



# NAGALAND

A Journey to India's  
Forgotten Frontier

Jonathan Glancey

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JONATHAN GLANCEY



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‘People should develop along the lines of their own genius and the imposition of alien values should be avoided.’

Jawaharlal Nehru

‘The worst sin against our fellow human beings is not to hate them but to be indifferent toward them; that is the essence of man’s inhumanity to man.’

George Bernard Shaw

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While acknowledging new names for cities and countries, I have in most instances used, for clarity's sake, those best known over the centuries to Nagas, Indians, Burmese and British alike.



## Introduction

Landlocked, and largely inaccessible to foreigners, Nagaland is one of the youngest and certainly the most hidden state of modern India. Cut off from the rest of the world at the eastern hem of the Himalayas, it is home to nearly two million people from some sixteen Tibetan-Burmese tribes who have been fighting a remote and rarely reported war for independence from India, on and off, since the early 1950s. The fighting continues sporadically, skirmishes between rival independence movements and against Indian armed forces undermining fragile treaties while tourists, some apparently unaware of the struggle being fought around them, continue to enjoy the more peaceful areas of the state.

Nagaland is tucked into the far north-eastern corner of India. It borders the states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh and, across an international frontier, the Union of Myanmar, once known as Burma. But up to a further two million Nagas live outside the state's borders. For many of them Nagaland, which has existed as a state only since 1963, is an Indian fabrication that fails to recognise their nationhood: a fragmentation of their natural homeland by politically expedient boundaries. What Naga independence movements and guerrilla armies have been fighting for over several decades is the dream of 'Nagalim', or a Greater Nagaland, an independent country that would unite all the tribes in a land of their own. As this book hopes to explain, their dream remains just that, and may do for many generations to come.

Here is a remarkable place – Shangri-La through a glass darkly – a people, and a war without end, largely unheard of outside the Indian subcontinent, and not much known even within it. Nagaland is a place of stunning beauty, a once-flourishing secret garden blighted by war and effectively cordoned off from the rest of the world. More than 200,000 people have died here in seven decades of brutal conflict while its political masters, despite numerous short-lived peace settlements over the years, maintain a heavy-duty military presence in the region. The Nagas, however, remain unwilling to settle for anything less than a much greater degree of freedom than the government of India is ever likely to sanction.

I had wanted to visit this high and haunting land since I was a small boy. My father, Clifford George Glancey, a child of the Raj born in Lahore, and my grandfather, George Alexander Glancey, an Anglo-Irish Indian Army general, knew Nagaland well. It was then the partly unexplored Naga Hills district of Assam, the great tea-growing region, where my uncle Reg, a future Eighth Army officer, was a planter. He spoke fondly of the Naga people. They were, he said, headhunters. But they were also hospitable, loyal, brave and passionately fond of music, dancing, hunting and extravagant costumes. They lived in remote regions of lush hills and valleys patrolled by tigers, and across the Burmese border in self-governing highland villages.

My father returned to the region with the RAF in 1944, when Commonwealth forces and Naga warriors loyal to the British drove the Japanese back from the Indian border to Burma and the tropical seas. The Japanese had hoped to reach Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Delhi through the Naga Hills. Had they done so, they would have broken the back of colonial India and of the British Empire itself.

My father said I would enjoy a trek to Burma from India through Assam and the Naga Hills. This, tricky enough in his day, is more easily said than done in mine. For many years Nagaland has remained a dream destination, much as Kafiristan

had been for Brothers Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan, Freemasons and soldiers of fortune, in Kipling's 'The Man Who Would Be King', a short story that I read over and over again as a boy. In 1975 it was made into an equally enjoyable and compelling film, directed by John Huston and starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine, renewing my enthusiasm for some unknown, mythical Asian world beyond established frontiers.

