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Identity and Violence: Exploring an Ethical Framework for Peace in the Context of the Indo-Naga Conflict

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Violence is still one of the biggest threats to human civilizational values. It looms large around the globe in various forms. Despite advancements at several fronts, including the existence of several peace norms and organizations, we are yet to find an adequate panacea for violence. In this paper, an attempt is made to provide a conceptual framework to understand and address the problem of violence through the philosophical lens of Emmanuel Levinas. According to him, violence is grounded in how we see ourselves and how we see the others. Identity construction is thus seen as the root cause of violence. Having outlined the basic ethical ideas of Levinas to address the problem of violence, I present a case study of a conflict – the Indo-Naga conflict. I suggest that for understanding and resolving the conflict at a much deeper level, one has to go beyond the socio-empirical conditions to conceptual pre-condition that comes with a sense of ethical responsibility.

Keywords: Identity, self, other, Nagas, Indian state, Immanuel Levinas, violence, peace

Introduction

A socio-cultural construction of the *other* is often limited and negative. The natural tendency is to problematize the concept of the other in relation to the *self*.[1] By self in the present context, we mean the identity of a group of people primarily though, at times, it may refer to an individual; the context of use will clarify its meaning. Accordingly, the other is taken to mean someone who is not a member of a given group. In a context of ethnic diversity and ethnic conflicts, what is lacking in the self or unknown to the self is generally seen as something threatening or evil. The other is a threat either to one's happiness or existence. In contrast, anything which forms a part of one's cultural and traditional identity is normally celebrated as good. The practices of the people is seen either as a form of self-realization or self-expression. Around this dialectic framework of the presence and the absence, we tend to construct the identity for the self and for the other as well. Such a process of *selfing* and *othering*

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is not an accidental product of history. It has its root in philosophy according to Immanuel Levinas, a celebrated French philosopher. He argues that the philosophical construction of the self which is widespread in the history of Western Philosophy is the root cause of violence.[2]

The Naga struggle for self-determination has resulted in enduring conflicts or 'durable disorder'.[3] It has seen much violence and bloodshed. It is not an exaggeration to say that there is hardly a Naga family which has not been affected by the Indo-Naga conflict. This conflict, which has been going on since the inception of Indian independence in 1947, is considered one of the oldest political struggles for self-determination in the Asian continent (Shimray 2004: 4640; Mukherjee 2014: 113). Nagas' aspiration to be free from any political domination started even before that however. It started since British colonial intrusion into the Naga soil in the first half of the19th century itself. This struggle of the Naga people for self-determination is coterminous with the consciousness and formation of an ethnic identity as Nagas. As such, the Naga identity is a modern political identity. Before the encounters with the others, it is not known that Nagas called themselves as Nagas.[4] It was a term used by others to refer to various Naga groups. Some argue that even the "Naga's idea of being a nation also has an outside, not-Naga, ontological position." (Chara 2018: 69). This does not mean however that the Naga consciousness as a people and the Naga struggle for self-determination are entirely a modern phenomenon wrought upon the Nagas by the outsiders. Jelle wouters stresses the availability of cultural democratic practices and ethnic resources that immediately set the Nagas apart from the others, factors that Nagas appeal to in order to justify their struggle for self-determination. On a similar line, U.A. Shimray also notes that conflicts in the NE have 'long social and cultural roots' (Shimray 2004: 4642). With greater self consciousness as Nagas through encounters with the others, especially since 19th century onward, and the desire to live as free people, the modern history of the Nagas has been characterized by one of struggles and conflicts. Even after signing the "Ceasefire Agreement" between Government of India (GoI) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN- IM) in 1997 and then the "Framework Agreement" in 2015 between these two entities followed by the signing of yet another agreement – "Agreed Position" – with the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), a conglomeration of 7 Naga political groups, in 2017, no breakthrough has been achieved lately in terms of arriving at any 'honorable and acceptable solution'.

Many reasons may be cited for both the causes of the conflict and the failures to end the conflict. However, I will not be looking at the empirical conditions and reasons. Much of the available discourses on Naga identity and nationalism are socio-empirical in nature though in the recent time, there is an emerging literary trend. In fact, some of the most fascinating works on these themes are to be found in the fiction writings (including anthologies) of Easterine Kire (2007; 2011;2012), Temsula Ao (2005), Veio Pou (2020), etc. Fiction narrative is increasingly becoming the dominant intellectual site for both articulating the 'dreams and woes' of Naga struggles on the one hand, and on the other, engaging the conflicting points of tradition and modernity. In the present work, I will offer a conceptual perspective with special reference to

Levinas. It is primarily ethico-philosophical in nature in that my focus is directed towards understanding the pre-conditions that has made the conflict situation possible. Through this study, I propose that (i) conflict resolution should involve the critical understanding of the self and the other and (ii) negotiation for conflict resolution should be guided by basic ethical principles that recognize and express the idea of humanity. Since the attempt is to critically examine assumptions and conditions in relation to a conflict situation, I will be primarily employing analytical and reflective methods.

