The complexities of Naga identity

The Nagaland govt. will face many hurdles in its quest to compile a list of indigenous inhabitants

The Nagaland government’s move to compile a Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) opens up possibilities in the context of the decision to link the register to the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system without a consensus on the definition of an ‘indigenous inhabitant’.

One such possibility is of RIIN pushing the negotiators engaged in the ongoing Naga peace talks to articulate new and hardened positions on the contentious issue of integration of contiguous Naga-inhabited areas.

Though the official notification on RIIN has not mentioned a cut-off date to compile the proposed register, the authorities in Nagaland have till date issued indigenous inhabitant certificates using December 1, 1963 as the cut-off date. Nagaland was inaugurated as India’s 16th State on this date following the ‘16-point agreement’ between the government of India and the Naga People’s Convention on July 26, 1960.

Opposition from NSCN (I-M)
The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), which has been engaged in peace talks with the government of India since 1997, has opposed the compilation of RIIN asserting that “all Nagas, wherever they are, are indigenous in their land by virtue of their common history”. A statement issued by the ‘Ministry of Information and Publicity’ of the self-styled Government of the People’s Republic of Nagaland reads: “The present move of the State government to implement [the] Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) is contradictory to the inherent rights of the Nagas. It is politically motivated to suit the interest of the groups advocating for the ‘16-Point Agreement’. The ‘Nagaland State’ does not and will not represent the national decision of the Naga people. It was formed purely to divide the Nagas.” The self-styled government of the People’s Republic of Nagaland is the parallel government run by the NSCN(I-M).

On June 29, the Nagaland government notified that RIIN “will be the master-list of all indigenous inhabitants” of the State. All those to be included will be issued “barcoded and numbered indigenous inhabitant certificates”. It added that all existing indigenous inhabitant certificates would become invalid once the process of compiling RIIN is completed and fresh certificates issued.

RIIN is different from Assam’s National Register of Citizens (NRC) as exclusion or inclusion in RIIN is not going to determine the Indian citizenship of anyone in Nagaland. The compilation of RIIN also involves the complexities of deciding claims in respect of children of non-Naga fathers as well as non-Naga children adopted by Naga parents.

Three conditions
Since 1977, a person, in order to be eligible to obtain a certificate of indigenous inhabitants of Nagaland, has to fulfil either of these three conditions: a) the person settled permanently in Nagaland prior to December 1, 1963; b) his or her parents or legitimate guardians were paying house tax prior to this cut-off date; and c) the applicant, or his/her parents or legitimate guardians, acquired property and a patta (land certificate) prior to this cut-off date.

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If the Nagaland government goes ahead with a compilation of RIIN with this cut-off date, then all Naga people who have migrated to the State from the neighbouring States of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh and elsewhere in India after this day will have to be excluded.

The NSCN(I-M) statement adds, “Nothing is conclusive on the Naga issue, until and unless a mutually agreed honourable political solution is signed between the two entities. Therefore, any attempt to dilute the final political settlement by justifying any past accord of treasons should be seriously viewed by all Nagas.”

This clearly indicates the opposition the Nagaland government may have to face if it goes ahead with the move to compile RIIN. The Centre and the NSCN (I-M), which is the largest among all armed Naga rebel groups, signed a Framework Agreement in 2015, the content of which has still not been made public, in turn leaving room for speculation on the contentious issue of integration of all contiguous Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh.

Unless otherwise clarified through an official notification, the proposed linking of RIIN with the ILP system may require large numbers of non-indigenous inhabitants of Dimapur district, more particularly the commercial hub (Dimapur town), to obtain an ILP to carry out day-to-day activities. Most of them migrated from other States and have been carrying out trade, business and other activities for decades. Migration also explains the higher density of population in Dimapur district (409 persons per sq. km) when compared to all the other districts in the State. The ILP is a travel document issued by the government of India to allow a ‘domestic tourist’ to enter Nagaland, and is valid for 30 days.

Streamlining ILP
The Supreme Court, on July 2, dismissed a Public Interest Litigation seeking a directive against the Nagaland government’s move to implement the ILP in the entire State including Dimapur district, which had so far been kept out of the purview of the ILP system.

A report prepared by the government, in collaboration with the UNDP in 2009, gave information on migration patterns in Nagaland. Titled ‘Rural-Urban Migration: A Thematic Report’, it said that in 2001, Assam was the State with the highest number of migrants to Nagaland (19,176 people), followed by Bihar (7,249 people) and Manipur (4,569 people). A large section of people (about 45% of them in the case of Assam, 59% in the case of Bihar and 25% in the case of Manipur) had migrated for better employment and business opportunities.

While the move to streamline the ILP system to curb the influx of “illegal migration” to Nagaland has been welcomed by civil society, public opinion is still divided on compiling RIIN without a consensus on the cut-off date.

As the Nagaland government has begun a consultation process on RIIN, it will be under pressure to delve into the work of streamlining the ILP mechanism from the proposed registrar and put it on hold till the ongoing peace process concludes and the final solution is worked out.

Besides this, the complexities that may arise in streamlining the ILP mechanism due to non-issuance of domicile certificates or permanent residence certificates to a large number of non-Naga, non-indigenous inhabitants could also make the task even more difficult for the Neiphiu Rio-led Nagaland government.