the Japanese army entered Burma, Phizo was willing to act as a spy for the British but it was the Japanese who examined him for the job.¹⁶ Phizo initially considered it a war between the British and Japan. He was able to obtain an assurance from the Japanese intelligence that he would assist them into the Naga Hills and in return they would make Naga Hills free after the war. On April 26, 1942, Subhash Chandra Bose joined the Indian National Army offensives, marching along with the Japanese. Phizo learnt the ideas and objectives of the INA. Phizo, however, was reluctant to commit himself to the cause of Bose although he was influenced by Bose's charisma and personality but was sure Bose would not let Naga Hills float away from United India.¹⁷ It was, however, reported that subsequently Phizo was able to squeeze out a 'gentlemen's agreement' with Bose that in return of his collaboration, Bose would allow autonomy to the Nagas after India achieved its independence. However, this report could neither be authenticated nor could Phizo's participation in the war against the British be confirmed.

Although Phizo was interviewed to work as an intelligence gatherer for the Japanese in the Naga Hills, it was his brother who eventually led the Japanese into the area. When the Japanese fell to the allied assault in Imphal and Kohima, both the brothers were arrested for assisting the Japanese. Phizo was anticipating a life-term in jails from the British, but he was mysteriously released from prison after the war. This was the time when there was discussion of India's gaining independence. Feeling that Nagas were leaderless, kinsman Megosieso urged Phizo to return to Nagaland. Here he heard that the British were considering retaining Naga Hills after withdrawing from India under the Crown Colony Scheme.

Although, as Phizo sensed, the best brains of the Nagas were in favour of it, he was quick to oppose the idea, as it would mean continuation of

the colonial rule. Very soon he was elected Chairman of Kohima Central Council and, consequently, became an inner member of the Naga National Council. He immediately objected to the Council's mild approach to the burning question of Naga Hills' future status and advocated a militant reaffirmation of sovereign independence. Thereafter, his conviction, vision and persuasive ability marked him for the next short step, the *de facto* President of the Council. Explaining his dominance, Phizo later stated, "I had seen nationalists at work in Burma. I had witnessed what patriotism could achieve. What I found on my return to Nagaland was nothing—no unity, no ideas. Everybody waited to hear first what the District Commissioner wanted."¹⁸

When the negotiation between the Nagas and the Indian government began, the Nagas could press for 'protection' against the fears and apprehension and secure 'Home-rule' under India administration. Since the debate over the identity and future of the Nagas was still continuing and the fear of alien rule still persisted, the Naga elite wanted time to resolve these issues themselves. They wanted a ten-year interim arrangement at the end of which the Nagas could decide if they wanted to merge with India or otherwise. Until then they wanted a political state conducive to the perpetuation of 'Nagaism'—the Naga way of life. But despite initial agreement, there were controversy and misunderstanding over the ten-year term option. It was Phizo who led the walk out from the Hydari-NNC agreement to start a never-ending struggle for self determination.

THE MIZOS: IMAGINING AN EGALITARIAN ORDER

The Mizos too had a similar dilemma. Ethnically they were closer to Burma. In fact, half of the Mizo tribe lived on the other side of the frontier which had been artificially created between the two: India and Burma. Those living close to Burma felt that they would prefer to be part of that country while those who lived in Assam wished that they would be left alone.¹⁹ They had no idea of the emergence of modern Indian or Burmese nation and merely wanted to live with their own people, and their ethnic tradition. International demarcation of borders at the point meant nothing to them. But the educated among them knew it was time to make decisions. The ex-servicemen coming back home after the war also related new ideas and experiences gathered from abroad. The new outlook influenced the Mizo perception of independence which was in turn determined by an immediate problem the Mizo populace was facing—the oppressive rule of the chiefs. From the time the Sailos assumed chieftainship Mizos have been reeling under their oppressive rule. The theoretically egalitarian