What few written references I came across to Nagaland as a boy were, however, hardly encouraging. I remember buying a second-hand paperback copy of H. E. Bates's *The Jacaranda Tree* at a time when this author was best known for his frightfully English novels *Love for Lydia* and *The Darling Buds of May*, but not for the stories he wrote as 'Flying Officer X' for the RAF during the Second World War. Bates developed one of these into *The Jacaranda Tree*, published in 1949. It tells the story of English settlers in Burma making a tragic escape to India with the Japanese army in hot pursuit. Led by Paterson, manager of a rice mill, their route would take them north . . . through Naga territory:

The hills might be tough, but he knew the road, if you could call it a road, for about a hundred and twenty miles north-westward, roughly in the direction of Naga country, but beyond that he did not know it and there were few who did. He could only guess what lay there. Soon the scraped-out terraces of blistered rice-field would give way to the wretched fields where nothing grew but the thinnest sesasum and millet where in harvest the flocks of raiding paroquets were like hordes of banana-green locusts ravaging the seed. It had always been a country of continual exodus up there: a wandering from place to place by thin cattle, lean men, sore-eyed children, women with faces of teak-wood, an endless search for the hills' less bitter places. And soon all that would go, to be replaced by the folded parallels of forested rock, basaltic, bitter, waterless, like hills of iron veiled with minutest

cracks of sand scorched to whiteness by the long dry season, mockingly like rivers between the great sunless towers of forest and bamboo . . . It was not the things that lay behind that troubled him . . . but the things that lay in front of him. If he feared anything at all it was that the road might die up there, somewhere in the high jungle, between the foothills where they now were and the far tea country of Assam.

Bates's Paterson and his fellow escapees are left at the end of the book as they cross a bridge into these darkly haunting hills, although not before they have encountered at least a few Nagas on the way, written off here as 'the eaters of opium, the head-hunters', forever squatting, spitting chewed betel nut and waiting silently for nothing.

Undeterred by this hardly enticing advertisement, in time I got to Nagaland, and have returned several times since, not always in possession of the correct visas, yet with good grace and in hock to no party, faction, media, military or business interest. I have trekked through its eleven districts – Dimapur, Kiphire, Kohima, Longleng, Mokokchung, Mon, Peren, Phek, Tuensang, Wokha and Zunheboto. I have crossed the high and slippery eastern and southern mountain borders into Burma, where the eastern Nagas live in a world that has changed little since my grandfather's day, or even for centuries before that. Sometimes it has been a very cold place to be, at others baking hot or, all too often, sopping wet. Walking in Nagaland is rarely easy, and walking is usually the only way to travel in the saw-toothed Naga Hills, though the flora and wildlife, hunted to near extinction in parts, have provided ample and very beautiful reward. I have seen leopards and elephants on hilltops. I have watched and listened in mute amazement to striped laughing thrushes and other stunning birds competing with the extraordinary nightingale-like songs of flying lizards. I have brushed my way through a wild proliferation of rhododendrons, orchids and bright mountain flowers while eating as many wild

cherries, mangoes and figs as I have been able to pick. And while the area has few conventional buildings of note, the state's natural architecture of densely crumpled and deep green landscapes crowned with traditional thatched hilltop villages remains imprinted and reprinted in my mind's eye. The Naga Hills have indeed been my secret garden.

The beauty of this mesmeric landscape is only the more haunting because of the sorry state of Nagaland's volatile politics. A tourist visa will grant access to the main approved visitor sites and nature reserves, and seeing them will be memorable experiences, yet, without understanding the story of the Nagas and their country, such trips are like travelling around England ignorant of the fact that it is a monarchy and the cradle of modern democracy, however imperfect.

The politics of Nagaland are arcane and understood by all too few people even in India, many of whom still look down on their 'primitive' countryfolk with a condescension that recalls the views of British imperialists a century and more ago. A report I watched on India's NDTV in October 2007 on the problem of Delhi's ever-increasing monkey population encouraged viewers to suggest what might be done with these cheeky, and sometimes aggressive, simians. 'They can be sent to Nagaland, where the local people have no problem dealing with monkeys: they will eat them,' was one suggestion. Presumably while swinging naked through the trees between bouts of headhunting.

