

NAGALAND PROBLEM

A Constructive Approach

By M. R. MASANI

It has been said of, classical tragedy that it is a conflict not between right and wrong but between one right and another. Such is the tragedy of Nagaland.

On the one side is the 'Naga' demand for complete independence voiced by the Underground which calls itself the 'Naga Federal Republic'. They say they are a separate nation. They wish to be close to India, but not part of India. They ask if Ireland can be independent of Britain, why cannot Nagaland be independent of India? They claim that, when the British left, Nagaland was not a part of India but was under direct British occupation, that Gandhi had assured them on the eve of the transfer of power in 1947 that India would be quite content to let them be free. They claim with bitterness, and no doubt with a great deal of exaggeration, that for ten years now, except during small intervals, the Indian armed forces have been let loose on them, harassing their people, destroying their villages and churches, with the inevitable cruelties that accompany guerrilla warfare anywhere in the world. They wish to be free, but not the subjects, of

of them speak English. They are a disciplined lot. We found their Chief Minister, Mr. Shilu Ao, and his colleagues able and patriotic men. Equally sophisticated were the leaders of the 'Naga Federal Government' whom we met. Everyone agrees that in the big family that is India, the Nagas would undoubtedly be valuable members. Everything should be done to keep them in the Indian Union, but nationhood, like membership of a family, has to come from within and cannot be imposed.

During our brief stay in Nagaland, we met all conceivable elements in the State. We met the Governor and the members of the Nagaland State Cabinet. We met high officials, both civilian and military, both local and from other parts of India. We met the Baptist Church leaders. We met two members of the Peace Mission, which has been doing excellent work under trying circumstances, Jaya-prakash Narayan and the Reverend Michael Scott, and the unfortunate absence of the third member, Mr. Chaliha, owing to illness. We met Ministers and military leaders of the 'Naga Federal Republic'. We met leaders of the Democratic Party, the official Opposition in the State Assembly, who recently resigned their seats. We visited as many villages as we could.

I believe our visit has served a useful purpose. In fact, it was long overdue. No member of our group could have come back but with a deeper understanding and a clearer picture, even though it might still be sketchy. On the other hand, those who could judge assured us that our very act of going there had made a tremendous impact on the Naga people, both overground and underground. After the isolation and neglect from which this part of the country had suffered, the fact that a few of us had taken the trouble to visit them and be in their midst, had met anyone who wanted to meet us and listened to anything that they wished to say, unpleasant though it might be, our insistence that we were there as friends—all these could not but have, according to some keen observers, a therapeutic effect.

There can be no question that a great deal of more of this kind of coming and going of men and women of various kinds visiting Nagaland and showing interest in their affairs, and of Nagas, on the other hand, visiting centres of Indian life and becoming a little more aware of the Union to which they belong is a crying need.

The basic fact about Nagaland today is that, for the first time for a decade, peace has descended on those beautiful hills. People are able to move freely, speak freely, breathe freely. For the great mass of the population, there is no longer the thought or the fear of their village being raided by one group or of reprisals from the other. Every single Naga whom we met felt that this was a great blessing and hoped that nothing would happen to take it away. But, since the cease-fire is extended for a month at a time, there is still great anxiety and insecurity. Nobody wants the end of the cease-fire and everybody asks how long it will continue.

The cease-fire talks only became possible thanks to both sides agreeing, at the instance of the Peace Mission, that each should feel free to adhere to its fundamental position and that no solution was ruled out for the purposes of discussion. It would be wrong now to superimpose any new conditions to these talks and to seek to end them on the ground that the other side is not prepared to give up its fundamentals. On the other hand, some machinery undoubtedly needs to be established to examine charges of violations of the cease-fire agreement made on both sides so that they may be dealt with and the threats that they pose to the continuance of peaceful negotiations may be eliminated.

It may perhaps be worthwhile

to attempt to strike a balance sheet of the gains and losses resulting from the continuation of the truce. Is time running for us or against us?

On the negative side of the balance sheet, from the point of view of the Indian Government, it can be said that the suspension of operations has given a chance to the Underground to regroup its forces, consolidate its organisation, recruit more young men to its ranks. It is also alleged that there have been some violations of the truce agreement and that men of the Naga Underground army have been seen with arms in villages resulting in the exaction of 'taxes' from unwilling villagers. All this, it continued indefinitely, would involve, argue some critics, a more difficult task for the Indian Security forces, if and when negotiations fall. Undoubtedly, there is some force in this. But it has to be weighed against the credit side of the balance sheet, where there are several important factors.

The biggest of these is that, in guerrilla warfare of this nature, the sympathies of the great bulk of the people who are neutral as between the two forces are, in the end, decisive. A guerrilla force can only function if by and large the sentiments of the people are in tune with its objectives and provide an appropriate climate. Today, there can be no question that the entire people of Nagaland enjoy peace and wish peace to continue. They would turn against whichever party ended the truce.

FEAR RECEDING

As the weeks and months pass, peace brings with it a relaxation of tensions. This involves, in so far as the village population is concerned, a freer expression of opinion and a greater assertiveness against the demands and exactions of the 'Naga Federal Government'. Now that the Indian Army no longer operates, the villages are turning to the State administration and the Indian Army for protection against the Underground. The glamour of the Underground is diminishing. People do not wish to pay taxes endlessly to the 'Naga Federal Government' when there is no fighting. Fear is receding.

So far as the Underground is concerned, a long period of peace must involve a measure of disintegration. The men from the jungles are going home to the villages to eat and sleep with their families. They are tasting the joys and comforts of domestic life. This is something that Mao Tse-tung's rules of guerrilla warfare do not permit of. Those who have talked to small groups of Naga Underground men find, in private conversation, that they are already becoming more reasonable and there is no desire to go back to the jungles.

