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### **The Power of Persuasion**

Hindutva, Christianity, and the discourse of religion and culture in Northeast India

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## **The Power of Persuasion: Hindutva, Christianity, and the discourse of religion and culture in Northeast India.<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract:

The paper will examine the intersection between Sangh Parivar activities, Christianity, and indigenous religions in relation to the state of Nagaland. I will argue that the discourse of 'religion and culture' is used strategically by Sangh Parivar activists to assimilate disparate tribal groups and to envision a Hindu nation. In particular, I will show how Sangh activists attempt to encapsulate Christianity within the larger territorial and civilisational space of Hindutva (Hinduness). In this process, the idea of Hindutva is visualised as a nationalist concept, not a theocratic or religious one (Cohen 2002: 26). I will argue that the boundaries between Hindutva as cultural nationalism and its religious underpinnings are usefully maintained in the context of Nagaland because they allow Sangh activists to reconstitute the limits of Christianity and incorporate it into Hindu civilisation on their own terms.

Keywords: Hindutva, Christianity, Religion, Culture, Nagaland, Hindu Nationalism

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<sup>1</sup> A draft of this paper was first presented at a workshop entitled "*Far From the Nation: Close to the State: Hazy Sovereignty and Anxious Citizenship in India's Northeast*", organised by Stanford University in March 2013. My thanks to Dolly Kikon and Thomas Blom Hansen for making it possible and for the participants for their engagement with this paper. Comments from Aya Ikegame, Jacob Copeman, Jeanne Openshaw and Gwilym Beckerlegge greatly improved the shape of this paper, alongside comments from anonymous reviewers and the editors of this journal. Finally, Lindsay Graham's probing eye and critical insight were vital, particularly when the paper flagged at phases during the conceptualisation and writing process.

## *Introduction*

The rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, sweeping to electoral victory in 2014, has changed the religious and political landscape of India in unprecedented ways. Headed by the charismatic Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, the party has galvanised their grassroots and middle class Indian support to the extent that Modi is now riding a wave of popular support, felt not only in India, but amongst Indian diaspora communities as well. However, things at home are far from perfect. The main challenge has been the BJP's links with right-wing Hindu organisations, under the umbrella of Sangh Parivar (family of associations), who continue to exert influence with their strong Hindu nationalism. They attract media attention through their attacks on Christians and their churches<sup>2</sup>; the controversy over Ghar Wapsi<sup>3</sup>; and the recent unrest in Jawaharlal Nehru University over the freedom of expression and the right to dissent.<sup>4</sup> While these overt forms of Hindu-right mobilisation are visible and discussed in the national media, there are many more subtle but nonetheless significant actions promoting Hindu nationalism in many parts of India. These remain largely unreported and under-researched. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap, and will examine the power of persuasion of the Hindu-right to demonstrate their serious engagement with Christianity and nationalism in the Northeast of India, using the example of Nagaland more specifically.

Centred on the language of 'religion and culture', the paper will examine the intersection between Sangh Parivar activities<sup>5</sup>, Christianity, and indigenous religions in relation to the state of Nagaland.<sup>6</sup> The Sangh Parivar are known as a family of associations organised around the core Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)

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<sup>2</sup> <http://Parivar.hindustantimes.com/india/2015-the-worst-year-for-christians-since-independence-study/story-WmObF2tsphJPVq2mqBDesK.html> (accessed 20th January 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Literally meaning "homecoming" to the original religion (i.e. Hinduism). It means re-conversion of Christians and Muslims, who were forcefully converted from Hinduism during the Muslim and colonial conquest: <http://Parivar.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/rss-open-to-reconversion-of-goan-catholics/article6732399.ece> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> January 2016).

<sup>4</sup> <http://Parivar.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/17/india-kanhaiya-kumar-watershed-freedom-intolerance-bjp-hindu> (accessed 24th February 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Where necessary I use Sangh Parivar throughout for some uniformity because there is much overlap between the different organisations such as the RSS, VHP, Kalyan Ashram, Seva Bharati, and Vidya Bharati in the Northeast. However, in specific instances I differentiate these groups and their ideology.

<sup>6</sup> 'Nagaland' here refers to the state and not the other Naga areas, but I acknowledge that these issues might resonate with Nagas outside the state. I use it simply to refer to my immediate fieldwork site.

principles to establish and promulgate the notion of Hindutva (or Hinduness), whose aim is to build a strong Hindu nation. It includes, for instance, the political (Bharatiya Janata Party-BJP) and the religious wing (Vishva Hindu Parishad – VHP). In Nagaland, the RSS works through an affiliate organisation known as Kalyan Ashram (welfare centre), registered officially in Nagaland as *Janjati Vikas Samiti* (tribal development society; see image 1).<sup>7</sup>

I will argue that the discourse of ‘religion and culture’ is used strategically by Sangh Parivar activists in the Northeast to assimilate disparate tribal groups and to envision a Hindu nation. In particular, I will show how Sangh activists attempt to encapsulate Christianity within the larger territorial and civilisational space of Hindutva (Hinduness). In this process, the idea of Hindutva is visualised as a nationalist concept, not a theocratic or religious one (Cohen 2002: 26). Yet, the issue of whether Hindutva is a nationalistic or a religious project remains ambiguous and unresolved (Sarkar 2012; van der veer 1994), particularly when overt Hindu religious groups like the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal are involved. However, I will argue that the boundaries between Hindutva as cultural nationalism and its religious underpinnings are usefully maintained by the Sangh Parivar in the context of Nagaland because they allow Sangh activists to simplify the situation by relegating Christianity as mere belief, ‘as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world’ (Asad 1993: 47). By deploying the language of belief, Sangh activists are able to reconstitute the limits of Christianity and incorporate it into Hindu civilisation on their own terms.<sup>8</sup> The Sangh version of Christianity can thus be encompassed with the civilisational and familial characteristic of Bharat (also Bharatavarsha).<sup>9</sup> Although this research focuses primarily on Nagaland, these ideas resonate regionally within Northeast India, and more generally in South and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>7</sup> *Janjati* is also spelt as *janajati* (but means the same) in some literature.

<sup>8</sup> For a similar process with regard to how the Hindu right relegate Indian Buddhism to the realm of belief and assimilated within Hindu civilization, see Cohen 2002.

<sup>9</sup> An idea drawn from the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* that refers to Bharatvarsh as the land of the Bharata clan, which includes the Indian subcontinent, parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, central Asia, South and Southeast Asia. So Bharatvarsh refers to someone belonging to the land of Bharat. This is used by the Sangh to refer to the vast expanse of Bharatvarsh that, in ancient times, encompassed the Northeast of India, and challenges the local version of history that argues that the Northeast had little connection with the modern geopolitical reality, India.

In order to tease out the implications of this tension over belonging, I will address two interrelated issues. First, I will present the work of the Sangh Parivar in the Northeast of India, which has grown in recent years. They believe that Christianity is challenging the territorial integrity of Bharatvarsh. This ‘challenge’ is regarded by the Sangh as territorial ‘secessionism’; their aim is to prevent it and unite the country. In this way, the Sangh disregards the geographical marginality of the Northeast – only 1% of its borders is with the rest of India. For many this marginality has meant that the region has been maligned and misunderstood, not least due to differences in culture, race, and religion.<sup>10</sup> Christianity, to a large extent, fills these gaps of insecurity; it has become a powerful marker of identity in the Northeast of India with large majorities in Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, the hill areas of Manipur, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

Next, I will assess certain implications of the relationship of Christianity with Sangh Parivar notions of what it means to be ‘Hindu/Indian’. I will explore how these notions enter into contemporary discourse through my work with the Sangh Parivar activists by highlighting two points.<sup>11</sup> First, to resist the spread of Christianity and to counter its suspicion of ‘Hindu’ groups, the Sangh is working closely with non-Christian indigenous religions in the region. Historical and mythological narratives are drawn from the epics such as the *Mahabharata* to illustrate their links with these indigenous groups, and to emphasise the composite territorial integrity of Bharat since time immemorial. The Sangh draws on the discourse of *sanatan dharma* (eternal religion and culture) to consolidate this unifying representation.