society was virtually polarized into two loose classes of people, the chiefs, the *upas* (close advisors) and their favourites on the one hand and the commoners on the other. The chiefs generally functioned like autocratic rulers treating common people 'as personal servants and even slaves'. Entitled to a number of customary taxes, the chiefs were paid *fathang* or taxes in kind out of the total individual share of paddy, *Sachchiah* or the best portions of meat of animals, animals killed, in a hunt and *Kmaichchiah* or part of the best honey obtained. Besides these, people had to pool their labour to construct the chief's house or cultivate his lands whenever summoned to do so. The imminent withdrawal of the British from India provided an opportunity to secure the abolition of chieftainship. The Mizo commoners were optimistic that they could secure an assurance to this effect from the Indian National Congress and merge with India on this condition. For the Mizos, the worst fear was the continuation of chieftainship which they wanted to halt even at the cost of losing their sovereignty. The British administration had always used the institution of chieftains to rule and influence people.²⁰ During the Second World War, the chiefs were made to take an oath that they would fight against the Japanese as their enemy.²¹ But, by the end of the Second World War, the British administration realized that not only were the people agitated over the continuation of the oppressive rule of the chiefs, but were no longer isolated from the political developments in the rest of the India. The secret meeting of the Mizo youths with Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, a nationalist leader from the Khasi Hills of Assam, was a proof of this. To pursue any political activity it was mandatory for the Mizos to obtain the permission of the administration. R. Vanlawma, the General Secretary of the Young Lushai Association (later renamed as Young Mizo Association), who had experience in running organizations, sought permission and was allowed to hold to Commoners' Conference. On April 9, 1946, the conference was held in Aizawl where a resolution was passed in favour of the formation of a political party, was taken to be superintendent who approved the proposal.²² Thus, on April 9, 1946, the first political party of Mizoram, the Mizo Commoners Union, was formed. The shrewd Vanlawma insisted on using the word Mizo in place of Lushai, as the former was a generic ethnic term that would include all the Mizo tribes rather than the Lushai, which was the name of just one sub-tribe.²³ His idea was to integrate all the sub-tribes of Mizos under one umbrella organization. At the same time, the word 'commoners' implied the strong anti-chief character of the party. But since the anti-chief character of the party was dividing the Mizos between the chief and commoners and, thereby, weakening their strength, Vanlawma had it deleted and the party came to be known as the Mizos Union.²⁴

In the party Conference of September 24, 1946, an unusual event took place. A strong debate emerged about the credentials of the office-bearers of the party which eventually ended with the party splitting into two by early 1947. The Right wing of the Union was called the Mizo Union Council.²⁵ It was led by Pachunga and supported by Lalmawia, Rev Zairema and Lalbiakthanga. The Left wing of the Mizo Union was led by Dengthiama, Khawtin Khuma, Saprawnga, Bawichuaka and Vanthuama.²⁶ While the former was anti-India, pro-chief and pro-British, the new Mizo Union tended to be militant, anti-chief and an integrationist organization.²⁷ It is also noteworthy that most of the new office-bearers of the Mizo Union were from outside Mizo Hills and strongly advocated the integration of the districts with India.²⁸ Thus, the Mizo society was polarized between the Right and the Left wings of the Mizo Union Party. Besides, the political situation of the subcontinent was also becoming clearer. It was apparent that the British were about to withdraw from India leaving it independent. It was also evident that there would be a partition of the country into India and Pakistan. The Left wing of the Mizo Union was in favour of integration with India and had not yet contemplated any other option. But there were occasional outbursts, mainly from the Right wing about an independent Mizoram after the British withdrawal. These conflicting views were debated when the Bordoloi Committee sent its invitation to the Mizo Union to select nominees to co-opted members of the above committee.²⁹ It started the first serious debate on the issue whether the Mizos should join India or remain independent. In the mean time, the Sub-Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly on Tribal Affairs, under the chairmanship Bordoloi, was formed and it visited Aizawl to know people's view regarding the nature of administration they visualized for themselves. The decision of the two members of the Mizo Union to participate in the Bordoloi Committee raised a hue-and-cry from the opposition. Reviewing the situation at a public meeting in Aizawl, Vanlawma, the founder of Mizo Union, now placed in the Right Wing, expressed his bitterness over the violation of the promise by Assam Premier and Chairman of the Committee Gopinath Bordoloi to offer them full fledged membership in the committee (now offering partial membership) and demanded that, on the ground of breach of trust, the Mizos should refuse to be a part of India and declare complete independence: "In the ancient past, Mizoram was not under anybody's governance. Now that the British, who controlled us, are about to leave the Asian subcontinent we should resume the status we held before the arrival of the British. We should demand total independence."³⁰

The Mizos attending the meeting were greatly agitated. Some were

for independence and others were fearful of its consequences, and this led to a public debate on the issue. Responding to the question as to why the MU had not favoured independence right from its inception but was raising it at this stage, Vanlawma said:³¹

