Chapter IV

The Moral Economy of State Resources in Nagaland

Whereas the previous chapter illustrated and argued that for Naga underground groups the state and particularly its development initiatives have turned into a ‘rebel resource’, this chapter approaches Nagaland state and its development programmes, policies and projects from the perspective of Noksen and Phugwumi villagers and through the windows of what is often simplistically termed as ‘corruption’, ‘absenteeism’, and ‘malgovernance.’

‘The movement of the VIPs has to be escorted’, Luthra (1974: 16) wrote in the aftermath of Nagaland statehood, then continued: ‘The security forces continue with their patrolling to ensure that the hostile elements do not indulge in any build-up of their armed strength; also frequent ambushes and sharp skirmishes take place between the two sides. Simultaneously, development work is being rapidly extended in all directions.’ This rapid extension of development ‘in all directions’ – amidst continuing conflict – I argue, was not just a noble gesture from the Centre – which routed a host of development projects through the apparatuses of the new Nagaland state – not even a classic and ever paternalistic ‘civilization mission’, but part of a paradigmatic shift in which an initial (and unsuccessful) policy of ‘coercion’, in which military force was employed to contain Naga insurgency, became supplanted by a policy of ‘seduction’, as I propose to call the deliberate usage of state largesse in an attempt to ‘nationalize space’ (Baruah 2003b).

However, several decades of statehood and development initiatives later not only was Naga insurgency continuing, but it was widely recognized that Nagaland state was
making a mockery of the very idea of the state as acting on behalf of its citizens, an entity above partial and personal (and tribal) interests, the guarantor of all-round development, and as staffed by loyal and diligent personnel pursuing the common good. What emerged instead were accounts of government disarray, development that was failing, and the existence of vast and complex networks that specialized in pilfering, profiteering, cuts, commissions, shams, scams or any other practice usually accepted as synonymous to ‘corruption.’ As we already saw in the previous chapter, these networks of ‘corrupt’ actors did not exclude Naga underground groups.

This disarray of governance was to the extent that ‘corruption’, an editor of a leading Nagaland daily told me, had become a ‘culture’, one that pervaded all levels, nooks, and niches of the state machinery. Most scholars and writers on Nagaland seem to agree and depict corruption as a ‘way of life’ locally given that ‘the looting of government offices by politicians, bureaucrats and sometimes in connivance with freedom fighters goes unabated’ (Ezung 2012: 1). Nagaland, Maitra (2011: 48) writes, has become ‘the symbol of corruption.’ Others talk about the state’s ‘whirlpool of rampant corruption’ (Shimray 2007: 115) or as the ‘paradise of corruption’ (Faizal cited in Shimray 2005: 239). Besides the widespread private appropriation of state resources, absenteeism in government offices, too, has been deemed all-pervasive, and this made the state’s (then) Chief-Secretary publicly lament the many absent officers, deserted offices, and the generally ‘poor-attendance by officers and staff’ (cited in Nagaland Post 08-08-2014). All together, it made a sitting Member of Nagaland’s Legislative Assembly confess that ‘Nagaland today is underdeveloped due to extreme corruption and
inefficiency’ (cited in Nagaland Post 11-10-2013). The message communicated seems clear: in Nagaland corrupt practices do not just exist, but thrive.

The prime cause behind the consistently high levels of corruption, the widespread absenteeism, and the pervasive malgovernance all across, the (then) Nagaland Development Commissioner explained as resulting from a ‘lack of sense of belonging in the government by the people’ and stressed the ‘very debilitating’ effect this had on development in the state. Alemtemshi Jamir continued: ‘Whether this [is] because the State Government is viewed to be a temporary arrangement pending a final settlement or whether the tribal mind is yet to reconcile to a new form of governance is a matter of debate’ (2002: 3-4). What makes this assessment especially noteworthy is that it does not come from a Naga underground group in an attempt to delegitimize Nagaland state, or from a disgruntled or defeated politician out to smear the ruling government, but from a long-serving officer situated at the helm of state affairs, and so after having engaged himself – first-hand, and for several decades – in the planning and implementation of development policies, programs, and projects.