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<sup>10</sup> The recent racial attack and death of a student from Arunachal in Delhi has highlighted the daily abuse faced by Northeasterners in many parts of India. Ringo Pebam, a Northeastern from Bengaluru says, ‘North East people face insults, harassment, sexual harassment, physical violence and humiliation on a daily basis. People here know very little about North East people, our history, culture, food habits, languages; people don’t know that India is home to people of different races. We demand changes in school and college curricula to include information about North East so that all Indians are aware about us’ (Morung Express, 16<sup>th</sup> February, 2014: <http://Parivar.morungexpress.com/frontpage/111130.html>; accessed 17<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

<sup>11</sup> English was the main language used to conduct these interviews due to the prominence of the language over other national languages like Hindi. At times Hindi was used alongside the local dialect of Nagamese.

Second, to limit its cultural force, the Sangh characterise Christianity solely as ‘the profession of belief’ precisely to be able to encompass it within the broader spatial domain of Bharat. In this context, I will examine the ethnographic construction of a ‘Christian Hindu’. I will illustrate how the Sangh develop this construction by examining the broader tension between locality and religious allegiance, and by following this Sangh territorial logic: just like Christianity that demands exclusive religious allegiance, so do the Nagas demand exclusive territorial independence. Once this allegiance is recomposed to its more inclusive ‘Hindu’ ideology, integration, and not secessionism, will be achieved. In order to understand the context in which these ideas have developed, it is important to sketch a brief history of Northeast India.

#### *Geographical and cultural differences?*

‘Periphery of the periphery on the road to nowhere’ is how one commentator describes the Northeast of India (Verghese 1997). But this description is relative: in strict territorial terms, it is not a cul-de-sac but the connective tissue that links South and Southeast Asia, both geographically and culturally. From the perspective of the Indian nation-state, this region is a geographical anomaly - it is tenuously connected to the rest of India by a ‘chicken neck’ corridor, around 40 km strip between Bangladesh and Nepal.

The Northeast of India comprises of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.<sup>12</sup> It is largely a mountainous region that borders with five nation-states: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China and Nepal, and an area with a mosaic of ethnic, religious and linguistic constellations – a ‘mountain Babel’ – that has historically opposed any centralised state authority (Myint-U 2011:79; see also Scott 2009). Due to the Indo-China war of 1962<sup>13</sup>, the porous international borders, and the demands of sovereignty by many of its indigenous populations, there has been concentrated military presence in the area.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sikkim, once a sovereign Himalayan Kingdom, became a part of India in 1973 and included, in official usage from 2003, as part of Northeast India. For this paper, however, I exclude Sikkim from my analysis of Northeast India.

<sup>13</sup> The Indo-China war centred on border dispute over the Aksai Chin region (between Kashmir and Tibet) and Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India. China wants India to recognise the Aksai Chin region as Chinese territory in return for Chinese recognition of

While its geography – between Indic and East and Southeast Asia – has eluded integration into the larger Indian national self, its racial and cultural differences have also weakened political association. Historically, the region was never a part of the large empires of the sub-continent and it was only due to British advances into Assam during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that it was administered by British India. A seasoned British administrator Robert Reid, who was the Governor of Assam (1937-42), addresses this issue with characteristic aplomb. Speaking of the borderland regions between Northeast India and Burma known then as the ‘Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of Assam’, he says, ‘neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically have they any affinity with the people of the plains, or with the peoples of India proper. It is only by an historical accident and as a natural administrative convenience that they have been tacked on to an Indian province’ (Reid 1944: 19).<sup>15</sup>

The consequence of this ‘historical accident’ has been aggravated in contemporary times due to the region’s marginalisation from the Hindi speaking (dominated by North and Central India) bent of national thinking that accommodates the Dravidian reality of South India but has yet to appreciate the Southeast Asian characteristics of Northeast India (Verghese 1997: 281). However, parts of Northeast India have had shared characteristics with Indic culture, where in some areas, particularly in the valleys, it has been at home since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The dominant Hindu tradition is present in the Brahmaputra and Manipur valleys that first spread to Assam and then to Manipur in 1705 where it was adopted as a state religion. Unlike the valleys, hill states such as Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland are almost 90% Christian, which has substantial presence in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh as well. While Christianity has definitely provided these hill states with some distinct identity in contrast to the Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist groups, there is clearly a form of

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Arunachal as Indian. India, however, is unwilling to compromise on both issues (see Lintner 1990; Maxwell 1971).

<sup>14</sup> Some well-known national movements are the different Naga nationalist groups such as the Naga National Council (NNC), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) based in Manipur.

<sup>15</sup> Here Reid excludes the Brahmaputra valleys of Assam and Manipur from this borderland area and is concerned primarily with the tribes of the hills. His classification works for administrative purposes, but in practical terms, the binary between plains-hills cause considerable problems especially when both spatial orbits are inhabited by either groups (my thanks to Sanjib Baruah for this point).

resistance developing even in cases where Hindu traditions have had greater influence. For instance, in the valley area of the Meiteis in Manipur, they are refusing to be recognised as ‘Hindus’ and are reviving their pre-Hindu religions (see Parratts 1999). These movements can be seen as resistance to the hegemony of the Indian heartland represented by Hinduism, and tied in with the long drawn out military conflict that has encouraged an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality on both sides (Parratt 2005: 1-3). In speaking about this sense of alienation and misunderstanding of the heritage of Northeast India, one commentator notes:

Deep in the Indian psyche lies the belief, lately encouraged by obscurantist political groups, that Bharat is really Aryavrata, or the Hindi heartland, and that outlying districts which do not conform to its manners, customs, language and religion are colonial possessions, and must be ruled as such until they can be absorbed in a superior code (Sanajaoba 1988: 22).

These views are not anachronistic biases; they continue to remain large in the public imagination in Northeast India, exacerbated by the militarisation of the region and coupled with the numerous human rights abuses that the 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) enables, with its unprecedented powers to stop, search and shoot to kill as necessary. Not only has the AFSPA fuelled mistrust and disdain of the Indian military and the Indian state, but in many parts of the Northeast Christianity has become a powerful symbol of resistance that provides alternative avenues of belonging. This is particularly true amongst the Nagas.

#### *Hindutva: the Northeast gap?*

While the work of the Sangh Parivar has received considerable scholarly attention elsewhere in India (Hansen 1999, Jaffrelot 1998, Ludden 1996, McKean 1996, van der Veer 1994), its presence in Northeast India (Kanungo 2011, 2012), not to mention Nagaland, has been neglected (see Longkumer 2010). The reason for this is because Northeast India has been fiercely hostile to the ideology of Hindutva (Kanungo 2011: 91) due to the relatively large Christian population. When the RSS and the VHP launched a programme of reconversion of tribals from Christianity in the 1990s, it was met with equally fervent retaliation in the Northeast. Rev V. K. Nuh, secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Convention (NBCC) said: ‘We will not remain silent



spectators to any forceful conversion plans'.<sup>16</sup> Competing openly with Christianity in the region, which is better organised and has more personnel on the ground, is an unrealistic aim of the Sangh.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this is why the work of Hindutva in recent years has shifted its focus from more explicit forms of nationalist mobilisation to more daily and imperceptible forms of cultural penetration (Berti, Jaoul and Kanungo 2011), primarily with non-Christian indigenous groups.

