

# Regionalism: Eastern Nagaland's Demand For Autonomy And Development

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## **Abstract**

*Eastern nagaland is a region characterized by distinct administrative history, perceived historical neglect and relative deprivation. This paper delves into the multifaceted phenomenon of regionalism and explores the roots of regionalism in the region, categorizing it as intra-state regionalism, driven by the eastern nagas' aspirations for regional autonomy, progress and development. The eastern nagaland people's organisation (enpo) has been at the forefront, advocating for a separate state, citing decades of intentional negligence and socio-economic disparities. The paper analyses the socio-political landscape, highlighting the perceived disparities in government representation, resource allocation, and developmental policies. The enpo's plea for a separate statehood, grounded in a perceived lack of benefits from being part of nagaland, reflects a demand for special status and provisions. The study underscores the urgency of addressing the region's unique challenges while preserving the unity of the nagas.*

**Keywords:** regionalism, eastern nagaland, relative deprivation, socio-economic development

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Date of Submission: 12-02-2024

Date of Acceptance: 22-02-2024

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## **I. Introduction**

The state of Nagaland which initially comprised of three districts namely, Kohima, Mokokchung and Tuensang was formally inaugurated on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1963. While Kohima and Mokokchung together constituted Naga Hills, Tuensang was under the North East Frontier Agency along with the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. Only a decade after independence the Tuensang region was separated from NEFA and after amalgamation with the Naga Hills came to be called the Naga Hills Tuensang Area until the establishment of the state of Nagaland. Over the years the number of districts has increased by bifurcating the three districts. Tuensang which is inhabited by the eastern Nagas was placed under a different administrative jurisdiction distinct from the rest of Nagaland during the British colonial era and for a decade following India's independence. The British had declared it as an Excluded Area. As a result, the people had almost no contact with the outside world. Head hunting and other primitive practices were common and in fact a case of head hunting was reported as late as October 1963 at Panso in Tuensang district. Special provisions were, therefore, made for the then Tuensang district in view of its relative backwardness, under which the district would have a Regional Council for a period of ten years with the Deputy Commissioner as Chairman. The Regional Council also nominated tribal representatives to be members of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. There was a separate Ministry for Tuensang affairs from among the nominated members of the area. It was only in 1973, at the end of the ten-year period that the Regional Council was abolished and the people of Tuensang district began to participate in the elections to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly along with the rest of the state. Today the eastern Nagas inhabit the 6 districts of Nagaland viz. Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak and Shamator which were formed by bifurcating Tuensang district. As per the 2011 census the total population of Nagaland is 1,978,502 and the combined population of the six districts in Eastern Nagaland is 734,762.<sup>1</sup> Eastern Nagaland comprises of seven major Naga tribes—Chang, Yimchunger, Konyak, Khiamnuingan, Sangtam, Phom and Tikhir.

Regionalism is a multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by its multidimensional components, including geographical, historical, cultural, economic, politico-administrative, and psychological aspects. However, before we look into the concept of regionalism, defining 'region' appears to be an essential prerequisite because it lies at the root of regionalism. A region can be described if not defined as an area that is conceived as an entity for the purpose of description, analysis, administration, planning or policy-making and which is recognisably different and distinct from other areas. As a part of a national domain a region is

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<sup>1</sup>*Census of India 2011 Nagaland, Series-14 Part XII – B, Directorate of Census Operations Nagaland.*

sufficiently unified to have a consciousness of its customs and ideals and thus, possesses a sense of identity distinct from the rest of the country or state.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of region also changes according to the context in which we use it. In the international context Southeast Asia consisting of eleven sovereign states is considered a region.<sup>3</sup> In the national level a region may mean a group of states with some shared characteristics, for example, the Southern states or the North Eastern states in India. It may also mean a state or part of the existing state, for example, Vidharbha in Maharashtra, Saurashtra in Gujarat etc. "Thus, the concept of 'region' may figure in the consciousness of people residing in smaller and smaller territories *ad infinitum*."<sup>4</sup>