When we formed Mizo Union party, the British administration was not clear as to when and how they were going to leave India. Under them the country was taken care of nicely and if we had mentioned independence when we started Mizo Union party, the British would not have let us start it at all. But now that India is going to obtain independence, we feel that they will be ruling our country and not considering our own interests. However, the attitude of the Indian people is becoming clearer. They failed to carry out their promise to us: that we would have full membership on the planning board and have asked us to be co-opted members only and might intend to give us still less than self-determination in the future. Now that we know that they are not going to carry out their promises our future looks very uncertain. Therefore, we must govern ourselves. At the moment we have enough supplies and if we lack supplies we will still find some other country to help us. And if we look at our natural resources and increase our produce by improving our farming system we will be able to produce a sufficiency of things. Now is the time to fight for our independence.

The defendant, Vanthuama, general secretary of the MU stated,

It is impossible for us to fight for our independence now. If we look around us, we see the Darwin theory—the more powerful swallowing up the less powerful. If and when we are truly more powerful, we will swallow Indians and if they are more powerful than us, they will swallow us. Besides if we are independent where will we get salt and iron ore to make our farming equipment and how are we going to make money?³²

There were sharp differences between the two sections of the public. The meeting took the form of a debate between Vanlawma and Vanthuama representing two schools of thought. Vanlawma responded to Vanthuama's argument by saying:³³

Pu (Mr.) Vanlawma's statement on Darwin's theory seems to me to be an attempt to escape reality. We all know for sure that we the Mizos are much smaller and less powerful than the Indians. For that very reason we created the Mizo Union Party....

Concerning salt and iron ore our ancestors, though less advanced than we, were self-sufficient and even made their own guns. If our ancestors knew how to trade with their neighbours we certainly ought to be able to take care of our own affairs. Concerning money we can use it as the rest of the world does. If we have enough food there is no need in fact to be unduly alarmed about our future.

This meeting marked the emergence of a new concept, that of total independence. During negotiations on the eve of India's Independence between Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam, and Vanlawma, when

asked to opt for India, the Mizo leader stressed upon the separate identity of the Mizos vis-à-vis the Indians:

We are a Mongoloid people and coming from the East we are ethnologically different from you who came from the West. We are now Christians and even before we converted to Christianity our own religion was different quite substantially from yours and it will not be possible to live with Indian under the same laws and regulations... we are a small nation and need a great nation to depend upon... will you leave us alone to manage our affairs so that we can survive among other nations?³⁴

Pachunga, another Mizo leader of the secessionist faction within the Mizo Union, repeated the same thesis to declare that 'we Mizos have nothing in common with the *vais* (Plainsmen)' and 'Mizoram is for the Mizo people'.³⁵ Around this time (May 5, 1947), a pamphlet entitled *Zoram Independent* written by D. Ronghaka was published and distributed in Aizawl. The pamphlet advocated that Mizo Hills should declare itself independent. The English translation of the Mizo pamphlet read.

Every nation in the world strives for independence. India has struggled long to secure their independence. So have the Muslims of India for their independence. If the Mizo does not fight for their independence, they will remain slaves (*Tik Luh Bawi*) which practice has been abolished long ago. We should fight for independence to avoid becoming slaves again. The fact that we speak one language (which proves that we are one people) is reason enough for us to strive for independence... If we are independent, all of us will be happy because then we will be working for our future. It might be difficult at the initial period but it would be worthwhile struggle... Because of our religion along we should be away from the Indians. All around us, different religious groups seem to form their own countries. The Burmese are Buddhists. The Indian are Hindus and the Pakistanis Muslims. Why should not we Mizos who are Christians have our own sovereign country.³⁶

MANIPUR: COMING OF THE PROPHET WHO RODE A WHITE HORSE

The princely state of Manipur was almost an island of civilization comparable to many South-East Asian states of the same time. It had its own body of literature, rich cultural heritage and enriched traditions comparable to many of the civilization of the time. It had a written language unlike many North-Eastern communities and a rich cultural heritage. In its own version of *Puranas*, a body of vernacular indigenous literature, there was a prophecy that the forties of the twentieth century would be period of 'great turbulence' in Manipur. War, devastations and chaos would follow.

By January 1941, people of Manipur began to discuss the prophecy and soon a rumour spread throughout the state that turbulence was imminent. There was panic as a consequence. By 1939, it appeared that

the prophecy was going to come true. The trouble began with the Nupilan movement.