Socio-cultural background of the Naga struggle at a glance

While discoursing India's north east (NE), partially or wholly, it is not unusual to see a systematic and substantial introduction of the region, historically, demographically, ethno-culturally, geo-politically, etc. For some, the nature of the study itself demands that. Besides, NE studies are comparatively recent and so minimal introduction is required to provide familiarity of the region to a reader. In the context of the Nagas with regard to the 'troubled history' of the people, some journal articles that provide informative introduction with insightful analysis and observation may be cited, viz., Chara (2018), Kikhi (2009), Hausing (2014), Mukerjee (2014), etc. Hence, I will not attempt an introduction of that sort in this work. However, I will briefly highlight some Naga cultural and historical aspects as some amount of background knowledge is inevitable for theorizing or problematizing. The idea is not to reinforce the available socio-empirical studies but to provide basic conceptual clarity and to establish certain conceptual relations for understanding the conflict situation at hand.

Traditionally, the members of any Naga community/group[5] shared a strong sense of belongingness. In contrast, someone who was not a member of a community was looked upon with distrust and hostility. Usually, the other was perceived as an outsider or an intruder or an enemy and rarely, it connoted any positive attributes. The sense of belongingness among the Naga groups was so strong that to be ex-communicated from the community was considered the worst punishment. One would sadly become the other – untrustworthy and unworthy. Against the backdrop of the headhunting culture in the past, it is not difficult to understand why there existed a dialectic gap between the notions of the self and that of the other. It may be noted here with regard to the headhunting culture that the practice of taking heads was confined to the others only and never among the members of a village community. This strongly suggests the existence of an 'identity-gap' or 'value-gap' between the self and the others. By losing one's membership, one would be thus deprived of the resources and opportunities to define one's worth and meaning (Tinyi 2012a**).** It is a dreadful thing certainly anytime anywhere to deprive a person of such powers to define and assert one's worth and existence. However, understanding of the notion of the other is not simple in that there are different levels of selfing and othering. So we will spend some time to understand how this process works out at different levels in the traditional context of the Nagas.

Selfing and othering in the context of the Nagas

An interesting feature of the Naga people is that till the early period of the colonial

era, none of the present Naga groups had any ethno-tribal identity, like the Changs or the Chakhesangs. For instance, my paternal grandfather lived and died without knowing that he was a Chakhesang (Chakhesang tribe was formed and recognized only in 1946). Probably his father was not even aware of his Naga identity. He belonged to 19th century. A person's identity was generally tied to one's village.[6] By identity, I am referring to a socio-political group which involves some kind of head-count or membership. Being counted is a mark of inclusion and conversely, not-counted is a mark of exclusion in the context of an identity of a social group. Any identity outside the village was, as if a rule, associated with the clan identity which in turn is usually connected to the ancestral genealogy or narrative. Though a strong sense of bonding or belongingness involving taboos and norms are commonly associated with the clan identity, head-count was not generally carried out in this case.

A village is the soul of one's identity. Though one's identity could extend beyond one's village, clan identity for instance as pointed out above, nevertheless, a village was the primary identity for the Nagas. Even today, a person's identity is traced to a village. One's village is normally considered to be the basis of authenticating one's identity. In other words, the village identity travels with a person even if one is not born or lived in one's village. For instance, though I have hardly lived in my village, and stayed away from Nagaland for more than half of my life, I am still counted in my village.

We noted above that the worst kind of punishment that can be given to any member was to expel a dissident or an outlaw from the village. When a person is ex-communicated, she becomes the 'other'. This is the first kind of *othering* and we may call this other as the "*internal-other*". She loses her membership, her rights and her obligations and so on. Of course, in most cases, one can regain membership of the village after serving/paying the penalty. At times, the whole family or clan would also be asked to leave the village for violating certain norms. When Christianity reached the Naga soil and some embraced it initially, they were ex-communicated from the village. Such people lived in the vicinity of the village but barred from participating in any village festivals and events. However, they were informed and formed by the same worldview, values and norms, etc.