In Northeast India, this sort of cultural infiltration and placation has been gradual since their work began in the 1960s. The Northeast of India for the Sangh is seen as an extremely sensitive border area that is exposed, according to them, to 'refugees, immigrants or infiltrators', mainly from Bangladesh (Mall 2012). According to them, the Chinese claims to Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, coupled with Westernisation (read Christianity) is encouraging isolationism and separatism that is cultivating an attitude that 'they [the people of the Northeast] are not children of Mother India' (Parameswaranji 1996). To protect and preserve the territorial unity of India, it is said, the Ramakrishna Mission (RM) started its operation in 1964 in Arunachal Pradesh followed by Vivekananda Kendra (VK) in 1977. Their focus was on education. VK now runs around 30 schools and has already surpassed RM in resources and numbers, and also runs a research centre known as the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC) that documents the indigenous traditions of the region. The RSS regularly runs *shakhas* (ritual gatherings), all over Arunachal Pradesh with considerable numbers in attendance, making it a strong centre for the activities of Hindutva in the region (Kanungo 2011). In other states, the VHP opened a hostel for 'tribal' children in Haflong, Assam in 1965 while the Kalyan Ashram started working amongst the Nagas in 1975. Haflong is now the headquarters of the VHP's Northeastern 'service' projects, which are assisted by groups such as the Kalyan Ashram, Vivekananda Kendra, Seva Bharati, and Vidya Bharati.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Church-Sangh Parivar are daggers drawn in northeast' (Rediff on the net, November 20, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Although Christianity, according to the 2001 census, is only 2.3 % (approximately 24 million) of the Indian population, the main areas of Christian influence are in the Southern regions of India (Kerala and Goa) and in hill regions of Northeast India amongst the Khasis, Nagas and Mizos, who comprise almost 60% of the Christian population of India. Exact statistical numbers are not broken down in these regions of influence to corroborate these claims.

While there are historical differences between these various groups - for instance the more 'spiritually oriented service organisation' of the Vivekananda Kendra and the Ramakrishna Mission, and the more overt political form of Hinduism of the RSS (Beckerlegge 2003) - they are nevertheless affiliates and cooperate on numerous issues, particularly when it comes to sharing resources such as education, hosting events, festivals for *janjatis*, and publications. However, it is the RSS and the Kalyan Ashram who have been active in emphasising the ideology of Hindutva in the Northeast. The adaptability of Hindutva is visible in Northeast India where they have worked in various locations and with different 'tribal' communities.<sup>18</sup>

### *Who is Hindu?*

In the Northeast of India, Hindu activities are driven by the ideological discourse of Hindutva (Hinduness). It has its genealogy in V.D. Savarkar, a prominent writer and political activist, representing the unique cultural essence of the people inhabiting the land of India: 'Hindu' comprises of nation (*rashtra*), race (*jati*) and civilisation (*sanskriti*) (Savarkar 2005: 101). Although Hindutva is seen as a secular, cultural identity, Savarkar falls into a paradox of both claiming and resisting 'the identity between faith and a community defined by its faith' (Sarkar 2012: 264) that he himself (and his successor the RSS and their affiliations with overt religious groups such as the VHP and the Bajrang Dal) is unable to resolve.

Savarkar argues that a 'Hindu' is someone who inhabits a territory (land between the Indus and the Seas), acknowledges the genealogy ('fatherland' or patrimonial inheritance) and the religious 'holyland' (2005: 110-13). In this sense, argues Tanika Sarkar, Hindutva paradoxically conjoins 'nation with faith, and, in the same move, makes the land of India the property, in a literal sense, of Hindus alone...' (2012: 279). While the aforementioned criteria includes the Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, other 'non-Hindu' religions like the Christians, Muslims, Jews and Parsis can only meet the first two because India is not their 'holyland' (Varshney 1993: 231). This is of course linked with the politics of indigeneity: only those religions

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<sup>18</sup> It is extremely difficult to map all the activity of the Sangh in Northeast India due to its variegated and dispersed nature, not least because of their covert operations in Christian dominated areas. Scale, numbers and organisation are therefore difficult to estimate.

that have their origins within India are legitimate ‘Indian religions’. Those that do not are ‘foreign’ and therefore not ‘Indian’.<sup>19</sup>

Although there are common ideological links for the Kalyan Ashram workers with this RSS construction of a ‘Hindu’ nation, the context with regard to the Northeast and Nagaland is very different. To take the example of Nagaland, we can note this difference is because: (1) It is a Christian dominated state with strong nationalist movements aligned with Christianity; (2) Naga identity has been defined negatively against an ‘Indian/Hindu’ one; and (3) the Nagas have never seen themselves as belonging within the Indian union. Even if we compare the experiences of Christians in different parts of India, there are divergences in view not least because some Christians (Dalit Christians in this case) see themselves as firstly ‘Indian’ and then ‘Christian’ regardless of regional identities because ‘they are the children of the soil as much as any Hindu’ (Kappen 1992: 150).<sup>20</sup> Christianity, therefore, is an important ideological system for the Nagas of Nagaland to the extent that many Nagas that I interacted with see Hindutva clearly as a threat to their national identity.

#### *Christianity and ‘making’ identities*

The prominence of Christianity amongst the Nagas cannot be underestimated. According to the 2011 religious census data, the Nagas of Nagaland comprise of roughly 88% Christian, dominated by the Baptists, and followed by the Roman Catholics, Revivalists, and other evangelical denominations.<sup>21</sup> The predominance of Christianity provides a significant marker of difference between the Northeast and the rest of India. But why is this history of difference so marked? Part of the reason has

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<sup>19</sup> The term ‘indigenous’ and the rights associated with it is a very complex discussion, which I allude to briefly here: for the Hindutva it means all those whose religions were born on Indian soil (Sundar 2002: 374). For the *janjati*, employing the UN declaration of indigenous people’s rights, it means cultural distinctiveness against the onslaught of ‘foreign’ forces and enabling them to ‘preserve their religion, philosophy, culture and national heritage’ (Kamei 2002b: 5). For the Naga Christians, it means ‘self-determination’ and sovereignty.

<sup>20</sup> Discussions on this are varied. Some, in particular, were keen to adopt a ‘Hindu-Catholic’ identity that synthesizes ‘Hindu’ notions of ethnicity and Catholic notions of ‘sacramental rebirth’ – or in other words, the physical and mental composition is ‘Hindu’ but the immortal soul is Catholic (Kim 2005: 111; see also Mosse 1994). A different view is represented by Dalit Christians who advocate a ‘Dalit Christian’ worldview. There is hesitancy from Dalit Christians to buy into a ‘Christian Hindu’ view because of the past where ‘Brahmanical Christianity’ was advocated (a combination of Vedic texts and Christian belief), which did not have space for Dalits (Jeremiah 2012).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/nagaland.html> (accessed 30th May 2016)

to do with the turbulent socio-political climate experienced at the hands of the Indian military, who are often viewed as ‘Hindu’ occupiers, and the political uncertainty that has preoccupied them since Indian independence in 1947. During the early nationalistic activities of the Naga National Council (NNC) in the 1950s, the high-handedness of the Indian military, keen to enforce the might of the GOI in suppressing any demand for Naga independence, used disproportionate military force against a public they rarely understood (see Iralu 2000). Living in a social and political reality where the Nagas were controlled, disciplined, and humiliated by the Indian military, Christianity not only provided a powerful identity, but also became a symbol of resistance (Nuh 2007: 102-03).