On the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War another crisis hit Manipur. To meet wartime food requirements, the government was purchasing large quantities of rice. 1939 onwards, Manipur experienced sudden flood which ravaged the rice crops in Manipur causing a famine like situation. Wartime requirement caused a huge demand for rice and such food stuff. Taking advantage of the situation the unscrupulous Marwari traders who had by now established a firm over the Manipuri economy, bought up its entire rice production and exported it for huge profits. As a cumulative result the subsistence economy of Manipur faced a huge food crisis. As there was no rice available in the local market, it led to an artificial famine-like situation. Initially, the people petitioned the Crown to stop the food export but when it was not adhered to, massive agitation broke out against the government to compel it to stop food export. The movement was led as well as participated mostly by womenfolk. The Manipuri women launched a massive agitation against the export of rice and demanded official intervention. Riot-like situation developed and tension was high especially because the unscrupulous traders were Marwaris from the Indian plains (*Mayangs*). This movement came to be known as Nupilan (1939-40) and immediately spread like wildfire and though led by womenfolk, drew support from all sections of the society.

In this crisis the Manipuris had looked to their old books for sustenance. The old Manipuri books had also predicted that in such crisis situation after three months of turmoil a new Prince Prophet (*Maharaja*) would come riding on a White Horse to rescue the Manipuris from this turmoil.³⁷ The role of Hijam Irabot Singh in extending support to the women's movement by involving Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha in it made people hopeful that perhaps Hijam Irabot Singh was that Prince Prophet who was the *avatar* who would rescue from the current trouble in their life. Hijam Irabot was not a Prince. He was born in a poor family but through extreme diligence had acquired western education. Seeing the potential of a brilliant career ahead the Maharaja of Manipur made him a part of the royal family by marrying his niece to Irabot. But Irabot did not get dazzled by the prospect of Princedom and actually worked to bring down the autocracy of the monarchy and establish a Peoples Republic in Manipur.

The demand for the establishment of a responsible government in Manipur is closely related with the birth of the *Nikhil Hindi Manipuri Mahasabha*, a socio-religious organization which was established under the patronage of the maharaja of Manipur in 1934. All the leading personalities of Manipur were members of this Mahasabha. The political

developments in the Indian mainland and the nationalist movement inspired this elite group to seek a change in the nature of the colonial rule and monarchical autocracy. With this objective in view, the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha was converted into a political organization called the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha on Imphal on December 30, 1938. The Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha split into two over the question of support to this movement. One section led by Irabat Singh wanted to offer whole-hearted support to it, whereas the other opposed such support. As a result of the split the faction led by Irabat Singh formed a new party called the Praja Sammelan whose avowed objectives were the abolition of colonial as well as feudal rule and the establishment of a responsible government.

Meanwhile, the Second World War hit the world. In December 1941, Japan entered the war but few Manipuris realized that it would soon reach their doorstep which happened when the Japanese invaded Burma. There was an influx of Burmese refugees of Indian origin to India through Manipur:

In January and February hundreds of refugees began to arrive from Burma and were housed in a camp five miles north of Imphal. The Invading Japanese army could enter India by land only through two roads, Arakan and Manipur. Imphal became the target of intermittent Japanese bombing from the second week of May 1942. On the 10 and 16 May, there were air raids on Imphal. Bombs fell on Assam Rifles Lines and in the area of Residency and Bazar. As a result of the raids the civil administration of the state had ceased to function. The other state departments, the doctors, the clerical staff and menial staff all fled to safer areas. The police having failed to report for duty were suspended and all convicts in the Jail had escaped. In the centre of Imphal almost the only civilian remaining were a few pilferers and looters.³⁸

The war situation continued through out 1943 and 1944. In March 1944, the Japanese completely overwhelmed Imphal and the road to Dimpur was cut off. On March 30, 1944, the fall of Imphal to the Japanese was announced from Tokyo. During these troubled times, Irabat was in Sylhet Jail.

Along with the Japanese came the Indian National Army (INA) offensive in Manipur.³⁹ The campaign was ill-timed as it coincided with the weakening of the Axis Power.⁴⁰ Moreover, the INA contrary to their expectations failed to enlist the support of the nationalist leaders in India. They also failed to gain expected sympathy from the people of Manipur and Nagaland.⁴¹ It appeared that Subhash Bose, the INA leader, had not established any contact with Manipuris until March 7, 1944, when his handbill—containing documents and Gandhi's photo—was distributed to them.⁴² On the other hand, the British were able to obtain supplies and manual help from the Nagas and Manipuris when the Imphal-Kohima

road was blocked.⁴³ Hijam Irabot was the only known leader to have supported Bose, but he was arrested under the Defense of India Rules in 1944 and was in the Silchar Jail for eight months.⁴⁴ The failure of the INA was also a disappointment.