Outside the village but in relation to the village, we can identify different categories of the others. Any person who is not a member of a village but speaks the same language constitutes a kind of others; we may call it the "*neighbour-other*". Since a village functioned almost as an end itself like a state, there was no need to have inter-village events or activities with exception to some feasts or religious rituals.[7] The neighbour-others would be referred to by their village names. The others of this type generally share same or similar traditional practices, beliefs and norms including food habits and clothes.

Persons who are not members of a village and speak a different language constitute the third type of others, the *linguistic-other*. Linguistic-othering has become the basis of classification of Naga groups into various tribes during the colonial administration. It is at this level that we begin to see visible differences in terms of dress and other cultural practices, for instance, the visible differences between the Mao and the Konyak

Nagas. However, despite visible differences (though not in all cases, for instance, linguistic difference between the *Chokri* and the *Kheza-Khuza* speakers while sharing the same dress and other practices), the deeper structure of beliefs and values are essentially the same. There is no 'cultural opacity' amongst them. Almost the same yardstick would be employed to measure the worth of a person and her action. As such they normally understand and respect each other. At this level, a person's or group's identity would be defined in relation to the language she speaks. However, it is important to note that people would not organize themselves into linguistic groups for any socio-political purposes, not even for wars.

Next is the category of others which can be termed as the *external-other*. The basis of othering takes place at the deeper level of beliefs and values. By and large, there is no linguistic or cultural similarity. Social structure and religious practices also differ greatly. Practically, there is no cultural meeting point except the physical border though, for various reasons, there have been interactions with such groups. The *Meiteis* of Manipur and the *Ahoms* of Assam are examples of this category of others. They are different ethnic groups of people who lived in proximity with the Nagas. At this level, a different factor of othering takes place based on geographical location, namely, *the hills and the plains* or *the uplands and the lowlands*. The latter includes the valley of Manipur too. They are no longer referred to in terms of 'specific' or 'particular' names, like the Sumis or the Pochuris (speaking people). They are given a 'general' name like *Tüphremi* in Chokri or *Tsümar* in Ao. There is no cultural identification with this group of people though there was historical relation with them for various purposes like trade, conflicts or alliances.

Finally, we have what can be termed as the *alien-other* or the *unknown-other*. This last category of people has no historical or cultural or territorial (boundary) relation with the Nagas in the pre-modern past. Until modern colonial era, they were unknown to the Nagas. They are different in terms of race, ethnicity or religion. They are the intruders in the modern times, for instance, the White colonizers or the Indian occupational forces. It is this category of others who is responsible for disturbing the whole cultural fabrics of the Naga world and awakening the soul of Naga nationalism from its sleep. And so it is with this category of other, especially the Indian occupational forces (Indian-other for short), that we will be concerned with in the present work.
The list of others or othering is not exhaustive and not meant to be either. Even among the identified, the criteria of othering need not be taken seriously. For instance, the Indian-other is an over simplified for the sake conceptual structuring. Even within the Nagas, there are some who live in the plains of Assam and the valleys of Manipur but we have not categorized them. There are Kukis who are neighbors of the Nagas in the hills, plains and valleys and yet attempt is not made to categorize them. There may be better ways to conceptualize the notions of the self and the others. For instance, I am of the opinion that exploring the notion of "clan-identity" can be very illuminating. This may be an alternative to the tribal identity constructed by the colonizers and embraced by the Nagas.

Of course, the practice of selfing and othering is not unique to the Naga culture. Even in the larger Indian social context, the divide between the self and the other was

prevalent to the point of dehumanizing the other. Within the culture of Hinduism, for instance, the dynamics of socio-political relationship was determined by the identities of the self and the other based on "caste system" or "*varna* system". The social stratification was hierarchical in nature. Those outside the social structure were perceived as the other of the vulnerable type, commonly termed as 'outcastes' or 'untouchables'. In short, within this hierarchical culture, encounters with the others were not based on the principle of mutual respect or equality. This is not to generalize that mainstream Indian society is defined by the Hindu culture. It is more and definitely more complex. However, it is reasonable to believe that whoever lived within the mainland India, Hindus or non-Hindus, had lived with the awareness and influence of hierarchical relations based on identity. The Indian-other is constituted by such groups of people.