The remainder of this chapter sets out to contextualize and illustrate Jamir’s evaluation about the apparent disarray of governance, continuing corruption, and failed development. But it also adds that what must be debated too is the possible relation – and herein lies this chapter’s main focus – between ordinary Nagas’ particularistic historical experiences of the post-colonial state and their apparent lack of belonging to that state, as well as the consequences thereof in terms of development policies and projects. I agree with Kikon (2015: 75) that in Nagaland the relationship between Naga citizens and the Indian state has been ‘profoundly shaped by the long conflict’, and which implicated
‘everyday practices of ethics, morality, and solidarity.’ Concentrating on the post 1997 ceasefire scenario, Kikon writes how ‘villagers were relocated from interrogation rooms to microfinance classes, and farmers previously restricted indoors due to curfews and the war were invited to attend livelihood-awareness classes and demonstration workshops for cash crops such as rubber and tea’ (ibid.: 75). Such initiatives, even if perhaps well-intended, Kikon argues, remain detached from the armed conflict and decades-long militarization of the hills.

For most Naga men and women the state calls up a set of ambivalent images, which include both bare violence and state monies, loss and largesse, deaths and donations, humiliations and handouts, deprivation and development. Of these, the memories of suffering and misery inflicted on their bodies by military and paramilitary troops often remain particularly vivid, as I will discuss in more detail below. These specific historical experiences, I argue, has shaped he ways ordinary Nagas have come to understand the state, as well as influence the moral reasonings they adopt in their dealings with its resources. My view, followed throughout this chapter, is that there is a distinct and specific link between Nagas’ historical experiences of the post-colonial state and the emergence of a set of local subjectivities and a moral commensality that seem, if anything, conducive for the pilfering of state resources to continue. I will start illustrating this with a vignette.

Meet Sekho, a resident of Kohima whose roots trace back to Phugwumi. If inquired about his occupation, Sekho would introduce himself as a ‘social worker’, and which, in his case, meant that he ran political errands for a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) and under whose tutelage he presided over a range of development
schemes, subsidies, and supply-works. The cuts and commissions he invariably secured had paid him a house in Kohima, education for his children, and an upscale vehicle. ‘A man of means and ways’, as Sekho was once described to me by a Phugwumi villager. One day Sekho offered to take me along to a certain government department in Kohima where he had a budget sanction letter for a sanitation project to collect and a prospective development undertaking to discuss. As we drove Kohima’s cramped roads, Sekho explained his current ‘development business’:

‘The UN now wants everyone in the world to have access to proper toilets. But India is lagging behind in achieving this. It told the UN it needs at least another five years to bring toilets to all parts of the country. To make this happen the Centre now allocates large sums of money to the states. Nagaland too is receiving an annual budget for this, even though most Naga villages already have proper toilets. Nowadays, I am busy with that’ [then adding in jest:] ‘I now make my money out of toilets.’

Inside the building, and after collecting the sanction letter, Sekho summoned me to follow him upstairs and to a particular office. It belonged to one of the department’s most senior officers, who appeared to recognize Sekho and invited us inside. Sekho wasted little time in bringing up the development project he wanted to carry out. ‘It will be in my own village this time’, he explained to the officer, then outlining his plan for the creation of a large apple-plantation and a related water-harvesting project. ‘I have already spoken with my villagers about it’, he continued. ‘They are supportive and we all agreed that from the official budget at least 40% should reach the project properly. The other 60% we can give here and there.’ Sekho then explained that he wanted to apply for funds from the
North-Eastern Council (the nodal agency for Centre-financed development in the region with its headquarters in Shillong), and that his project proposal was almost ready. All that was needed now to make it official was the seal and signature from a government department.

It was for this government endorsement that Sekho had come to meet the officer. ‘Just last week we had a meeting on such requests in our department’, the officer responded. ‘Nowadays we receive proposals to be forwarded to the NEC from all corners of Nagaland. Most of them we sign. But after that there is only silence. The budgets are not sanctioned through our department, and in the end we get nothing.’ Sekho nodded. He understood the implications of the officer’s words. ‘I will endorse your application only if you can assure that the budget will come via this office’, the officer concluded. It was a proposition Sekho had no option to agree to, even though he knew this would reduce his own profit-margins as the department was expected to slice of a percentage for its own ‘uses.’ I am planning to go to Shillong next week to visit the NEC. I will come to meet you before that’, Sekho ended the conversation. We shook hands and left. Back in the vehicle, Sekho opened the envelope and studied the sanction letter. ‘It should have been a little more’, he sighed. ‘There must have been an extra cut from above.’