The stint at the Sylhet Jail, following involvement in the Nupilan Movement, had proved to be a training ground for Irabot in Marxian ideology.⁴⁵ He, along with his Manipuri Krishak Sabha, intensified its socio-political reform movements. Irabot's slogan, 'land to the tiller' caught the fancy of the peasants. The post-War period saw Irabat Singh as a confirmed revolutionary with a leftist ideology. The demand for 'full responsible government', through 'adult franchise' was again adopted and passed at the second conference of the Manipur Krishak Sabha held in Nambol on May 16, 1946.⁴⁶ On May 16, 1946, the Manipur Krishi Sammelan too converted itself into a political party. This was followed by the establishment of the Manipur State Congress Part on October 4, 1946. Subsequently, it became a unit of the Indian National Congress. All members of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha joined the Congress. Like other parties, the Congress too demanded the abolition of the monarchy and establishment of a responsible government based on the principles of democracy and adult franchise.⁴⁷

The imminence of British withdrawal made the people as well as the maharaja restive. While the movement for responsible government was intensified, the autocratic monarch dreamt of retaining the sovereignty but sensing the peoples' mood for responsible government he relented and was willing to concede the demand. He requested the British Residency in Manipur to allow him to make a royal proclamation regarding the setting up of a new administration. The British Political Agent, Gimson asked the maharaja for a copy of the draft.⁴⁸ In course of his letter dated October 20, 1946, Maharaja Budhachandra expressed a desire to establish a democratic system of administration with an elected Advisory Assembly constituted by representatives of both the hills and plains. But in real terms the maharaja had prepared only a new set of Administrative Rules. Agitated, the State Congress Party submitted a memorandum on November 1, 1946 for the establishment of a proper Legislative Assembly.⁴⁹ The Maharaja sensed the belligerent mood of the people and issued a formal order (12 December) to constitute a constitution making committee to prepare a new constitution for the state. On July 27, 1947, the committee submitted its constitution to the maharaja. However, the maharaja was not fully prepared to implement the demands of the political parties.⁵⁰ Instead, he formed an interim government in Manipur on July 1, 1947. The Manipur State Durbar was abolished and renamed as the Manipur State Council.⁵¹ On July 15, 1947, Pearson, the President of Manipur State

Durbar became the Chief Minister of Manipur. But soon he was replaced by Priyabrata Singh, the younger brother of the maharaja.⁵² Amidst such developments, the British withdrew and on August 15 when India was declared independent, Manipur reverted back to its old status—an independent sovereign monarchy. Manipur had an Assembly constituted by the people's representative after a long struggle for responsible government, but the Communist-phobia that had gripped this Indian state following Telengana, Punnapra-Valayar, Bengal (Tebhaga), Tripura, proved fateful. In fact, by the end of the War, the Communist Party of India was in a position to claim as being the third biggest party after the Congress and the League and obviously weaker than them.⁵³ The inexplicable fear of Communism was compounded by the worldwide specter too—especially the events in China and Burma which bordered India's North-East. Home Minister Patel wanted to ban the party.⁵⁴ The Assam Chief Minister Bordoloi was willing to grant autonomy to Manipur so that its activities did not affect Assam. The Communists were trying to organize a Telegana-like uprising in Manipur, which sealed the fate of this Princely State.⁵⁵ The neighbouring Tripura was already witnessing a similar uprising. The seizure of Manipur became essential to stop the march of Communism into the Indian mainland.

However, as the British paramountcy came to an end of August 15, 1947, Manipur reverted to its pre-colonial sovereign status. The Maharaja of Manipur gained full control of his state's administration once again after 86 years. But this was a critical juncture in Manipuri's history. On the one hand, it witnessed a massive movement for responsible government and on the other, there were preparations underway among members of the Congress to effect its merger with the Indian Union. The then Dominion Agent, Debeshwar Sharma, was pressing the Centre for integration of Manipur as a district of Assam, there was even a suggestion that Manipur should be merged with West Bengal.⁵⁶ In mid-September, Sardar Patel mooted a scheme for the formation of a Purbanchal Pradesh consisting of Manipur, Cachar, Lushai Hills and Tripura.⁵⁷ Irabat found the whole idea of Purabanchal Pradesh 'nauseating'.⁵⁸ He felt that such a move would be a threat to the distinctive social, cultural, political and historical identity of Manipur and strongly opposed the idea, imploring people to fight tooth and nail against it.