The violent encounter of the self and the other

Against the above mentioned backgrounds of the Indian society and the Nagas, what can we expect the encounter of the two? Anything but cordial. This is not a wild and baseless speculation. (Note that within this mainstream Hindu culture, Nagas are the vulnerable other and outside the social structure). There is abundance of hard historical facts to substantiate it: There is the infamous Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFPSA), infamous in that it is the very anti-thesis to the idea of modern democracy; the presence of military personnel and their camps in every nook and corner of the Naga inhabited areas; the unpleasant experiences of the Nagas with the neighbors – the others with 'untouchability attitude' – who embraced Hinduism. Besides, the fact that there are many among the present generations of Nagas who have not seen their grandparents because their lives had been cut short by the conflicts is yet another telling story. In short, the encounters of the two were characterized by violence, hostility and suspicion. It has been accompanied by "name-calling" or identity construction based on their pre-conceived notions of the other. The point of emphasis is that even before they met each other in conflict situation, they already had cultural resources to negatively label each other. It is natural to apply the inherited process of selfing and othering on encountering each other.[8] The fact that the modern humanitarian and democratic ideals and principles enshrined in the constitution were simply bypassed and instead passed dehumanizing laws and policies to deal with the Naga movement are simply an extended process of selfing and othering.

Given these background conditions, violent encounter is expected. What however made the relationship between the two in question more problematic is that it has taken a violent political turn. Violence is legitimized through laws in its most brutal forms. The initial cultural othering with such names as wild-uncivilized-tribals, head-hunters, beef eaters, dog-meat eaters, pork eaters, etc. have been baptized with new names such as separatists, secessionists, rebels, terrorists, blood-thirsty.[9] What went fundamentally wrong in the process is this: the practice of name-calling (a process of social identity construction) resulted in further violence and deeper distrust between the two. Earlier, I used the term "mad dog syndrome" to explain the use of undemocratic laws and forces by the Indian state to unleash various forms of

oppression and violence on the Nagas in the name of "law and order", for neutralizing or restraining the "mad dog" (Tinyi 2012b). As one would expect, this name-calling is not one-sided. Even the ordinary Naga folks started to perceive the Indian (para-) military forces with such labels as "aggressors", "imperialist/occupational force", "rapists", "shameless people", "cowards", etc. The Nagas see them as symbols or forces that are anti-thesis to the notions of democracy, security, peace or justice in their homeland.

How does one tackle a conflict situation such as this? The simplicity and directness of the solution, such as recognizing Naga's independence or wiping out the Naga movement by any means, is directly proportional to the difficulty of execution. There are many factors at stake – the question of human rights, the question of indigenous rights, the question of the sovereignty cum image of the Indian state, the question of international relations, the question of other ethnic groups in the NE with similar movements and of internal conflicts among them, etc. But then any other means in between these two alternatives are bound to get complex and challenging. The attempt of the Nagas to internationalize the Naga struggle or to opt for an arm struggle did not bear desirable fruit of late. On the other hand, "The Indian state has had a primary military response to the conflict in the North-east" (Nunthara 2005: 601). Needless to point out that this response failed to work in the Naga context. Various other measures and strategies such as economic and developmental packages, constitutional provision, political agreements and elections, etc. have been attempted without the desirable outcome of late. All this has made many thinkers, activists, public intellectuals and writers, etc. to seriously analyze the cause and nature of the conflict in the more recent times. One thing to note is that almost all the commentators on the Naga issue, including the Indian state, have recognized the futility of seeking military solution. On the cyclic futility of arm struggles and the use of military forces to tackle them in the NE, Barbora observes,

> Armed struggles in the north-east can therefore be seen as the artefacts of such a delegitimating process, whereby their causes are simply dismissed as deviant behaviour due to the fact that they employ violence to meet their ends. This creates conditions for the perpetuation of a politics of controlled disorder wherein armed intervention is the norm - an unending war of attrition - whose course is circumscribed by powerful military and political interests and where the state's legitimacy and monopoly over force is always suspect (Barbora 2006: 3809).

The same realization has dawned on the Naga public and various Naga political groups regarding arm struggle. This is a noteworthy progress. However, this is not enough in itself to solve the protracted Naga struggle. There is a need to find a framework within which differences can be addressed and peace can be negotiated, a theoretical framework of the meta-narrative kind that can even interpret "Framework Agreement" and "Agreed Position" mentioned above for a long term tangible solution. Not only does he offers insightful meta-narrative dissensus (perspectives/ reasons) for the Indo-Naga conflict, Hausing also suggests the possibility of exploring the idea of asymmetric federalism within the Indian constitutional framework itself to

resolve the Indo-Naga conflict (Hausing 2014).