Nari Rustomji, a Government advisor, addressed some of these concerns during his time in the frontier regions of India. Notwithstanding the fact that Christianity is enmeshed as a cultural identity, he argues that for the Nagas Christianity has also mobilised a political identity to resist a ‘Hindu’ assault. In 1959 when the Nagas wanted to broadcast Christian messages via radio, many of his Government colleagues in Assam were uneasy. This was due to rumours that the Naga Hills district of Assam wanted to use Christianity as a buffer against ‘Hindu’ cultural and religious dominance in the plains of Assam. Some even wondered if the adoption of Christianity would give rise to foreign allegiances, such as with America (Rustomji 1983: 63-64). This kind of critique is central to RSS rhetoric which can be traced back even to the second RSS chief Golwalkar’s tirade against Christian missionaries for encouraging secessionism and fomenting Naga independence (Golwalkar 2000: 236-237). Nevertheless, Rustomji suggested that the Nagas do not feel they belong to India when they travel outside the region, due to the stereotyping and harassment they face in the hands of the ‘Indian’ public through mistaken identity (even by officialdom). In many instances, they are considered Chinese, or Vietnamese but not ‘Indian’ (1983: 31). Moreover, many Sangh activists see the advocacy of Christianity in Nagaland (and the Northeast of India) as a political tool aimed at undermining Indian authority (see Buamik 2004).

This concern with being undermined was prevalent in the early years of Indian independence and at the height of the struggle for Naga independence represented by

the NNC formed in 1946.<sup>22</sup> In the 1950s, for instance, local Christian missionaries were barred from working amongst some Konyak Naga areas by the Indian Government. These areas were under the jurisdiction of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which went on to form the state of Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Nagaland. Propagation of Christianity in this area became such a contested issue that one of the pastors of Longkoi, a village in NEFA, was allegedly killed by the Indian military because he breached the status quo by being involved in mission activity. The justification given by the Base Superintendent of Champang, K.C. Gogoi, apparently was that ‘It is Hindu Raj, no preachers will be allowed to come to villages in my area’ (Rao 1986: 44).

Even Jawaharlal Nehru, widely regarded as a staunch secularist, took heed, according to Paul Pimomo (2012), of the views such as those presented by a Mahasabha (a right wing Hindu nationalist party) activist in Tuensang in the erstwhile NEFA. In his letter to Nehru, Bhuddeshwar Gohain, the activist, wrote about the proliferation of Christian activities and their ties with the foreigners of the American Baptist Mission. Condemning such activities, he implores Nehru to ‘check and replace the Christian culture immediately with a national culture’ even if it means from the barrel of a gun (Pimomo 2012: 132). When pressed in parliament on the use of force in the Naga Hills in 1956, Nehru reasoned that part of the intervention was to protect non-Naga ‘teachers’ and government officials (Mao 1992: 51; Pimomo 2012: 132). Indeed, Sarvepalli Gopal, Nehru’s biographer, suggests it was likely Delhi held the view that an alliance between foreign missionaries and the Nagas could explain the motivating factor for Naga independence (1979, Vol 2: 207).<sup>23</sup> Nehru was perhaps concerned by the growing signs of American influence, particularly in the Himalayan region where

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<sup>22</sup> The fight for Naga independence continues unabated to this day represented by different factions that have their origins in the NNC – the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 and its subsequent split in 1988 between Isak/Muivah and Khaplang. Although their ideologies vary (for the NNC the demand is complete independence from India, for the NSCN-Isak/Muivah it is territorial sovereignty and integration of all Naga inhabited areas in India and Burma) their insistence on Naga self-determination remains central (see Vashum 2000).

<sup>23</sup> There are reports of the Governor of Assam (who also had jurisdiction over the Naga Hills) interviewing two American missionaries (Delano and Truxton) about the role of the church in encouraging the work of the NNC. The Governor was particularly worried by the flyers circulated by the NNC to mark the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1953 as Naga Independence Day in their churches (see Activities of the NNC, 1953 (nos. 33): Nagaland State Archives, Kohima).

Nepal's ties with America caused some anxiety (Pimomo 2012: 135). This notion of foreign intervention through Christianity is striking in both aspects of Indian nationalism – that of the territorial integrity of India (Nehru's concern) and the political commitment to Hinduism (Hindutva's concern) (Varshney 1993: 228). And in this, oddly, both Nehru's concerns and those of the Hindutva seem to align.

There is a common, though not always coherent, thread that runs between the everyday performance of Christianity and its political aspects; the various Naga nationalist movements use slogans such as 'Nagaland for Christ' to emphasise and legitimise their Christian credentials. The NNC even promulgated the article adopted in 1958 of the Constitution of the Federal General of Nagaland that states that 'Nagaland shall be the kingdom of Christ'. This was later dropped in the 1965 constitution – 'Protestant Christianity and Naga religion shall be the religion of Nagaland' – to accommodate those religions outwith Christianity (particularly the non-Christian Zeliangrong Heraka movement headed by Rani Gaidinliu and sections of the Konyak Nagas) (Kamei 2004: 213). Christianity, therefore, is a vital concern with regard to the Nagas and Nagaland. While it is precisely this 'foreignness' of Christianity that has enabled the Nagas to articulate a sense of difference and belonging, the activities of the Sangh and the manner in which they articulate their 'history' and its connection to the Northeast, attempts to invert the dominance of Christianity in the region. In the process, the ideology of Hindutva provides alternative notions of what it means to be 'Indian'.

#### *Unity in Diversity: Serving the nation*

'Namaste Arko-ji', a familiar welcome greets me. Jagdish walks up the steps in a busy street corner in the capital town of Nagaland, Kohima.<sup>24</sup> The evening winter chill descends. It is December, the traditional festive Christmas season in Nagaland, when offices shut early, schools go on an extended Christmas holiday, and plans are made to travel to ancestral villages for Christmas feasts and gatherings. The evening is particularly busy as people mill around the city centre shopping for goods, eating food from street vendors or meeting friends. The colour of bright Christmas lights

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<sup>24</sup> All individual names are pseudonyms. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, Nagamese and some Hindi. Jagdish spoke in fluent English, and inflected with the local pidgin Nagamese for particular effect.

dotted everywhere by bamboo constructions of the Star of David, wrapped in red cellophane paper, glow like neon lights. I have known Jagdish – who has lived in Nagaland since 1975 as an RSS *pracharak* (full time worker) from Gorakhpur (in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh) – since 2005 when I first met him at the Annual Heraka Conference in Jalukie, a district in the Southwest of Nagaland. He was there attending the conference to accompany various Sangh Parivar delegates who provide support to the Heraka, an indigenous religious movement.

We order coffee from a nearby street vendor and converse. Amidst the sea of people, Jagdish stands out: his white Indian lungi and a khadi shawl, and his *sikha*, a tuft of hair on the back of his shaven hair, half covered by his shawl. These visible sartorial and ritual markers and his choice of welcome and gesture, are part and parcel of, he insists, his Bharatiya (Indian) identity that resists the normative ‘western’ aesthetic preference in Nagaland. A preference that, he continues, is annihilating indigenous cultures, and therefore is vital to protect and preserve using the discourse of religion and culture that connects with ‘Hindu’ civilisation. It is this ideational discourse that is vital to organisations like the Kalyan Ashram active in Nagaland, and resonates with the narratives of the RSS. As a prolegomenon to answering my question ‘what is national identity?’ Jagdish offers a common response in English that will be repeated many times in conversations with Kalyan Ashram workers:

Hindu means those who are following indigenous faith, eternal religion and culture (*sanatan dharma*). They are taken as a Hindu. Hindu means – every way of life originated from the son of the soil, having different way of worship, having different name of god – all included into a Hindu faith. Hindu is a way of life; it is not a way of worship. Christianity and Islam are a way of worship. Hindu is a conglomeration of different forms of worship, a conglomeration of different philosophies. In that way Angami people or every Naga or everybody who is not Christian not Mussalman [Muslim] are Hindu.