My own experience of the Nagas is of open, friendly, funny and protective people, despite tribal differences and bloody rivalries between their well-armed guerrilla armies. No Naga has ever threatened me. Perhaps, I have been lucky; perhaps the place has been kind to someone who wanted to see it so much and who has no axe to grind. What I have learned, though, is that the story of Nagaland, all too rarely written, is as rich as it is uncertain and even baffling. This is a land of myths and an unfathomable ancient history, of deep valley shadows and long-buried secrets. Despite many changes of lifestyle here since the

British left the Naga Hills in 1947, the intense and even spiritual relationship between the Nagas and the mist-shrouded land they dream of being wholly theirs again one day is both compelling and tragic.

This is a small corner of the world. The stunningly beautiful Naga Hills are the backbone both of the state and of this book; at their greatest extent they cover an area about one hundred and fifty miles by seventy. The highest peak, Saramati, rises some 12,500ft above the precipitous valleys carved by the Dhansiri, Doyang, Dikhu, Milak, Zungki and Tizu rivers. Yet this geographically impractical landlocked hillscape has been fought over by some of the greatest military powers and the most formidable political regimes of the past century. Astonishingly, the story of Nagaland has touched the lives of families in the depths of rural England, Germany, Japan, China and the United States. When the British stepped foot here in the nineteenth century, they drew the eyes of the burgeoning imperial world to the blue-tinged Naga Hills – an area that, until then, had been isolated for hundreds of years.

The British first gazed out over this vertiginous, semi-tropical landscape in the 1820s when driving out the Burmese, who had been there since the thirteenth century. They found fierce ‘Stone Age’ peoples living according to the tenets of an age-old animist religion. Despite a nominal conversion of many lowland Nagas to Christianity, these highlanders were not ready to be pacified. In 1880 the British signed a treaty under which the Nagas allowed Indian Army bases to be set up in the hills; in return, Naga tribes retained many of their old freedoms. Civil and criminal administration remained in Naga hands in areas of no immediate interest to the British.

Nearly seventy years later, on the day before Nagaland was due to be incorporated into a newly independent India in 1947, the tribes declared their own independence. Although Mahatma Gandhi had given the Naga people his reluctant blessing to follow their own destiny, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first

prime minister, most certainly had not. Seven years of fruitless negotiation followed until, in 1954, India invaded with an army 100,000 strong. Tens of thousands of Nagas were herded into fifty-nine makeshift concentration camps, where many died either from starvation or after drinking contaminated water. A 'shoot to kill' order from Delhi caused the bloody deaths of countless Nagas, combatants and civilians alike.

In 1964 a ceasefire was announced, by which time Nagaland had been declared a state of India. Fighting soon broke out again, with atrocities committed on both sides. The conflict polarised political stances. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), a Maoist-Christian revolutionary force, was founded in 1980. Fighting for a socialist state, and for Jesus Christ, the NSCN has battled on, in various guises, against both the modern Indian Army and breakaway factions in its own ranks up to the present day.

Although increasingly represented in the wider world – there are many Naga doctors and university professors in North America as well as mainland India – all Nagas remain, at heart and in their bones, antipathetic to their powerful and hugely populated neighbour. Most Nagas certainly live very differently from those in the rest of India. Nagaland remains a rural state. More than four-fifths of the population lives in small, isolated villages. Built on the most prominent points along the ridges of the hills, green in the day, blue and then purple as the sun drops behind them, traditional villages remain stockaded with massive wooden gates approached by narrow, sunken paths, just as they were centuries ago. Even by Indian standards, Nagas are very poor: the official per capita income of Nagaland, although reliable figures are hard to come by, is something like £75 (\$120) a year, although those living in the most inaccessible valleys earn, if anything, considerably less.

And, however modern some Nagas might appear in the few towns worthy of the name, dressed in jeans, trainers and even high heels, and with mobile phones glued to their ears, tribal

loyalties bind them together with ties a first-time visitor would find hard to discern. Between them, Nagas speak at least seventeen distinct languages, including Angami, Ao, Chang, Konyak, Lhota, Sangtam, Sema and English. And, of course, there are countless dialects. What Nagas will not speak, except when careermongering or working in shops and the new service industries in Dimapur, the ramshackle border town that acts as the principal gateway to Nagaland, is Hindi, the official language of India. Away from the few main towns and despite a slow invasion by global capitalism, and even a visit by the television celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay in 2009, Naga culture remains remarkably intact.