"The religious identity of the Nagas, Christianity, also acts as a strong force for secessionism in this part of India" (Mukherjee 2014: 119). It may be noted that there is a general allegation on the part of the right-winged organizations, including political parties, in India that Naga movement was directly influenced by Christianity. There is a grain of truth in this but to take a partial truth to be the whole truth is a dangerous thing, more dangerous than that ignorance or mistaken beliefs at times. If one's identity is informed and shaped by certain religious culture, it is normal to see the same in others. Is there an attempt to reduce the Naga struggle into a larger ideological war, religious or otherwise? This angle is not ruled out though any attempt to address the conflict exclusively from such perspectives is bound to fail. Studies by Chara (2018) and Chophy (2021) direct their attention towards explaining the relation of Naga nationalism and Christianity and also to clarify misconceptions, possible or real, about the relation. In fact, the former argue that the Naga identity was a construction by the outsiders initially and that without Christianity, it is difficult to find the ideological fabric that unites and defines various Naga groups into one entity.[10] This is a relevant point of discussion in that it brings us back to the central focus of this paper – construction of identities for the self and the other. In what follows, attempt will be undertaken to explicate, analyze and apply the conceptual framework of Levinas.

Levinas' charge against the violent Self

Violence is not just what we do to harm ourselves or the others. It is deeper. Its ontological root is in the conception and pursuit of the self. He argues that the metaphysical discourse in the whole of western philosophical tradition is characterized by this logic: Essentializing the self by reducing the other to the self or *same* or by making the unfamiliar familiar (Levinas 1993). He argues that unless, the discourse in turned around in favor of the other, the problem of violence cannot be overcome. Levinas notes that the natural tendency of any creature is to strive to remain and preserve itself. Agreeing with this basic intuition of Levnias, April Capili observes that the same natural tendency is seen while trying to preserve ourselves and also to secure our basic needs, including our extravagant wants, at the expense of others (Capili 2006). We find ourselves being thrown in a world where everyone seems to be running after his or her personal interest, for self-realization. In our pursuits of life, we tend to use and manipulate things and other humans, wherein we become consciously or unconsciously a rampaging and ravaging force that not only possess and assimilate things but also exploit and inflict violence upon the others.

Violence can pick up one or the other form. It is therefore hardly limited to physical form. According to Levinas, it also consists in "interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action" (Levinas 1999b: 21). For him, anything that keeps anyone from becoming truly human is violence. Various forms of patriarchy or institutions of slavery, for instance, which denies the possibility of action for self-expression, be it ethical or aesthetic or spiritual, can be considered as violence of the more fundamental kind. Such a perspective on violence has immense implication on how dominant forces define roles for the others, especially the weaker

sections of the society. Levinas drives home the point that what primarily characterizes the self is violence and war, the inner tendency of which is to be. Human beings for the most part are thus "self-enclosed totalities" striving to fulfill themselves in and through various modes of existence.

Reading the self from this perspective has made him skeptical even towards Martin Heidegger's conception of the human being as *Dasein*. *Dasein* is essentially self-interested, the ultimate in relation to which the place and meaning of every other thing is determined. Levinas opines that it is through enjoyment, the use of and dependence on terrestrial things, that subjectivity emerges and thus gains independence and mastery over the world –"to be me though living in the other" (Levinas 1999b: 118). Capili employs an apt analogy to explain what has been termed by him as the centripetal movement of enjoyment, that is, the need to eat:

> Food is ingested, digested, and broken into elements that are then assimilated by the body; what cannot be assimilated is rejected and excreted. Food at first separate from me, becomes my energy, part of my body, but ultimately, my self. We see in this simple act of eating that what is not-I is assimilated and appropriated by the I. (Capili 2006: 702-703).

Unfortunately, this natural desire to realize the self therefore happens at the expense of the self-realization of the others. In other word, violence is rooted in our natural tendency to reduce or assimilate what is "other" to the "same"; it is grounded in the very manner in which we conceptualize our being; the face of being is the face of violence (Levinas 1999: 21). By way of critiquing the notion of the self, Levinas exposes the conditions that make war and violence possible. He argues that peace would be possible only when the self, the totality or the ultimate, is put into question. He thus challenges such an uncritical assumption in philosophy and put forth a strong argument in favor of the other, the other which we encounter in real life and that which resist being reduced to the same.