This explanation is a common one offered by many Sangh activists that I have spoken to, repeated in other contexts in the Northeast, particularly to assimilate ‘tribal people’ and their outlook with Hindu civilisation (see Bhide 2004). Sustained by the logic that the Nagas have misunderstood, and are suspicious of, the Hindus, organisations

like the Kalyan Ashram provide other avenues to explore how these gaps can be lessened. In emphasising the common ‘Hindu’ identity that is beyond mere ‘worship’, the goal of the Kalyan Ashram is to stress that ‘Nagas are our blood brothers’ and by extension part of this Hindu orbit that is familial, territorial and civilizational. This strategy is significant in this context. In my conversations with Sangh activists, they never refer to Hinduism (or even the word) as religion, precisely because they want to foreground the idea that Hinduism is more than internalised belief (or worship). It is ‘social, political, economic, and familial in nature’ and can encompass India (the secular state) into India (the Hindu homeland) (Cohen 2002: 27).

The Kalyan Ashram are part of the larger national Akhil Bhartiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA), started in 1952 by Ramakant Keshav Deshpande.<sup>25</sup> It is part of the Sangh Parivar that is comprised of various ‘Hindu’ nationalists having some sort of familiarity or association with the RSS. It focuses on Hinduisng tribals by integrating them into national life and fighting Christian conversion.<sup>26</sup> In Nagaland, Kalyan Ashram began its work in 1975 and was later registered as *Janjati Vikas Samiti*. It has a tiny working office in Dimapur, Nagaland, where, on the many occasions I visited, they had at least four full time staff made up of non-Christian Nagas and several RSS volunteers from outside Nagaland. It also has a number of interlocutors, mainly non-Christian leaders, intellectuals and organisers, from different Naga communities who are called upon to officiate at important functions, inaugurate various Kalyan Ashram events, and even advertise their work in all-India gatherings. Jagdish, my main RSS informant, is central to the work of the Kalyan Ashram in Nagaland. He is not only an indefatigable organiser but also author of several tracts, pamphlets and a regular contributor to local papers and *The Organiser*, the official RSS magazine. He coordinates the different educational programmes that are funded by the Kalyan Ashram.

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<sup>25</sup> A Kalyan Ashram worker suggested that the term *vanvasi* (jungle dweller) is now slightly old-fashioned, so instead they prefer *janjati*. However, *janjati* and *vanvasi* are used interchangeably to assert certain ideological positions. *Jan* (literally people) and *jati* (birth group) was translated to me as *jan* (common) and *jati* (race). *Janjati* therefore could also mean tribal community in the context of Nagaland and in its larger manifestation as ‘a common race’ with other communities in Bharatvarsh.

<sup>26</sup> <http://vka.org.in> (accessed 23/02/2013)



Ramesh, another senior organiser, overseeing the organisation in 2006, told me that Kalyan Ashram is a non-governmental, non-political, socio-cultural voluntary organisation. Its aim, in this respect, is to help *vanvasi* (here he meant tribals – Christians and non-Christians) to gain a foothold for themselves: by empowering the people to fight and preserve their own traditions and cultures. Only the *vanvasi* people, he said, can do this; we can only support them structurally. By structurally he means: to help them establish schools, organise meetings, and introduce them to the wider network of organisational benefits. Not only do they provide finance and resources to various non-Christian organisations in Nagaland and Northeast India through their charitable works, they also run schools and hostels, help publish various magazines such as *Naga Dawn*, and contribute pieces in the monthly *Heritage Explorer* (see image 2). Along with other Sangh affiliates, they organised the first *Janajati Faith and Culture Protection Forum* in 2002 (Guwahati in Assam was the venue) that brought together many non-Christian indigenous traditions of Northeast India under one banner, along with various conferences and workshops (images 1 & 3).

Their primary aim is to establish a sense of national unity and to share in the cultural resources of Bharat. In my many conversations with Kalyan Ashram workers, preserving tradition against foreign invasion seems to be at the forefront of their work in Nagaland. They particularly narrate a version of history that pits the Nagas against foreign rulers, especially the British, and later the Christian missionaries, and extols the worthiness of rejecting ‘foreign powers’, that have broader resonances with Hindutva strategizing, here, for example, with Islam. In the words of the historian Partha Chatterjee:

The idea of the singularity of national history has inevitably led to a single source of Indian tradition, viz. ancient Hindu civilization. Islam here is either the history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life. The classical heritage of Islam remains external to Indian history (1993: 113).

*Resisting foreign forces as the mark of national identity*

Kalyan Ashram’s version of Naga history begins with the British conquest of Angami villages of Khonoma, Mezoma and Kekrima in 1878, and their resistance. To

demonstrate this, Jagdish highlights how the Chang Naga community in Eastern Nagaland, and then the Zeliangrong people in the South, fought against British expeditions. Particular mention is made of a Rongmei Naga leader Jadonang, hanged by the British in Imphal (Manipur) in 29<sup>th</sup> August 1931 for sedition by proclaiming a ‘Naga Raj’ that would oust the British, and then the imprisonment of his successor, Gaidinliu, in 1934. Why? Here is the crucial bit according to Jagdish: ‘They [Jadonang and Gaidinliu] said that our indigenous faiths are ours, we don’t like any foreigner’s religions’. The Kalyan Ashram’s reasoning goes something like this: the resistance demonstrated by the Angami, Chang, and especially Jadonang and Gaidinliu, represents the true spirit of the Nagas, not those exhibited by the Christianised Nagas who formed the Naga club in 1918, the first articulation of a Naga political identity.<sup>27</sup> This club, Kalyan Ashram assert, only divided and cultivated mutual suspicion between the Nagas themselves and between the Nagas and ‘Hindu/Indians’.

In contrast, the Sangh laud leaders like Jadonang and Gaidinliu because they vehemently opposed Christian conversion in their native areas. They reformed their indigenous religion to deal with the onslaught of Christianity and colonialism on their own terms (see Kamei 2004; Longkumer 2010). The Sangh have integrated the actions of Jadonang and Gaidinliu into their history to encompass them into the larger Indian national struggle for independence (see image 3). They point particularly to Jadonang’s knowledge and admiration of Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement (Mukherjee et al 1982: 67-96); and Nehru’s respect for Gaidinliu (calling her the Ranee or Queen of the Nagas) as he rallied for her release from prison in 1947; and her subsequent close relationship with the Indian Government.<sup>28</sup> The figure of Rani Gaidinliu in particular has become the dominant image of Northeast India amongst the Hindu-right. Although beyond the scope of this paper to recount all the ways her image has been used (see Longkumer 2010), as a point of departure I provide a few examples. The celebration of Gaidinliu’s birth centenary in 2015 all over the country

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<sup>27</sup> The Naga club was formed in 1918 by a group of mission school educated Nagas, who were mainly teachers, government officials, village elders and pastors – products of the colonial and missionary schools. They would later go on to form the NNC.