The language of corruption woven into this conversation and in Sekho’s remarks was obvious. For instance, Sekho’s insistence on having 40% of the project budget go the actual project meant that there was 60% that could be pilfered at various levels, spanning both government officers, the villagers put in charge besides, of course, his own private cuts. Second, the officer’s insistence of having the budget channeled through his department meant an opportunity for him and his colleagues to appropriate a share.
Sekho’s final remark that something must have happened from ‘above’ implied that the sanitation project had already been ‘touched’ by several officers, all deducting a percentage. At the time of this ethnographic encounter I was still in the beginning of my fieldwork and had met Sekho only at a few previous occasions. I did therefore not dare to inquire deeper into the intricacies of the sanitation projects, the NEC proposal, or into his dealings with government officers, afraid that doing so could spoil our relationship. But over the course of my fieldwork Sekho and I came across each other on multiple occasions, both in Phugwumi and Kohima. One evening, as we sat down, I asked him his views on Nagaland state, its many development programmes, and corruption. I quote his answer at some length:

‘Nagaland today is the most corrupt state of India. Everybody knows that. But we must understand the history behind this. Look, when I was growing up, Delhi only sent us bullets. So many Jawans came, raping our women, beating our elders, killing our children. Those days Nagaland was like an open-air torture cell, so many things happened. Some of it too inhuman to even speak about it. In our village [Phugwumi] the Indian Army also did terrible things. I remember how one day we all had to assemble in the school compound. The Army captain was angry and said he knew that our village was supporting the NNC. He selected some boys from the crowd and had them hang upside down from a tree. Then they were beaten with sticks until they fell unconscious. They did like that in front of everyone’s eyes. But nowadays Delhi’s attitude towards us has changed. They no longer send us bullets but money. A lot of money. In Delhi they think the more money they give us Nagas the more we will start feeling Indian. They think we
don’t know their strategies. But we Nagas understand their intentions. But money is better than bullets. We simply take the money from them, after all it is high time for them to compensate us for the horrible things they have done to us. But accepting this money does not make us feel any more Indian. The only thing it has done is to make Nagaland the most corrupt state of India. But who cares? It is all Indian money. Deep down, we Nagas still want Independence.’

Sekho’s acts and articulations introduce us to some of the lingering sentiments, deeper structures, and inner-logics that lie concealed behind Nagaland’s now widely reported ‘catastrophe of corruption.’ Put differently, it introduces us to the complex relationships that exist between Naga citizens and the state. The remainder of this chapter explores this relationship ethnographically. It does so by looking at how state-led development programs, policies, and projects manifest themselves in Nagaland, how such development initiatives are perceived and engaged with locally, and what moral reasoning ordinary villagers adopt in their dealings with the state and its resources.

This chapter, to be sure, is not meant as an expose. Journalists and some academics have already written about it. Neither does it seek to judge or condemn. What it attempts, in good anthropological fashion, is an ethnographic and empathic exploration of some ‘corrupt’ practices in Nagaland as they unfold at village levels. As such, this chapter does not primarily deal with ‘corruption’ as it reportedly exists within and between state departments, or in the realms of private companies and businesses, but aims to shed some light on Nagaland’s ‘crisis of corruption’ by adopting a ‘worm’s eyes view’ (Parry 2000). Far from claiming definite answers, this chapter’s aim remains limited to broadening our analytic avenues for understanding corruption in Nagaland by
situating the contemporary pilfering of state resources against the historically experiences and understandings ordinary Naga men and women have of the post-colonial state, and the resultant activities and moral reasoning they adopt in their dealings towards the state and its resources. To do so, however, we first need to refine our analytical grasp of what corruption is, and what it is not.

**The State, Corruption, and Morality**

In approaching corruption in Nagaland analytically, I begin with the assumption that all economic activities, of which the pilfering from state resources, are influenced by moral reasoning (Browne and Milgram 2009), in the same way as monies are represented and morally evaluated contextually, culturally, and differently (Parry and Bloch 1989), and economic actions and transactions – be them legal or illegal, moral or immoral – are never secluded from particularistic value sets and social relations (Olivier de Sardan 2005; cf. Van Schendel 2005). Already long ago, Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) showed convincingly how economies are never plainly utilitarian but ever invested with moral expectations and judgments. They illustrated how revolts and revolutions – be they 19th century food riots in Britain or peasant uprisings in colonial Burma and Vietnam – were not just spasmodic and raw ‘rebellions of the belly’ (Thompson 1971: 77) but the cumulative outcome of states and elites violating a traditional and popular consensus as to what were moral and immoral economic practices and principles, just and unjust prices. In recent years such ‘moral economy’ perspectives have proven insightful in the study of corruption (cf. Shah 2009; cf. Sykes 2009), advancing the view that, rather than
merely a field of moral disapproval, corruption should be approached and theorised like any other research object (Olivier de Sardan 1999; 2005).