Levinas argues that this self-enclosed totality does not and cannot begin with itself. It always presupposes primordial openness to another. The self neither decides its original existence nor its name. One is thrown into this world. The self is given, not chosen. The fact of one's existence comes through the action or decision of others. As such, we owe everything that we have and are from the others. This fact of our existence is what is meant by being created according to Levinas. Despite this givenness or createdness of our being, each of us is enabled to become independent, separate and creative. However, when we encounter the face of the other, our autonomy is put into a halt: the face of the other commands and at the same time begs and we are put into a situation wherein we have to freely choose whether or not to give up our place and own up what he calls our *infinite responsibility* to the other. The experience of the other on encountering one may be described as follows:

> When I "see" the face of the other, I hear the command that does not really force and impose; in the face of the other person, I experience the resistance of what, in reality, has no resistance; I am in the face of an alterity that is irreducible to me, the otherness of the other that I certainly did not produce. (Capili 2006: 706).

Such an enigmatic experience suspends the totalizing tendency of the self, the I. It makes us to look up to that which is really beyond, infinite and irreducible. At that very instance, we are made to recognize the transcendence and heteronomy of the other. Even murder cannot take hold of this otherness. Consequently, the self as a rampaging and ravaging force is at once arrested, questioned and accused.

The infinite in the face of the other brings into question the freedom of the self, which is discovered to be murderous and usurpatory (Levinas 1999: 294). The experience of this epiphany in the face of the other is essentially ethical in nature, not just a perceptual encounter. The more we gaze on it, the less we see the face (the flesh, the color of the eyes, the shape of the nose, etc.). Emerging out of the trace, the moral "authority" of the face of the other is felt in one's "infinite responsibility" for the other (Levinas 1998: 74). When we encounter this face, a face in all its weakness and helplessness without any name or categories, we hear the ethical command: "Thou shall not kill"! Though it is possible to annihilate this face, one cannot do so without suffering bad conscience or guilt. "A face is a trace of itself, given over to my responsibility, but to which I am wanting and faulty. It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving" (Levinas 1974: 91). On the contrary, this face serves to "remind" the self of the original relation that it has with the other from whom it received its being, it is reminded of the original openness and relatedness to the other which cannot be reduced to the self. The face of the other has a 'trace' of the infinite and it attests to "the presence of the infinite" (Levinas 1993: 111). This makes the face of the other incomprehensible and exposes the self's usurpatory existence. When the self is confronted by the face of the other, it is given the opportunity to respond to the other on realizing the inescapable relatedness and an undeniable responsibility for the other. Levinas writes, "It is the responsibility for the creature that constitutes the "self". Responsibility for the creature, for that which the ego had not been the author. To be a "self" is to be responsible before having done anything" (Levinas 1996: 94).

Detotalizing the self for the possibility of peace

Despite attempts to keep his discourse outside the domain of theology, his major themes are loaded with theological tints such as trace, infinity, guilt, debt, etc. His conceptualization of the other which emerges out of the *illeity* – an external embodiment of the Self or God in this context – that one experiences debt and responsibility with utterly asymmetrical relationship: "I owe the Other everything, the Other owes me nothing". This notion of the trace is the heavy shadow of God, the God who commands, "Though Shalt not kill"! He observes: "the trace is not just one more word: it is the proximity of God in the countenance of my fellowman" (Levinas 1998: 57).

For Levinas, peace is not merely an economic, political or military problem, but an ethical one. It is not about successful management of conflicting interests. For him, it is much more. It is about realizing the fundamental relational proximity the self has with the other: "as awakeness to the precariousness of the other" (Levinas 1996: 97). In other words, real peace is possible by realizing this essential relationship we have with each other. It is about realizing the essential condition to be a human

person. It is forgetting this original relatedness in course of its quest for autonomy and identity that the self creates conditions of war and violence. For peace thus to be possible, we need to see the other persons beyond their context, that is, beyond race, color, origin, religion, language, etc. we need to "perceive men outside the situation in which they are placed, and let the human face shine in all its nudity" (Levinas 1999: 233). Echoing the view of Levinas, Capili writes, "One makes a step toward peace if and when one acknowledges, as an autonomous individual, one's original relatedness, one's givenness, and one's infinite responsibility to the other man" (Capili 2006: 711).