<sup>28</sup> Gaidinliu indeed saw herself as goddess Durga, following in the tradition of Devi or even Bharat mata. For her, separating from the great ‘Indian Nation’ was nothing but madness (Longkumer 2010: 180-84).

demonstrates this newly acquired status, with a special event held in New Delhi with the Prime Minister, Finance and the Home Ministers in attendance, when previously many in India would not have heard of her, and even in Nagaland she was not universally known.<sup>29</sup> In my many conversations with Sangh activists, her name and story came up frequently as providing the example that Nagas should emulate, instead of Christian nationalists like Phizo, the first leader of the NNC. The Prime Minister has also indicated that Gaidinliu's image will be embossed on a coin, along with public institutions in Nagaland being named after her – such as the Airport, a Central University and even a Museum in Kohima (Longkumer 2015).

The Kalyan Ashram point out that, unlike their Christian counterparts, Jadonang and Gaidinliu located their resistance within the prophetic tradition of their people and utilised the cultural resources available to them (Thomas 2012). Jadonang and Gaidinliu's activities (now called the Heraka movement) would become an ideal platform for the Sangh to make the Heraka a Naga cultural and religious movement against the foreign invasion of Christianity. It (1) made the Heraka and other related indigenous traditions a conglomerate of the larger 'Hindu' constellation through exemplifying the acts of their leaders as 'freedom fighters' and incorporating them into the larger pantheon of national martyrs (see image 4) and (2) they have been framed under the rubric of the tribal history of India seeking to revive their indigenous faith and culture: a culture and tradition that has marked similarities with 'Hindu' practices.

However, Christianity remains an integral part of Naga identity if for no other reason than the large numbers calling themselves Christian – and this is problematic for the Kalyan Ashram narrative, as we have outlined it so far. It is very difficult for the Sangh to argue against Christianity as being integral to the people's identity. Unable to dismiss Christianity completely, how do the Sangh argue for territorial integrity given the 'foreignness' of Christianity? The Sangh argue that Christianity brought about a separation between 'religion' and 'culture'. Using this argument, the Sangh relegate Christianity to a cognitive sphere of belief ('religion'). Given that it is 'mere belief', this enables the Sangh to suggest that Christianity is removed from what it

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.narendramodi.in/pm-inaugurates-birth-centenary-celebrations-of-rani-gaidinliu-282577> (accessed 30th May 2016).

means to be a nation and it is, in fact, Hindutva that provides the material, social and religious landscape in which to situate one's belonging. Let us consider for a moment how the Sangh explain the separation between 'religion' and 'culture' that Christianity brought about.

*Religion and culture in conversation*

Jagdish explains:

Culture is religion in action. Culture is just like soul and body. Culture and religion are inseparable – they are two sides of the same coin. When Christianity came, with planning, they tried to separate culture with religion. And that is why wherever Christianity went, culture automatically died. And a separate culture developed which is based on hedonic consumerism, free from spirituality.

Christianity has long been associated with creating an ineluctable split between 'religion' and 'culture' in a variety of contexts (Asad 1993; Dumont 1971; Keane 2007). Indeed, in much of the colonised world, separate conceptual categories such as religion, culture, law, and politics, familiar to the Euro-Americans, did not exist. Creating anew these categories in the local context meant that sorting out what is 'religion' from 'culture' became a task fraught with difficulty for early Euro-Americans, and subsequently for the local people.

Early missionaries in the Naga Hills, for example, from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century made a clear distinction between Christianity ('true religion') and ancestral custom ('false religion'). Ancestral custom – such as drinking rice-beer, animal sacrifice, venerating ancestors, headtaking – was anathema to any Christian progress; such practices had to be discouraged, the missionaries believed, amongst new converts. But Christianity, the missionaries realised, also needed to be relevant within the local culture to be effective. Therefore, they gradually and painstakingly distinguished between 'local culture' (these included language, food, festivals, songs and poetry, albeit purified) from 'pre-Christian religion' (spirits, gods, shaman, divination, priest, sacrifice, rice-beer, omens). A similar process was unfolding in mission fields across the world, and here is Webb Keane's analysis of this in Sumba, Indonesia:

‘...those who advocated the localization of Christianity had a reason to seek out differences between religion and culture. But in doing so, they risked participating in the purification process that had contributed to secularization in the West, by confining religion to a distinct sphere apart from other domains of social life...’ (2007: 106).

Reflecting on the work of the missionaries, the anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who worked in the then Naga Hills, praises the ‘secular’ aspects of Naga culture such as dress, ornaments, feasts of merit, rice-beer and so on, which he claims (mistakenly) are not inherently connected with religion. He argues that those ‘secular’ activities would actually have complemented Naga Christianity had it not been for the excessive and puritanical ideas of early American missionaries (1976). Similarly, Robert Reid notes that:

The rather iconoclastic zeal of the earlier missionaries who saw evil in anything that savoured of heathenism has in modern times given way, to the great advantage of all, to a more sensible policy, which is prepared to preserve all that is good in old custom so long as it is not inconsistent with Christian teaching (Reid 1944: 22).

Both von Fürer-Haimendorf and Reid are interpreting ‘culture’ as a semantically neutral activity that is largely separated from ‘religion’. Christianity, in both their cases, is treated as an objective, inner activity that can co-exist with some aspects of the outer domain of culture, as long as the latter does not clash with the former. Jagdish’s narrative, in some respects, resonates with these intellectual debates.

For him, Christianity is primarily belief oriented ‘worship’, for it is disentangled from the realm of ‘culture’, and is thus separating foreign beliefs (Christianity) from locality (Naga culture). For the Sangh it is highly significant that Christianity severed links with the Naga past. This renders Christianity ineffective and spurious – it is only a cognitive exercise – because it has no socio-political relevance in Bharat. Due to the strong disconnection of Christianity from culture, it leads to disenchantment (or hedonistic consumerism), a definitive feature, as the Sangh see it, of secular modernity. To halt this ‘disenchantment’, and to stop the further secularisation of Naga culture, lest its roots are lost, the Kalyan Ashram propose two solutions. The

Kalyan Ashram suggest that to preserve the coeval nature of both religion and culture in the Naga context requires: (1) a return to one's eternal religion and culture; and (2) to remember that Naga ancestors were all Hindu. But what are the criteria for making this claim of 'Hindu-ness'?

### *Civilisational links*

Although the Kalyan Ashram use the power of persuasion to argue that 'Hindu' as a nationalistic and civilisational identity that has little to do with 'worship' in the above sense, the term 'Hindu', for many Christian Nagas, has negative connotations. This presents a problem for the Kalyan Ashram. 'Hindu' is a false religion for it worships 'idols', and venerates nature, which in Christian terms is 'demonic' because this gives agency to those forces instead of exclusive allegiance to one God. However, the Sangh, while upholding the idea of Christianity as foreign, suggest that this is a misunderstanding of 'Hindu' and one given by 19<sup>th</sup> century Christians.

The Kalyan Ashram in particular claim that precisely because the Nagas worshipped the sun and moon, sacrificed to ancestors, deities, and spirits, and venerated the natural world – they are 'Hindu'. 'Refer to any texts on pre-Christian Naga "animist" practices and you will find an affinity with Hindu culture', asserted one Kalyan Ashram worker. Indeed, the Sangh regularly evoke the idea of 'tribals' and 'Hindus' worshipping nature. One of the VK activists, Ankush, offered this explanation:

Tribals also worship the sun, moon, and trees. In that sense there is a common identity. I consider tribals as a part of Hinduism. Because of their innocence, they are being separated.