Protected and largely left alone by the British, the Naga tribes had little or no inkling that theirs was to be the country through which the Japanese Imperial Army would try to hack on its supposedly triumphal way to Calcutta, and what Tokyo believed would be the fall of the Raj in 1944. Nor would they have imagined that the communist Chinese would threaten to come this way less than twenty years later in their war with India. By default, this isolated corner of the world, inhabited by tribes whose way of life had changed remarkably little over hundreds of years, became an unlikely hub of international ambition, an improbable junction of global importance.

To me, this is one of the most extraordinary things about Nagaland. Some of the greatest political ructions and military campaigns within living memory took place here in jungles and valleys thousands of miles from the mechanised capitals of Great Britain, Italy, Germany and Japan. In my story we will meet a host of characters to whom the Naga Hills would have meant precisely nothing until political ambitions, Eastern and Western, became the stuff of global strategies and rainforest tactics.

Because Nagaland became such a slippery meeting point of global powers between the 1940s and 1970s, the Indian government has tried to keep the tightest of grips on this, its geographic Achilles heel. The tricky thing, though, is that the



Naga tribes want as little to do with India as possible. Sixty years on, independence is still little more than a dream, and the fight for the Naga Hills and for Nagalim continues, together with its attendant atrocities. (I narrowly missed being blown up myself one day walking through the Hong Kong market alongside Dimapur Junction.)