From Politics to Ethics – A plea

So what are we to take home from our reflection on the basic ideas of Levinas in the context of the Indo-Naga conflict? First, there is a need to address the conflict from a different level, from political to ethical, from the empirical conditions to conceptual pre-conditions. Political actions need to depend on something more fundamental for its justification. Trying to justify violent actions by certain fixed ideas of politics in the interest of the state have thus far failed to yield desirable result. The demand of a modern state is seen to perpetuate and justify violence. While the attempt of this study is not to criticize the state *per se*, it certainly attempts to show the limitation of a state. There is a need to see each other – the Nagas and the Indian state – with a human face, the face with an ethical obligation. The ethical obligation or responsibility in the present context is reciprocal. Without ethical responsibility, there is likelihood to escalate violence and problems in the process itself while negotiating peace or solution. Only at the ethical plane can both the entities hope to overcome the situatedness or giveness of politics, culture and history which perpetually divide the two. The usual practice of labelling people – the other – with stereotyped identity imageries need to be consciously checked and arrested. Instead, taking clue from Levinas, the two ought to see each other as having a human face, with or without the trace of the divine, and feel the ethical epiphany: "Thou shall not kill"! The face of the other should remind not only the ethical responsibility one has with the other but also that the pursuit of the self which inevitably leads to violence.

Being placed at an advantaged position, the Indian state should replace the mask of the non-human state by a human face in order to see the ultimate irreducibilty of the Nagas even against the possibility of the annihilation of the Nagas. The agenda of totalizing the self or homogenizing program to reduce the otherness into the same must make way in favor of co-existence and co-operation. The naked perception of each other with human faces ought to incite in each other a sense of "infinite responsibility" rather than seeing each other as self-seeking entities that threaten the pursuit of other's happiness. We need a human eye, the eye to see the self in the other, before we act. Right vision that enables us to see each other in our nakedness will surely expose the limitations of many things that offer themselves as a solution to end violence. Putting on this human eye may require us to deconstruct the violent self. However, if taken seriously, it is likely to influence the nature of peaceful dialogue between the two which in turn will deter further escalation of violence and then consequently pave the way for a long term desirable solution that is 'acceptable and

honorable'.

Towards such a proposition, the words of Levinas provide an inspirational direction: "To be a "self" is to be responsible before having done anything" (Levinas 1996: 94). Before doing anything, we got our identity the moment we are born into this world. We owe a sense of who we are to the others – we owe our existence to our biological parents, to our ancestors, to the community, nation, etc. In other words, our natural relation cannot be separated from ethical relation (responsibility). Certainly, this ethical responsibility is obscure in that it is not defined in relation to one's action. It is something which is not defined in relation to a specific action or person and so our ethical responsibility towards the others remains in so long as we live. This realization is fundamental in that it makes our choices and actions toward the others ethical and arrests the self from becoming violent.

The fact that we did not choose or earn our identity makes it a gift (no matter how good or bad) and we will have the responsibility to pass on this gift of identity to the generations after us. Irrespective of the conditions in which we got the gift, we have the power however to change the content and form of our gift to others. We can use the gift of identity to achieve noble things for the self and for the others as well. We can use it to stop the cycle of violence. Viewed from this relational dynamic of gifting, which in non-symmetric, the dialogues for peace ought to be defined and guided. Such an approach will paralyze any violent action or a conflict by removing the possible grounds of violence itself.

Concluding Remarks

By questioning the self, the self as "self-enclosed totalities" which seeks self-fulfillment in and through various modes of existence, I have tried to show, through the philosophical lens of Levinas, that the very manner in which the self has been conceptualized or uncritically assumed is essentially violent in nature. Therefore, there is a need not only to question the self but also to understand and define the self with a human face in relation to the other who also shares the human face. The face of the other is one that commands as well as begs ethical responsibility from the self. Can both the parties in conflict at hand assume alternative modes of existence that is not violent? I have discussed how the Levinasian model[11] explains the nature of the Indo-Naga conflict in a much deeper ontological level. This call to consider the model is neither to dismiss nor undermine the socio-empirical initiatives and the agencies of the state to seek conflict resolution. Rather, it is primarily an invitation to critically examine the self and the other before we adopt those measures for conflict resolution. The proposed model is not and cannot be limited to the Indo-Naga conflict resolution. It has rich resources to address violence of many forms. For instance, the Nagas being a conglomeration of different tribal groups can apply the same model for negotiation of peaceful co-existence. The internal tensions amongst the Naga groups due to inherited historical reasons or modern tribalism needs to find resolution at a much higher level. Likewise, if the Indian state is committed to resolving n-conflicts persisting and mushrooming in the NE, then it has to go beyond the existing policies, economic and developmental packages and agreements. Looking for pragmatic solutions, formal agreements, for instance, while insisting on the received as well as

modern conception of the self and the other, may serve only specific and temporary interests. Long term peaceful existence needs resolution at a deeper ethical and conceptual level; it must address the root cause of the problems and then move on to address related problems. Walter Fernandes rightly observes that the whole NE region should be treated as one and goes on to caution: "Dealing with one underground group at a time can only increase distrust between the ethnic communities of the region and make them feel that the centre is following a divide and rule policy in the region." (Fernandes 2004: 4611).