Indeed early accounts of the Ao Nagas, for instance, also mention that for the Aos 'the sun and moon are regarded as deities, and are occasionally worshipped, as are also the spirits officials and ancestors' (Clark 1907: 57). In fact, even the early American missionary Edward Winter Clark equated the polyvalence of the Ao Naga deity Tsüngrem to the Hindu deity Ram (cited in Ao 1994: 26). These equivalences have powerful resonances for the Kalyan Ashram through the discourse of *sanatan dharma*, defined by them as 'indigenous faith, eternal religion and culture'. For them, *sanatan dharma* is treated as a way of life and not a particular way of worship. The term *sanatan dharma* captures this 'Hindu' discourse of national unity (see also

McKean 1996: 82-84). The use of *sanatan dharma* by the Sangh is not new but has historical precedents that are widespread throughout the Indian scriptural tradition (Dimitrova 2007: 90). However, it is also important to note that *sanatan dharma* has been differently constructed at different periods, and for different purposes, and by different people, suggesting that it is less than ‘eternal’ (Dalmia 1997).

Various Kalyan Ashram workers assert that *sanatan dharma* is the ‘soul’ of the nation - it is the eternal and natural way of life, related to nature worship, perhaps to connect with the different *janjatis* of India, who are often depicted as ‘noble savages’. A familiar American interlocutor for the VHP, Stephen Knapp, notes how the traditions of Northeast India are connected to the Indian and Vedic heritage. Speaking of non-Christian tribals such as the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak in Manipur, he comments that because they still worship the Sun and Moon as their primary deities, ‘they are a tributary of the great river, Sanatana-dharma, that flows through the universe’.<sup>30</sup> At the centre of this debate is the relationship of the *janjatis* of Northeast India to ‘mother earth’, or India as mother (*maa* or *Bharat mata*; see image 4). Notice this injunction from Jagdish as he attempts to link ‘faith’ in Bharat with one’s history and culture that is exemplified by the notion of *Bharat mata*.

And everybody having faith in *Bharat mata*, having a regard for Bharatiya history, and pilgrim places, they are all taken as a patriot. If I regard Phizo and Aliba Imti [past NNC presidents] as my own forefather, then you should also regard my bhagwan Ram as your own forefather. This Tsüngrem [Ao Naga high god], if I take as one of the gods, we accept that you will have the same regard for our gods. No clashes, you go on your own way, I go on my own way. Same river leads to the same ocean. So similarly, through your Tsüngremong and Moatsü festival [Ao Naga festivals] Sekrenyi and Ukepenopfü [Angami Naga festival and deity], Tuluni [Sema Naga festival] and all these lead to the same god. So that is the Indian/Vedic philosophy.

The power of these ancient symbols such as *Bharat mata* and their link with anthropomorphic representations of ‘mother earth’ evokes the ‘body-cosmos’ (Eck

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<sup>30</sup> ‘The work we did in the Northeast’: [http://Parivar.stephen-knapp.com/my\\_northeast\\_india\\_mission.htm](http://Parivar.stephen-knapp.com/my_northeast_india_mission.htm) (accessed 19/02/2014).

1999: 33; see also Ramaswamy 2001) of India's sacred landscape as tangible and relatable. L. Khimun, a Tangsa Naga from Arunachal Pradesh and the General Secretary of the indigenous *Rangfraa Faith Promotion Society*, suggests this line of thought: since the *janjatis* are jungle dwellers, they are closest to nature through their dependence on the forest for their livelihood; because of this they are 'spiritual' in a sense that they are as 'sacred' and 'pure' as 'mother earth'; due to this relationship they worship her (Khimun 2012: 14). Similarly, according to L. Khimun, 'Hindus' worship the elements of the earth (fire, water, air and sun) and thus revere 'mother earth' – often depicted as goddess Kali maa. These similarities make the Hindus, like the *janjatis*, also indigenous. Here 'mother earth' is the ideal representation of *sanatan dharma* in the whole of Bharat (Khimun 2012: 20).

These points should not be dismissed as trivial, since they act as significant pointers for 'Hindu' nationalists towards civilisational connections. In other words, these common practices are the unifying forces that link the Nagas with Bharat – and its land is also tied with holy places like 'Somnath, Meenakshipuram, Kanchi, Nasik, Ayodhya, Mathura, Kashi, Haridwar, Rishikesh...and Kailash Mansarovar etc.' (Brahma 2006: 77). By employing the spatial metaphor of 'sacred geography', the Kalyan Ashram suggest that the Nagas (and Northeast India) are part and parcel of this ancient Vedic tradition, linked with stories even in the *Mahabharata*. For instance, the Kalyan Ashram emphasise the story that Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, married a Naga princess, Ulupi, and Chitrangada, a Manipuri princess. They regularly cite other examples of characters from Northeast India - Krishna married Rukmini from Arunachal, a Mishmi girl, Bhim married one Dimasa girl Hidimbi – and places such as Malinithan in Arunachal Pradesh are linked to the mythology of Goddess Parvati (Kanungo 2011: 103). These are highlighted to solidify the link with Bharat, or Bharatvarsh (based on the Bharata clan).<sup>31</sup> Thus the

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<sup>31</sup> These Vedic references are ambiguous to say the least. According to an Indologist Naomi Appleton (personal communication), while Chitrangada is recognised as one of Arjuna's wives, and Rukmini as Krishna's wife, the geographical references to these characters are vague. It is also unclear if 'Naga' is referring to a snake, snake deity or the ethnic Naga group. Other characters mentioned are equally difficult to trace. Ulupi, for instance was a Naga (snake) princess, who abducted Arjuna, as he spent the years of exile wandering the earth in search of divine weapons (in preparation for the big war). Hidimbi was a *rakshasi* (demoness) who married Bhim after she met him in their forest exile. The point is that what



Sangh effectively rely on the epic *Mahabharata* as a means of indigenising its links with Bharatiya/Hindu culture. Bharat (=India) is used as an ideological tool to exclude, particularly the Muslims, who are treated in nationalist history as invaders, aggressive murderers, and plunderers (van der Veer 1994).

In the case of the Christians in Nagaland such exclusions cannot be so easily polarized with Sangh activists hesitant to exclude the Nagas, even in light of their Christianity, because they are keen to maintain broader civilisational links with the Nagas in response to the Nagas' own preference for exclusion from India. Therefore, some distinction between 'Nagas' and 'Christianity' must be maintained if the Sangh is to have any success in responding to the Nagas' indifference to the national unity of Bharat. How is this process achieved? What does this do to the larger project of Hindutva in Nagaland? Can non-Hindus be part of India? The simple answer is yes, but only by assimilation and acceptance of the territorial sovereignty of Bharat. I was told that if Christians accept this principle then they are 'Christian Hindu' (the criteria is different for Muslims [see Varshney 1993: 231; Bakhle 2010: 168-174]). This criterion of territorial sovereignty is particularly significant in the Naga case due to its Naga nationalist demands for their own sovereignty. But how does one become a 'Christian Hindu'?

#### *Making Christians Hindu?*

As already discussed, members of the Kalyan Ashram argue that Christianity is solely a 'religion' that imports alien 'worship', concerned primarily with immaterial beliefs, and that it gives rise to a separate, and inauthentic, Naga culture based on 'hedonistic consumerism, free from spirituality'. By making this separation, the Kalyan Ashram are able to say to the Nagas that the 'soul' of any nation are those 'authentic' practices and ideas (pre-Christian Naga high gods, customs, material culture, and festivals). It is these, the Kalyan Ashram claim, made the Nagas 'Naga' and part of the land and Hindu in the first place. Once the Nagas recognise this it will enable them, according to the Kalyan Ashram, to be more nationalistic, instead of anti-national and divisive.

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is represented as positive civilisational links can also be interpreted as arbitrary and negative, though largely elided on the ground.