To explore why corruption exists and persists, Olivier de Sardan (2005: 168) says, is to explore the ‘positive grounds’ on which a ‘moral economy of corruption’ may have grown and solidified locally, usually in spite of legal frameworks trying to prevent and punish ‘corrupt’ actions and actors. Corruption, then, entails a moral judgment of behaviour deemed as degenerate and perverse of a particular sociality, economic dealings, and mores, not just a ‘natural’ or ‘legal’ condition of felony to which persons become regulated when caught transgressing laws and procedures to accrue private benefits. For rural Jharkhand, for instance, Shah (2010: 78) shows how the Adivasi Munda elite could self-legitimise their pilfering of state resources ‘through a moral discourse which showed a general lack of commitment to the state as it manifested itself locally.’ This lack of moral commitment, on parts of the Munda, Shah found related to their historical experience of the state as an oppressive force that collaborated with the local high and dominant castes at the material and cultural expense of the indigenous Munda.

Such ideas and idioms of ‘morality’ usually garner little attraction in debates on corruption, which, in India and elsewhere, routinely merge into what is called The Pathology of Corruption (Gill 1998). Oftentimes an organic analogy is invoked which – revamping an old structural-functionalist approach – compares corrupt activities to bodily abnormalities that corrode the structure and functioning of organs and bodily systems, causing diseases that then symbolise the break-down of social institutions and processes: ‘Corruption is bleeding our people dry’, as a leading Indian politician framed it (cited in
The organic and medical metaphor, corrupt actors represent the worms and germs that must be localised and expelled for the social body to advance and prosper. In broad terms, although less figuratively, this is also the stance upheld by international organisations – the United Nations, World-Bank, and International Monetary Fund among them – which ceaselessly promote the catch-all phrase of ‘good governance’ and its core principles of transparency, accountability, and integrity as corruption’s prescribed antibiotics.56

What advocates of such views promote is the adoption of more stringent anti-corruption laws, their no-nonsense enforcement, and the establishment of independent investigative agencies with undisputed access to all desks and transactions of state. Examples of this stance, in India, was the indefinite fast resorted to by the Gandhian Anna Hazare in 2011 in an attempt to pressure the Indian Government into accepting the Jan Lokpall Bill, or the citizens’ ombudsman bill, which would see the creation of an independent body to investigate corruption cases. What such understandings of

56 Anthropologists and other social scientists have laboured hard to complicate such notions ethnographically by focussing on the social context in which corruption takes place, pointing to ‘problems of meaning and representation’ (Shore and Haller 2005: 2). They recognise, among others, the often thin and uncertain line that may exist between social customs of gift-giving and bribery (Steidlmeier 1999), the differential moral evaluation of gifts, bribes, and commissions (Parry 2001), see corruption as a form of social exchange, or perceive corruption as a modern ‘by-product of the formal rules that seek to separate persons from the offices they hold’ (Robertson 2006: 8). Collectively, such analyses show how the form and substance of ‘corrupt practices’ cannot easily be extracted, even less understood, from the historical and cultural contexts in which they occur. Needless to say, my analysis builds upon such insights.
corruption, and its envisaged solutions, assume is that illegality equates immorality (cf. Pardo 2005), a surmise which, if true, would establish Nagaland as a place ruled by greed, selfishness, an all-out immorality, characteristics of what Banfield (1958) once infamously described as *The Moral Basis of Backward Society*. However, if, as Parkin argues, moral principles are most clearly discernible in their transgression (Parkin cited in Shore 2005: 132), what needs explaining in the context of Nagaland, as this chapter’s ethnography will illustrate, is a general absence of such moral condemnation on part of Naga villagers of those fellow-villagers who privately appropriate parts of that what is officially designated for the public good, or against those who are absent from duty in local level government offices. While conventional legalistic approaches to corruption need no belittling, what they work to conceal, I pose, is the wider social and moral frameworks in which ‘corrupt’ practices unfold and are evaluated locally. In Nagaland this moral framework is shaped by villagers’ historical experiences of the post-colonial state – which is marked by ambivalences – and to which the next two sections turn.

**Memories of Violence and Suffering**

For most Naga villagers their first introduction to the post-colonial state was through its military and paramilitary forces, which, in its attempt to subdue Naga insurgency, reduced villagers to bare life at the disposal of the state. The enactment of Nagaland state, Jamir (2002: 3) recalled, had been ‘preceded by unprecedented violence and misery associated with the mass-based political movement’, causing defining individual and collective tragedies that often attached themselves to ordinary Naga villagers with post-traumatic clarity and came to shape their understandings and views of the post-colonial
state. Several waves of violence rolled over Phugwumi and Noksen (and most Naga villages) a number of times, and days and lifeworlds were shattered, houses and granaries burned down, cattle slaughtered or set loose, and villagers chained to the experience of state violence in deeply ingrained ways no ceasefire or definite political settlement can hope to fully shed. While since the 1997 ceasefire violence exerted on Naga villagers has much reduced, past experiences of violence have impressed local lives deeply. This section attempts to discuss some of the temporalities of past violence.