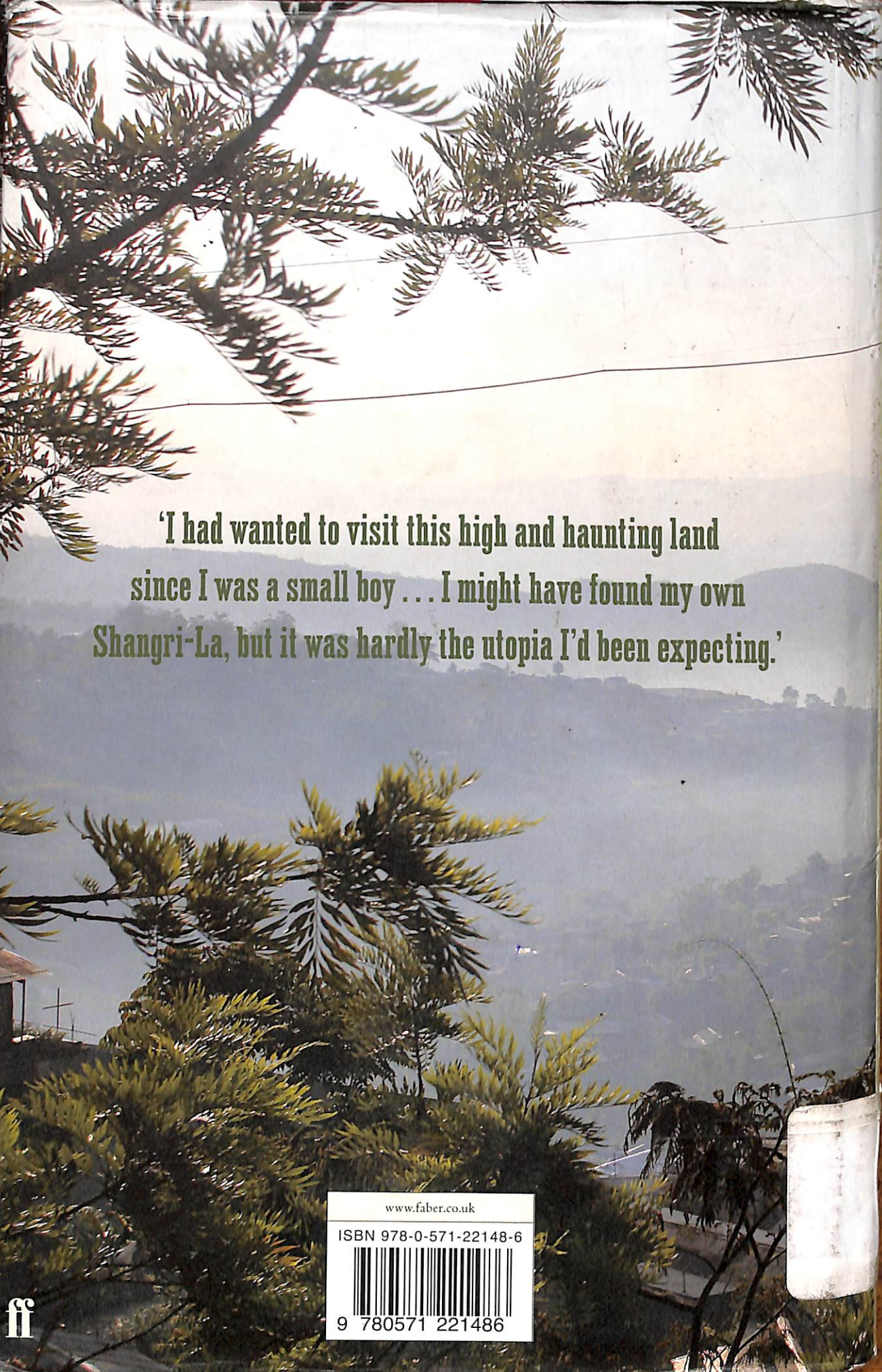
Well before I was born, Nagaland had been sealed off from the rest of world. During the days of the Raj, visitors to the Naga Hills required special internal visas to travel east of Dimapur Junction. The British reasoned that they were protecting the tribes from both Indian and modern culture. From the 1960s, Delhi went further, and made it all but impossible for anyone to enter Nagaland, including Indian citizens.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Nagaland itself is demographically fragmented. Its people adopt different stances on their nation and its awkward relationship with India and the world beyond. Some Nagas, especially those in Burma, live almost wholly remote from the modern world while others serve guerrilla armies equipped with modern weapons, laptops and satellite phones. Some want Nagaland to revert to the state of freedom, if not innocence, that prevailed before the British first turned up in the 1820s. Many, probably most, support separation from India whatever the consequences, and a Greater Nagaland that will encompass all Naga tribes in the region. There are those, too, who want to live a more or less wholly modern life, and others who have already emigrated in search of one.

Delhi is keen to point out that an independent Nagaland would be economically weak as well as prey to neighbouring powers, China chief among them. India needs Nagaland as a buffer to protect its north-eastern border. A slowly increasing trickle of tourists over the past decade see an ideal Nagaland as a happy marriage of environmentally friendly nature reserves and unchanged traditions. As for me, I simply do not have an answer. I can only say that I grew up with a dream of a Lost Kingdom that I hoped I would find in Nagaland. Now that I

understand this uncomfortably fabricated state, and its people's aspirations, a little better, I know that the Shangri-Las we carry in our mental rucksacks can only ever be the products of yearning or wandering minds. But the disappointment of discovering that utopias exist only in the stories of ancient Tibetan mystics, Thomas More, Jonathan Swift or James Hilton, author of the curious novel *Lost Horizon*, is offset by the fact that, in reality, their supposed locations can be richer and more moving, even if in disquieting ways, than we had ever expected them to be.

My enduring relationship with Nagaland has matched and mirrored my own path through life. My story begins with the Nagaland of my childhood, experienced from another continent only through the writing, maps, photographs and researches of long-dead soldiers, anthropologists, missionaries and colonial officers. Without them, I would never have been inspired to see for myself, nor would I have met those Nagas whose voices and histories emerge as my story unfolds. Initially, this is a tale told through British eyes; as it develops, the Nagas find their own voice and their story becomes their own.



**'I had wanted to visit this high and haunting land  
since I was a small boy . . . I might have found my own  
Shangri-La, but it was hardly the utopia I'd been expecting.'**

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