While it is undeniable that it will be impossible for the Sangh to dislodge the prominence of Christianity for the Nagas, what is interesting is the fact that the Kalyan Ashram are suggesting an alternative scenario that replaces Western culture (or hedonistic consumerism) with 'Naga/Hindu' culture. Christianity as mere 'worship' must accommodate the material reality of what it means to be Naga/Hindu. This Naga/Hindu culture with its reverence for 'mother earth', closeness to nature, customs and so on, can accommodate Christianity – because it is mere belief – and in the long term make Christians 'Naga Hindu'..

The polemic by Jagdish reiterates the issue:

Bharatiya culture came into clash with Christianity and Islam. Because exclusively they said only Jesus, only Bible, only church. And no salvation out of the church; Muslims said out of Quran and masjid no salvation. We said, no, Jesus Christ is also one of the gods. Muhammad is also one of the prophets, one of the incarnations of god. We accept them as gods, but Christians reject us; clash comes there. But integration also comes here. That you will feel part and parcel of Bharatvarsh [land of Bharat]; Bharatvarsh is a land of yours; Nagaland is mine and Delhi is yours; whole country belongs to you, whole country belongs to me. So, you should say that I'm a Bharatiya; I'm an Indian. At the same time, when you are following your own faith, that is an integral part and parcel of Hindu faith. So that emotional culture is our motto: Nagas should also say that I'm an Indian.

The dogmatic orthodoxy of Christianity and Islam is contrasted with the fluid heterodoxy and orthopraxy of the Hindus, which can encompass the many strands of these sectarian religious truths within the stream of Hindutva as a civilisation. On a practical level this sort of negotiation – between belief and practice – was narrated to me by Jagdish. He gave an example of five Konyak Christian Naga girls who were sponsored by the Kalyan Ashram to live in a hostel in Gorakhpur, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. These girls were refusing to participate in the morning prayer rituals because they were warned by their parents not to partake in satanic pujas (*shaitan laga puja do nokoribi*). Their refusal was later explained to Jagdish:

[the girls said] ‘...our father said that we shouldn’t do any satanic pujas – if we do it is sin and we will go to hell. So how can I pray; this is not Christian prayer. Then I [Jagdish] said: “I’m a Hindu but I go to the church, read the Bible, and have dozens of biblical literature. By going to the mandir, you don’t become Hindu, by going to a particular puja, you are not going to get *pap* (sin). When you are at home, pray to Jesus Christ, when you come here, follow this practice”.

This narrative provides a good example of the Kalyan Ashram’s argument about the flexibility and inclusive nature of what it means to be ‘Hindu’ as opposed to sectarian religions that produce exclusive religious truths. Sectarianism, for the Kalyan Ashram, is therefore antithetical to the spirit of national citizenship embodied by being ‘Hindu’. In arguing that Hindutva is civilisation itself, and using the discourse of religion, it can be seen both as ‘a religion and not a religion’ (Thal 2002) because of the irresolute tension that exists between it as cultural nationalism and a community defined by its faith. In Nagaland, however, it makes sense for the Sangh to privilege the civilisational link. Therefore, Sangh activists in Nagaland claim that sectarian religions give agency to leaders (Jesus Christ and Mohammad), books (Bible and Quran) and specific places of worship (church and mosque), while ‘Hindu’ is an acknowledgement of the physical reality itself (nature) or *sanatan dharma*. It is co-extensive with the body politic of *Bharat mata* that realises the power of deities that exist naturally in the world, instead of divisive gods who require exclusive allegiance (Thal 2002: 108). Thus ‘Hindu’ is not a religion but civilisation itself; its performance is now a patriotic duty and indicator of national citizenship. This is the reason why Khimun, as I narrated earlier, makes reference to ‘mother earth’, precisely to naturalise land and deity. The only way to express one’s genuine national identity is to return to the territorial and civilisational roots of one’s land and nature.

Therefore the post-Enlightenment notion of ‘religion’, as belief, can have strategic uses for proponents of Hindutva. The difficulty with Nagaland, as I have already explained, is that they do not fall into the neat Sangh nationalistic paradigm of indigeneity, because unlike other Indian Christians I have discussed, belonging within India is precisely what the Nagas object to and therefore resist the ‘Indian’ tag. So the Sangh are confronted with a double task: how do they persuade the Nagas that like

the Hindus they are also are rooted to the land? And, how do they convince the Nagas that this rootedness to the land is part of ‘mother India’, as this is precisely what the Nagas are contesting for over 60 years?

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, I have examined the way in which the Sangh Parivar makes claims to the civilisational discourse of religion and culture to emphasise the civilisational links, particularly with those who do not feel that they belong in Bharat. They persuasively maintain that national behaviour unites people, rather than individual and sectarian worship that causes conflict. But how does one deal with a religious tradition that is practised in vast numbers without excluding them from Bharat? Christianity for the Sangh then is represented as mere belief, or of the heart, that can be incorporated into the broader ‘Hindu’ national self, which provides the material and social landscape in which to situate one’s belonging. The material dimension of being ‘Hindu’ does not mean that one becomes a religious ‘Hindu’ from another region of India, it simply emphasises that ‘Hindu’ is the physical acknowledgement of reality itself. Therefore, in a way, Sangh activists demand a different kind of Christianity – one that is not divisive, is in touch with its pre-Christian roots, and one that celebrates the performance of (ancestral) identity as patriotic duty. The Nagas, they reason, already have the similarities of religious practice with those of the ‘Hindu’ due to the pre-Christian ‘animist’ worldviews that have been abandoned by many. The Kalyan Ashram promote a return to this pre-Christian worldview, partly because the most effective way to confront Christianity, as secessionist, in Nagaland is through the integrating principle of religion and culture.

For Naga Christians, however, Christianity has become so intertwined in their national identity. It is not only a culture of belief but a way to foist a political identity upon the territorial uniqueness and independence of Nagaland. Nagas, in different ways, use this idea to construct a viable rhetoric of belonging. The Christian Nagas recognise their link with the land and nature as a basis of their national belonging to resist exactly what the Sangh activists are trying to claim. In a sense, what it means to be Christian and Hindu are interdependent in a context marred by suspicion, distrust, and conflict borne out of a turbulent and tempestuous history. These perceptions are what fuel the broader discourse of national identity and

belonging in places like Nagaland and other parts of the Northeast. Though never explicitly stated by the Sangh, Hindutva activities are a form of cultural placation that utilises the tools of appropriation to shape a vision of what it means to be 'Hindu'. It is clear that they are mimicking the very Christian missionary activities they are fighting, to great effect, and promoting a dual strategy of 'stigmatisation and emulation' (Jaffrelot 1999: 6): opening schools and providing various structural and economic support to draw people into the 'Hindu' fold. Negotiating with Christianity in the Northeast is therefore a sensitive and complicated task that has the potential to complicate matters because of the vitriolic rhetoric and activities that occur in many parts of India between certain Sangh activists and 'tribal' Christians (see Froerer 2007). The rise of the BJP as a force to reckon with and the activities of the Hindu-right will continue to generate attention and debate in the media, and in spaces that escape such scrutiny. As this paper has suggested, central to the very idea of India is the way religion and its relationship with national identity continues to permeate any discussions about how the future of India is envisioned.

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### Images

Image 1: the official brochure of the Kalyan Ashram in Nagaland.

Image 2: The magazine depicting the loss of culture through the theme 'Save the Ancestral Roots'.

Image 3: the image produced by the Kalyan Ashram highlights the different national leaders (both tribal/non-tribal). Jadonang is in the centre and Gaidinliu directly above him.

Image 4: the image of *Bharat mata* with the various 'tribal' leaders surrounding her.