The dilly-dallying tactics of the Maharaja in granting a responsible government generated public hostility against him. On October 4, 1947, the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution for 'immediately granting responsible government'—giving the deadline of April 1, 1948.⁵⁹ The Maharaja assured the people of an elected legislature based on adult franchise and a ministry of elected representative, but political leaders did

not trust him. Demonstrations and picketing in front of state offices, at the residence of the government officials, were resorted to. This non-stop agitation completely paralyzed the functioning of the government and normal life in Manipur.⁶⁰ On November 10, the government threatened realization and stoppage of 'war compensation'.⁶¹ But this intensified the movement, which compelled the chief minister of the interim Council to make a declaration on November 23 that a responsible government would be introduced within six months. The election was held on June 11, 1948, under the supervision of the Francise Sub-Committee.⁶² No party could secure an absolute majority in the election though the Congress emerged as the largest majority. Consequently, a non-Congress coalition government was formed and Maharaja Kumar Priyabrata Singh became the first Chief Minister. The maiden session of the Assembly took place on October 19, 1948.⁶³

The election result gave a jolt to the aspirations of the Congress party. It also sealed the fate of the idea of a Purbanchal Pradesh. The local Congress unit established closer links with the area. It invited Prafulla Chandra Ghose an eminent Congressman from Bengal who in his speech favoured the idea of Purbanchal Pradesh. But people's opposition to the idea made the situation tense.⁶⁴ At a public meeting held on September 18, 1948, the leaders of both the hills and plains strongly opposed the move and declared that the people of Manipur would resist any type of imposition of the proposed province. The Government of Manipur also opposed the idea.⁶⁵ Due to such strong opposition the proposal of the Manipur State Congress for the creation of a Purbanchal Pradesh was nipped in the bud.

Irabat Singh, who had contested on the Krishak Sabha ticket and was returned from the Utlou constituency, not only opposed the Purbanchal Pradesh idea, but also demanded that Kabaw Valley, which had been transferred to Burma in 1947, be returned to Manipur. The workers of his Krishak Sabha and Praja Sangha started mobilizing villagers and organized several village meetings. Irabat was a confirmed Communist by now and his activities roused suspicion in the government circles.⁶⁶ Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam, visited Manipur to study the situation. The political activities of Irabat, in particular, were minutely observed and studied. This had become essential in view of the increasing rumour of a Communist Coup in Manipur and Irabat's opposition to the merger of Manipur with India.⁶⁷ It was reported that the high-level officials of the Indian Government felt that if Irabat were allowed to move freely, it would be impossible to effect the merger. Irabat was also held responsible for all the disturbances in Manipur. The Manipur Government, in a move to curb his activities, banned the Krishak Sabha, Praja Singha, Mahila Sammillan and Student Federation—the organizations Irabat was associated

with.⁶⁸

Irabat, on the other hand, founded the state unit of the Communist Party of India after the second Congress of the CPI was held in Calcutta, February 28–March, 1948.⁶⁹ This was the time when peasants were engaged in armed struggle in Telengana, Bengal and Tripura. Irabat's days as a free-moving citizen came to an end on September 21, 1948. On this day, as attempts were being made to arrest him, Irabat went underground. From his hideout he started spreading Communist ideology and programmes, and also mobilizing and organizing the peasants. Irabat was trying to start a Telengana-like uprising in Manipur.⁷⁰ In fact, one of the reasons that the Home Ministry of India hastened the process of Manipuri's merger with India was the rising specter of a Communist armed struggle in various parts of India which had given rise to this phenomenon called 'Communist Phobia.'⁷¹ When the Indian State actually obtained the merger of Manipur through doubtful mode on October 15, 1949, Irabat's dream of establishing a Peasants Republic of Manipur was shattered. The Prophet turned revolutionary could only mutter "Now Manipur is finished".