In the light of the variation in views over what constitutes a region, it is no surprise that regionalism is also a contested concept with no lucid definition. In the broader scope of international relations, regionalism denotes the collaborative initiatives undertaken by neighbouring countries within a specific geographic area to address shared challenges and promote cooperation on economic, political and security matters.<sup>5</sup> However, for the purpose of our study, our focus is directed solely towards comprehending the concept of regionalism within the national context. Regionalism, as a concept within a national framework, refers to the phenomenon where distinct regions within a country assert and promote their own identities, interests, and often seek a degree of autonomy or self-governance within the larger national structure.<sup>6</sup> It is a complex and multifaceted process that can have significant implications for both the regions involved and the overall national unity. Many countries are characterized by diverse cultural, linguistic, historical, and economic differences among their various regions. These differences can lead to the emergence of regional identities and interests that may differ from the dominant national identity and priorities. Regionalism is used to understand the diverse and overlapping concepts of territoriality, ethnicity, and socio-economic disparity. The concept of regionalism examines both the real presence of variations among regions, within and across national borders, as well as subjective perceptions of these distinctions.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas O. Hueglin defines regionalism, "as the persistence of subnational and transnational differences, identities, and commitments."<sup>8</sup> G. Palanithurai and R. Thandavan understands regionalism partly as a frame of mind that leads to the identification of territory, religion, culture, language, race etc. and the tendency to preserve and protect these identities against intrusion or exploitation from others.<sup>9</sup> For ArtatranaGochhayat, regionalism may be understood as an ideology and political movement, usually articulated and organized by the elite to advance the causes of the regions they represent.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of regionalism has attracted huge attention from Scholars has been dealt with in different ways by different scholars and in different social conditions. In a general sense the concept of regionalism in the context of India has been analysed by broadly classifying it into four major types, namely, a) supra-state regionalism which is an expression of group identity of several states rallying on an issue of mutual interest vis-a-vis another group. b) inter-state regionalism in which the boundaries of a region are coterminous with that of a state, and puts one or more states against another on specific issues creating tensions between them. c) intra-state regionalism embodies the quest of a region within a state for self-identity and self-development in positive terms and in negative sense reflects a psyche of deprivation and/or exploitation of a region in relation to other

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<sup>2</sup>Rupert Bayless Vance, *Regionalism and the South: Selected Papers of Rupert Vance*, UNC Press Books, 1982 p.380.

<sup>3</sup> Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

<sup>4</sup>Susmita Sen Gupta, *Regionalism in Meghalaya*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, M. (1997). *Regions and Regionalism*. In: *Issues in World Politics*. Palgrave, London. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25639-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25639-6_4), pp 69–89.

<sup>6</sup>ArtatranaGochhayat, "Regionalism and Sub Regionalism: A Theoretical Framework with Special Reference to India", *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Vol. 8(1), pp. 10-26, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas O. Hueglin, *Regionalism in Western Europe: Conceptual Problems of a New Political Perspective*, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Jul., 1986), pp. 439-458, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421693>

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, pp.10-26

<sup>9</sup> G. Palanithurai and R. Thandavan, *Perspectives on Indian Regionalism*, Kanishka Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992, p.2-3.

<sup>10</sup>ArtatranaGochhayat, *op.cit.*, p.10.

region of the same state.<sup>11</sup> d) secessionism has been identified as an extreme form of regionalism wherein a region seeks to end its association from the nation and see itself as a separate entity.<sup>12</sup>

Based on this broad classification, regionalism in Eastern Nagaland can be categorized as intra-state regionalism, as it primarily revolves around the preservation of their cultural identity and concerted efforts to foster regional progress and development. This sentiment arises from a perceived sense of relative deprivation<sup>13</sup> in relation to other region of the same state. Relative deprivation is when a group of people feel that there is an actual or perceived lack of resources required to maintain the quality of life—diet, activities, and material possessions—to which various socio-economic groups or individuals within those groups have grown accustomed to. As defined by social theorists and political scientists, relative deprivation theory suggests that people who feel they are being deprived of almost anything considered essential in their society—whether money, rights, political voice or status—will organize or join social movements dedicated to obtaining the things of which they feel deprived and such social movements and their associated disorderly acts can often be attributed to the grievances of people who feel they are being denied resources to which they are entitled. It is important to note that subjective perceptions, while often serving as the driving force of regional movements, may not accurately reflect objective conditions. Regional differences can be political, economic, sociocultural, or, most likely, a combination of these.<sup>14</sup> Critics of relative deprivation theory have argued that it fails to explain why some people who, though deprived of rights or resources, fail to take part in social movements meant to attain those things.<sup>15</sup> However, proponents of relative deprivation theory argue that many of these people simply want to avoid the conflicts and life difficulties they might encounter by joining the movement with no guarantee of a better life as a result.

The Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) had in 2010 petitioned the Prime Minister for the creation of a separate state called Frontier Nagaland for the Eastern Nagas and to reinstate the former special provisions and status enjoyed by the people of Eastern Nagaland during the time when the Tuensang Frontier Division was under NEFA. The ENPO claimed that their memorandum had drawn strength from a broad-based consensus, as it was based on the collective resolutions and mandates of grassroot organizations, including village councils and the tribal councils. Comprising six (now seven)<sup>16</sup> major Eastern Naga tribes—Chang, Yimchunger, Konyak, Khiamnuingan, Sangtam, Phom and Tikhir—the ENPO claim to represent the aspirations of the local population and argue that the creation of a separate state in the North-East would bring about improvement in the overall well-being of the residents of the five (now six)<sup>17</sup> Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak and Shamator districts, which currently fall under the jurisdiction of Nagaland state.<sup>18</sup>

According to the ENPO the ten-year period under the special provision failed to bring about the desired effect upon the development of the people in these areas due to deliberate negligence and manipulation by the ruling administration in the state. Lack of exposure and access to educational resources, technology and digital resources,<sup>19</sup> inadequate transportation infrastructure and other public amenities or facilities had resulted in the people of the region falling behind the rest of the Nagas by over a century. The ENPO concedes that while this backwardness of the people of eastern Nagaland may have been by destiny in early stages, at present it is

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<sup>11</sup> Iqbal Narain, "Cultural Pluralism, National Integration and Democracy in India", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 16, No. 10, October 1976, p.912- 913.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Wood, *Secession: A Comparative Analytical Framework*, *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), pp. 107-134 (28 pages), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3230396>

<sup>13</sup> Ted Robert Gurr uses the term "relative deprivation" to mean the discrepancy between what people think they deserve, and what they actually think they can get. Gurr's hypothesis which forms the foundation of the book is that, the potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity. For further discussion see Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas O. Hueglin, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Joan Neff Gurney, Kathleen J. Tierney, *Relative Deprivation and Social Movements: A Critical Look at Twenty Years of Theory and Research*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1982, p.38.

<sup>16</sup> In 2022 another Naga Tribe called the Tikhir has been granted recognition, Government Of Nagaland Home Department: Home Branch, Nagaland: Kohima, Notification No. Home/Scst-30/Tikhir/2 022, Dated Kohima, the 20th January 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Government Of Nagaland, Home Department, General Administration Branch, Notification No.Gab-Ucom/Dist.Admin/2019, Dated Kohima, the 20h Jan', 2022.

<sup>18</sup> ENPO/Memo-01(Statehood)/M-Home/GOI/02, Dated 25th November,2010, Office of the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) H.Q.:Tuensang-798612: Nagaland.

<sup>19</sup> Technology and digital resources were not available during the period the ENPO is referencing, so there could not have been government neglect in this regard.

through intentional and continuous negligence that the people of the region are deprived and doomed and their condition is likely to remain unchanged. They maintain that the legacy of the century gap and the rapidly expanding and deepening disparity between the forward and backward communities resulting in acute imbalances and lopsided growth in all spheres while remaining in the same state exhibits exponential ramifications to the disadvantage of the later.<sup>20</sup>

The ENPO claims that there is unequal distribution of funding across various developmental policies and activities in the state. Despite these six districts being inhabited by seven declared backward and underdeveloped tribes which form almost half of the total geographical area of the state and population, the yearly assembly allocation is comparatively very negligible in terms of the actual allocations and implementations in contrary to the projected figures and proposals in the papers shown before the central government in addition to the undisclosed and covert diversions of funds. Besides, all the establishments dedicated to promotion of development and major projects are headquartered and positioned in the forward and comparatively more privileged and developed districts where the pattern of fund flow and corresponding allocations align closely. Thus, the eastern part of the state is given the least priority in the overall development agenda, especially roads, communication and other vital infrastructural developments.