Arms are not being imported. Not a single bullet is known to have come in since the cease-fire. It is true that a party of some 1,500 young men has crossed the border into Burma, but that is not a result of the cease-fire which allows the Indian Army a three-mile strip of territory in which to intercept anyone who attempts to cross the border into Burma. Such crossings and goings have been there for ten years and would continue even if operations were resumed. On the other hand, road building by the Indian Army and the Nagaland Government is proceeding apace.

Peace is coming to be posed against independence. Public meetings have been held in various places where resolutions have been unanimously carried supporting the Peace Mission's proposals and urging that peace should continue.

What are the Peace Mission's proposals which are generally being favoured? Essentially they boil down to this: that, while the Nagas have a right to determine their destiny, the fairest and only practicable solution of the problem is for them to participate of their own volition in the Union of India and for the necessary modifi-

cations in the relationship between the State of Nagaland and the Union Government to be made. There should be no objection to this formula. After all, there have been seventeen Amendments to the Constitution, many of them reducing the liberties of the Indian people. One of these is the thirteenth Amendment, which embodies special safeguards for the Naga people. What possible objection can there be to one more Amendment which would make the people of Nagaland a happy and willing part of the Union? More than once we were told: "Only one word stands in the way—the Constitution".

SHIFT IN STAND

It is true that as of today, the 'Naga Federal Republic' finds itself unable to accept this formula. It is significant, however, that they have not rejected it. They have countered with a demand for a plebiscite, but this itself marks a shift from the intransigent demand for severance from India to an acceptance of the fact that the people must decide whichever way they wish. It is possible that the process of bringing the Underground to an acceptance of the Peace Mission's proposals may take time. Wounds inflicted over a decade do not heal overnight. The negotiations at Paomungron, which resulted in peace in Korea, lasted for several years. The negotiations for the Austrian Treaty, which finally succeeded, also lasted for nearly a decade. Yet both problems were settled peacefully. Why not allow at least one month of truce for every year of hostile operations which have now lasted in Nagaland for some fourteen years? Why not let the talks continue till the General Elections of 1967, when the Underground might feel persuaded to put up candidates in order to find out whether they have the support of a majority of the people in the State? Meanwhile, the flag of India continues to fly peacefully over Nagaland.

With the withdrawal of the special powers of the Armed Forces and the holding in abeyance of the Nagaland Security Regulation, for the first time the Civil Government in Nagaland has begun to function in its own right since September 6, 1964. After fourteen years, of which at least ten were spent in shooting it out, is it too much to ask that the Civil Administration should be allowed to function under due process of law in order to restore confidence in the Indian Government's intentions among the people of Nagaland?

JAW, NOT WAR

In case anyone should blandly advocate a military solution of the problem by uprooting all the villages and raising the Army a 'free hand' to shoot down or round up hostile elements in three or four years that would undoubtedly be required, one may well pose the question whether it is fair to our Armed Forces, whose function is to fight the country's enemies, that they be asked, year to year, to undertake the distasteful task of shooting down those, however recalcitrant they might be, whom we claim as citizens of India? One may also ask what would be the effect of this on people in two other neighbouring areas, namely, the Mizo Hills, whose economic outlets are all towards Pakistan, and the recently created NEFA area with its large contiguous frontier with China? Will the Mizo and NEFA people reconcile themselves to the fate of their Naga brethren? May it not be that such action would make these people feel they have no other outlet to achieve their aspirations than to ask for foreign aid and intervention to ward off similar evils from themselves?

Whichever way one looks at it, one is led back to the wisdom of those words of that 'old war-horse', Winston Churchill: "Jaw, jaw is better than war, war."

A VAST FAMILY

We, on our side, urge that India is a vast family of people of various races, religions and cultures, all rubbing shoulders and living as free citizens of the Union of India; that the Indian Constitution guarantees Fundamental Rights to all citizens and that, in the case of Nagaland, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution gives a greater measure of autonomy to that State than is enjoyed by Maharashtra, Gujarat or Bihar. We point out that there is not an economically viable State but has to depend heavily on Indian subsidies; that they are surrounded by neighbours not all of whom—certainly not Communist China—can be trusted to respect their independence; that India needs Nagaland for its security and defence and that Nagaland needs India just as much for its sustenance and survival. We say to them: we are sorry for what has happened on both sides during the past ten unfortunate years; let us forgive and forget, let us look to the future and not to the past.

Who can doubt that both points of view have a logic of their own and that both of them are well-intentioned and patriotic? It is a tragedy that historical processes should have brought about a situation where this confrontation should have to take place.

It was to study this situation and the recent suspension of operations on both sides which was brought into effect on September 6, 1964, that a group of fifteen Members of Parliament of various political parties and trends of thought visited Nagaland from February 5 to 11. The suggestion was originally made by Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan and was advanced in a letter from Professor Ranga to the Prime Minister, who readily accepted it.

One of the most cheering impressions with which one returns is that of seeing our own officials, both civil and military, performing their duties cheerfully and efficiently—men from every corner of India rubbing shoulders in the common cause of carrying on the tasks of government. Watching them at work, each one of them so different but yet welded together by a fine esprit de corps, one felt proud of them and of our country.

NOT PRIMITIVE

Many of us have a misconceived idea about the Nagas. The Nagas are not primitive and, in the words of the able and genial Governor of Assam and Nagaland, Mr. Vishnu Sahay, they are by universal consent 'lovely people'. Their village organisation is highly democratic. Some ten per cent.