EPILOGUE

In all hundred years of their rule, the British tried to keep the hill people of North-East India hidden from the world and refused to allow them even their traditional relationship with the outer world. But the break out of the Second World War shattered that iron wall and exposed the people to the greatest calamity of all times. The devastation of war was accompanied by drought in Naga Hills, flood in Manipur and famine-like situation in all three areas. It was followed by the British declaration of a imminent withdrawal from India. The people were left to chart out a future for themselves. Rest of India was prepared for a transfer of power under the leadership of Indian National Congress but the hills of Mizos and Nagas had no platform to raise their voice. The huge crisis led to debates, debates led to newer ideas, ideas led to the formation of organizations to represent their ideas of future. Organization threw up leadership, leadership talked about possibilities and possibilities led to the implementation of the ideas of their future. Thus, while Manipur thought of the formation of a Peasant Republic, Nagaland imagined a sovereign nation and Mizoram visualized an egalitarian society. All these were possibilities. But the turns of events were such that possibilities were not actualized; dreams were unrealized. The course of history was counter to the ideas and images that people had thought of. They remained possible nations.

NOTES

1. The materials used in this paper were earlier used in my book *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North East India*, Delhi, Manohar, 2002. It has now been enriched and reinforced with new information and understanding for this paper.
2. Charles Pawsey, 'The Naga Problem,' unpublished manuscript, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge. P.4
3. Charles Pawsey, 'The Naga Problem,' unpublished manuscript, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge. p. 4
4. Charles Pawsey, 'The Naga Problem,' unpublished manuscript, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge. p. 4
5. *ibid*
6. *ibid.*, p. 6
7. *ibid.*, p. 7
8. Ursula Graham Bower. 1952. *Naga Path*, UK: Readers Union/John Murray (Indian Reprint, Spectrum, Guwahati, 2002.) p. 145
9. T. Aliba Imti. 1988. *Reminiscences: Front Impur to Naga National Council*, Mokokchung: Author
10. T. Aliba Imti. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Naga National Council Memorandum to His Majesty's Government and the Government of India, February 20, 1947.
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*, p. vi.
15. T. Aliba Imti. 1946. Secretary, Naga National Council, Public Address, Khima, December 6.
16. Pieter Steyn. 2002. *Zaphu Phizo: Voice of the Nagas*. London: Kegan Paul Ltd, p. 54.
17. Pieter Steyn. 2002. *Zaphu Phizo: Voice of the Nagas*, London: Kegan Paul Ltd., p. 59.
18. Pieter Steyn. 2002. *Zaphu Phizo: Voice of the Nagas*. London: Kegan Paul Ltd., p. 72.
19. *ibid.*
20. Ch. Saprawaga. 1967. 'Factors Contributing to the Mizo Problems', *Tribal Mirror*, Vol. 3, cited in S.K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North East India*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973, p. 161.
21. L.B. Thanga. 1994. 'Basis of Autonomy Movements in Mizoram: Historical Background', in R.N. Prasad, *Autonomy Movement in Mizoram*, Delhi: Northern Book Centre, pp. 72-4.
22. R. Vanlawma. 1972. *Ka Ram Le Kei (My Country and I): Political History of Modern Mizoram*, Aizawl : Soram Printing Press, p. 88.
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.*
25. Mizo National Council, Memorandum to Government of India, 1965.
26. R.N. Prasad. 1987. *Government and Politics in Mizoram*. Delhi: Northern Book Centre. p. 79.

27. S.K. Chaube. 1973. *Hill Politics in North East India*. Delhi: Orient Longman, p. 162.
28. *ibid.*, p. 161.
29. R. Vanlawma, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
30. *ibid.*
31. *ibid.*
32. *ibid.*, p. 122.
33. *ibid.*
34. R. Vanlawma. 1972. *Ka Ram Le Kei, Aizawl*, cited in Vumson, *Zo History*, Aizawl ; Author, n.d., p. 250.
35. Cited in Vumson, *ibid.*
36. Pachunga in a recorded public address, Aizawl, February 21, 1947, cited in R.S. Samuelson, 'The mizo Independence movement', M.A. thesis, Humbolt University, USA, 1976. Subsequently published as *Love Mizoram*, Imphal: Goodwill Press, 1985, pp. 41-2.
37. Karam Manimohan Singh. 1989. *Hijam Irabbot Singh and Political Movements in Manipur*, Delhi: B R Publishing House, p. 123
38. Karam Manimohan Singh. 1989. *Hijam Irabbot Singh and Political Movements in Manipur*, Delhi: B R Publishing House, p. 149.
39. Laldena. 1991. 'The INA Movement', in Laldena, G. Kabui and Joykumar Singh. *History of Modern Manipur*, Imphal: Modern Book, pp. 174-82.
40. *ibid.*
41. *ibid.*
42. *ibid.*
43. *ibid.*
44. N Joykumar Singh, 'Movement for Responsible Government in Manipur (1938-48)', *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Barapani Session, 1983, pp. 202-9, See also his *Social Movements in Manipur*, Delhi : Mittal, 1992.
45. *ibid.*
46. *ibid.*
47. *ibid.*
48. *ibid.*
49. *ibid.*
50. *ibid.*
51. *ibid.*
52. *ibid.*
53. *ibid.*, p. 446.
54. N. Sanjaoba. 1990. 'The Genesis of Insurgency', in Sanjaoba (ed.) *Manipur: Past and Present*, Delhi: Mittal, pp. 245-90.