Although the Indian state has vast intellectual and cultural resources to understand and address the conflicts, it is unfortunate that it has chosen instead to use the violent techniques, ideologies and rationales of a modern state to either whitewash the conflicts as 'law and order problems' or violently oppress the vulnerable others at the periphery. No doubt, these modern approaches of the state are bound to show short-term results and yet they leave behind wounds that refuse to heal as proven by the Indo-Naga conflict, wounds that would trigger violent reactions at the slightest provocation. If enduring peace, not just absence of war or violence, is truly desired, then it is imperative that a more humane approach involving deep understanding of the self and the other as conceptualized by Levinas is a pre-requisite for negotiating and realizing it. "Only a sustained engagement with the issue, coupled with a heightened public perception of the complexity of ethnic relations within the region, can act as a catalyst for non-militaristic change in the existing system" (Barbora 2002: 1291). It demands responsible ethical action from not only the formal state agencies but also the intellectual and cultural resources within and without the state.

Notes

[1] In philosophical traditions, the self is usually defined in relation to an individual or the soul/mind of a person (transcendental ego) or the universal spirit or the absolute spiritual being (pure consciousness).

[2] Here by self, he is essentially referring to the individual self. However, the notion of the self is not limited to the individual. It refers to the collective identity also in that violence is not limited to the level of the individuals self. He was equally concerned with wars and the violence of the states as well.

[3] The term "Durable Disorder" is used by Sanjib Baruah in his work to describe the many unresolved conflicts in the NE. See his (2007): *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press)

[4] However, there are some who believe that the term 'Naga' is of native origin. For instance, it is said by some elders of Chokri speaking community of Chakhesang Naga tribe that the term 'Naga' is a derived from two words 'ni' (ear) and 'ga' (cut). This is justified in terms of the Naga traditional practice of piercing ears by both men and women. Hokishe Sema is of the opinion that the term 'Naga' referring to the present Naga groups existed even during the migratory period of the Nagas from Burma region. See his book (1986) *Emergence of Nagaland: Socio-Economic and Political Transformation and the Future,* Ghaziabad, Utter Pradesh, Vikas Publishing House, 27.

[5] In a strict sense, such a community or group would be limited to a village identity or a clan identity. Language identity or tribal identity is of recent origin following the

ethnographic studies of the Naga people during the British colonial era.

[6] This is similar among the Kukis, and perhaps many tribal societies in the region. For more details see Haokip 2017: ii.

[7] In some cases, a cluster of villages can share very strong religious and traditional bonding. In some other cases, a number of villages can come under the control of a powerful village chief. However, these are exceptions and not a norm.

[8] Such negative process of selfing-othering was absent or not explicit in the case of the Naga's encounter with the American missionaries and so it resulted in the subsequent conversion of the people to Christianity.

[9] For more details on the construction of self and other between the two involving name calling, see Tinyi, "What makes me a Naga?" and "The mad dog syndrome versus the messiah syndrome" in Paul Pimomo, et. al., (2012). It is not unusual to come across headings of academic papers or national dailies which use the terms "terrorist" or "terrorism" to characterize the Naga struggle though the Indian state itself refrains from using such terms in the recent time. For instance, the title of Archana Upadhyay's academic paper reads "Terrorism in the North-East: Linkages and Implications" (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, No. 48, pp. 4993-4999, 2006). Though the paper is meant to describe the whole conflict situations in the NE, and not an exclusive term for the Naga struggle, from the perspective of conflict resolution, the use of such a term will serve only to bring more animosity and deeper suspicion between the conflicting groups.

[10] Contrary to his position, we argue that if we look at the meta-narratives to explain the narratives and practices of various Naga groups, there is a way to re-interpret and re-construct an indigenous Naga identity from within. (See, Hewasa and Venusa Tinyi "(2010). "Who were we before we became the 'Nagas'?: Exploring the narrative discourse". In Zuchamo Yanthan, et. al., (Eds.) *Nagas Today: Indigenous Discourse*. Delhi: Naga Students' Union Delhi, 1-25.

[11] The concepts of the Self and the Other that I have employed here to propose a Levinasian model is to be treated metaphorically and symbolically. Such a treatment is not only consistent with the wider philosophical outlook of Levinas but will also enlarge our understanding of the concepts.

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