According to ENPO the representation of Eastern Naga people in government service sector is hardly in the range of 3% inclusive of all the categories and hence, not in a position to have any say particularly in policy makings, proposals and implementations.<sup>21</sup>

The ENPO contend that the people of Eastern Nagaland are inadequately represented in the State Assembly. The contention of the ENPO is that based on the population ratio at the time, the appropriate allocation of seats should have been around 24 seats. However, the actual distribution of seats did not adhere to the Census data and was seemingly conducted in a haphazard manner. The Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation, maintain that being part of Nagaland has not been conducive to the positive development of the region as they were yet to see the fruits of development of independent India at all. It is contended that the Eastern Nagas have accrued no discernible advantages by being part of Nagaland. Therefore, the ENPO holds the opinion that instead of remaining silent or being neutral and trying to find other solutions the government of India should address the statehood demand with unequivocal clarity, offering a definitive and decisive response.

Considering the aforementioned premises concerning the problems and prospects and the experiences of the people of Eastern Nagaland in relation with other advanced groups of the state for years before and after formation of the state of Nagaland, the ENPO on behalf of the people they represent made known that they cannot continue to co-exist with the rest of the Nagas from other parts of the state. The ENPO made it clear that the people of the region had deliberated and were determined to pursue the path of establishing a separate state for themselves for their socio-economic upliftment and to politically avail the privileges of democracy by demanding a separate statehood with special status and provisions, exclusively for the people of eastern Nagaland from the Government of India.<sup>22</sup>

According to the ENPO after considering all the relevant factors, it was their contention that the upliftment of the socio-economic conditions of the people of eastern Nagaland was very limited in scope as long as they remain a part of the state of Nagaland and no matter what the offer and redressal that may be initiated in response to the demand by both the state government and the central government it was "already too little too late". The ENPO held that the only solution to the problem was granting the demand and aspirations of a full-fledged state with special status and provisions to the people of eastern Nagaland.<sup>23</sup> The ENPO in their memorandum also proposed to name the state "Frontier Nagaland", and this was unanimously resolved by the representatives of ENPO, Konyak Union, Phom People's Council, Yimchunger Tribal Council, United Sangtam Likhum Bumji, Chang Khulie Setshang, Khiamniungan Tribal Council, Eastern Naga Students' Federation and Eastern Nagaland Women's Organisation.<sup>24</sup>

While the region's demand for Frontier Nagaland echoes a sense of urgency and a desire for a decisive response from the government, it is crucial to acknowledge the intricate interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors that have shaped this regional identity. It becomes apparent that a nuanced understanding is

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<sup>20</sup> ENPO/Memo-01(Statehood)/M-Home/GOI/02, Dated 25th November,2010, Office of the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) H.Q.:Tuengsang-798612: Nagaland.

<sup>21</sup> ENPO/Memo-01(Statehood)/M-Home/GOI/02, *op.cit*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* and interview with leaders of Eastern Nagaland between the period of October 2022- June 2023 in Dimapur, Nagaland.

<sup>23</sup> ENPO/Memo-01(Statehood)/PM/GOI/01, Dated 25<sup>th</sup> November,2010, Office of the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) H.Q.:Tuengsang-798612: Nagaland.

<sup>24</sup> N.B:- Resolved unanimously that the name of the proposed STATE shall be "FRONTIER NAGALAND", dated, 30/11/2010, Office of the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) H.Q.:Tuengsang-798612: Nagaland.

required to address the unique challenges faced by this region within the larger framework of Nagaland and the Indian state. A comprehensive dialogue involving all stakeholders, including the Government of India and Nagaland, ENPO, and the local population, is essential to foster understanding and seek solutions that balance regional aspirations with the overarching goal of maintaining the Naga identity and unity.<sup>25</sup> The path ahead necessitates a collaborative effort to bridge the socio-economic gaps, ensure equitable representation, and address the specific developmental needs of Eastern Nagaland. Only through such a holistic approach can the region hope to reconcile its historical grievances and carve a path toward a harmonious and integrated future.

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<sup>25</sup>The Eastern Nagas' demand for separate state further complicates the Naga issue-one of the oldest issues which had started even before India's independence. On one had the Nagas have been demanding for sovereignty and integration of all the Naga inhabited territory and on the other hand this seemingly contradictory demand by the Eastern Nagas threatens to pose an obstacle to finding an early solution to the Naga peace talks.