In this letter to Patel, 26 May 1948m Bordoloi wrote, '..... It has therefore been absolutely necessary that these trends towards separatist (Communist) uprising shall be observed from day to day and the Dominion Government and the Government of Assam should be kept apprised of them while therefore I am completely agreeable to allow autonomy to the State of Manipur, I would not like the State Government to feel that all it should do is to satisfy the

- Governor of Assam personally and should have no other consideration for their conduct.' Cited in *ibid*.
55. Pethic Lawrence to Mountbatter, 12 April 1947, letter No. 134, and N. Mansergh (ed.), *Transfer of Power, 1942-47*, Vol. X, London : HMSO, 1981.
 56. It had originated in the Manipur State Congress unit and supported by Manipur Socialist Party. It reportedly had Sardar Patel's blessings.
 57. Kshetri Rajendra Singh. 1987. 'Social Movements in Manipur : A Study of Two Movements among the Meitheis', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Centre for Social Studies, Surat, p. 106.
 58. N. Joykumar Singh. 1983. 'Movement for Responsible Government in Manipur (1938-48)', *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Barapani Session, pp. 202-09. Also Ksh. Shyam Kanai Singh. 1982. 'The Merger of Manipur with India', *Proceedings of NEIHA*, Imphal Session, pp. 224-28.
 59. *ibid*.
 60. *ibid*.
 61. *ibid*.
 62. *ibid*.
 63. Bimal J. Dev and Dilip Lahiri, Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri. 1987. *Manipur Culture and Politics*, Delhi: Mittal, pp. 100-01.
 64. *ibid*.
 65. Kshetri Rajendra Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 107.
 66. Irabat was already talking in terms of a people's republic in Manipur and working towards it which had reinforced the India Government's suspicion. The country was already witnessing peasant unrest in Telangana, Tebhaga (Bengal), Assam Tripura. The second Congress of the CPI was held in Calcutta from February 28 to March 6, 1948, which supported these movements. This was followed by the inauguration of state unit of CPI at the District Organizing Committee level in Manipur. This was a red signal for the government.
 67. S. Chattradhari. 1972. *Manipungi Itihassta Irabat*, Imphal, pp 64-65, cited in Kshetri Rajendra Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 109.
 68. T. Bir Singh, *Comrade Irabat*, Imphal: Irabat Memorial Library and Information Centre, pp. 56-7.
 69. Kshetri Rajendra Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 111.
 70. The Communist armed movement in Manipur had intensified and was viewed seriously by the Government of India specially because it came in the wake of rumours of Chinese hand in it and spurts of such movements in many parts of the country. Sardar Patel as the Home minister confirmed in the Parliament (February 1951) that there had been a Communist uprising in Manipur of a serious nature but was presently under control. The *Times of India*, February 28, 1951, wrote in its editorial 'widespread terrorist activities are reported in the strategic north-eastern districts embracing Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Peking may not harbour expansionist designs but Communism is potentially expansive and explosive and anxiety is heightened by the Union Home Minister's reference of encouragement for the Assam terrorists from across the border'. The

Communist phobia gripped the Assam Chief Minister Bordoloi so much that he asked Patel to allow Manipur autonomy so that Manipur did not influence Assam.

71. N. Joykumar Singh, Joykumar Singh. 1983. 'Movement for Responsible Government in Manipur (1938-48)', *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Barapani Session, pp. 202-9, See also his *Social Movements in Manipur*, Delhi: Mittal, 1992.