The onset of state-initiated violence in the Naga uplands can be traced to the mid-1950s, and the start of the Indo-Naga war. Violence soon escalated and by 1956, ‘nearly two divisions of the army and 34 battalions of the paramilitary Assam Rifles and Armed Police were operating in the Naga Hills’ (Sundar 2011: 49), which ‘ravaged Nagaland on unprecedented scale’ (Yonuo 1984: 221). This characterization of the violence as ‘unprecedented’ is telling, first, given that blood-feuds, reciprocal head-cutting, and ethics of revenge had long etched themselves in the Naga ‘habitus’, and, secondly, because barely a decade earlier Kohima had been reduced to ruins and rubble and many Naga villages depleted of its resources as the result of Allied and Japanese forces battling over Kohima, a clash which has been chronicled as amongst the most violent, most destructive battles fought during the Second World War (Keane 2011; Swinson 1946).

But if ‘unprecedented’ indicates the scale of violence, how does one write about people’s experiences of bodily violence without descending into morbid facts, figures, and clichés? Words a agony, anguish, misery, suffering, torment, trauma or pain; can they ever communicate the bare experience of violence, or for that matter how violence and fear feels, smells, tastes, and looks? Also, can those of us lucky enough to have never
experienced physical cruelty possibly imagine the torment and trauma of violence through the act of hearing or reading about it? And to what extent can an ‘outsider’, somebody like myself, be equipped to reconstruct and write about the violence experienced by other peoples in a meaningful way?

Perhaps the easiest way for me to engage these questions would be to circumvent them by restating what others have written on the bodily violence, cultural wounding, and social dislocation exerted on Naga villagers in the shadows of the Indo-Naga conflict. I could, for instance, recount some of the horrific tales of killing, torture, rape, the burning of villages and granaries, the desecration of churches documented in detail by Kaka Iralu in his *The Naga Saga* (2000). I could also cite the press-releases and papers published by the Naga Human Rights Movement (NHRM) as they detail allegations of Naga suffering, humiliation, and oppression at the hands of Indian armed forces. Or I could explain the legalities and workings of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, which commissioned any soldier to shoot at Nagas on mere suspicion and with immunity (Kikon 2009). Alternatively, I could invoke the more analytical, less graphic, less emotionally charged analyses of scholars. In that case I would probably cite Horam’s (1988: 9) observation that the Indian Army ‘exerted the maximum of pressure’, discuss Sundar’s (2011) analysis of the Vietnam-like process of village regrouping embarked upon by the army in an attempt to sever links between guerrillas and Naga villages, dwell on L. Ao’s (2002: 1) notion of ‘fear-psychosis’ that has grown locally, and maybe end by emphasizing Misra’s (2000: 55) conclusion that ‘the record of Indian security forces in the matter of human rights in Nagaland is decidedly a negative one.’ None of these however is the road taken here.
What I propose to do instead is not to focus on the actual events of past violence, but on their social afterlives, on the ways memories of state-violence have become socially sedimented, at once embodied and emplaced locally. The experience of violence, pain, and loss are usually very personal and intimate ones. However, the moment a person narrates his or her experiences such events turn into social facts, and if such narrations – each unique, but each also part of a wider patterns – are narrated by many they turn into a collective memory, or even a national consciousness of the past.

A cursory look at the history of political violence in the Naga uplands would suggest its division into three main phases. The first phase, and during which the violence was reportedly at its most severe, was from the mid-1950s up to the onset of the first Indo-Naga ceasefire in 1964. Several rounds of peace-negotiations however did not result in a political solution and by the beginning of the 1970s the ceasefire broke down. This commenced the second phase of political violence which continued roughly up to the signing of the 1975 Shillong Accord, a now defunct surrender treaty signed by NNC representatives. But if the Shillong Accord, and the presumed defeat of the Naga Movement, announced a lull in the political violence, it did not end it. By the early 1980s, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) injected new vigor in the demand for Naga Independence and resumed the path of guerrilla warfare. It started the third phase of political violence which continued until 1997 with the signing of the second Indo-Naga ceasefire. But if this would seem a more or less official history of the violence, villagers in both Phugwumi and Noksen, in recalling political violence, offered accounts that were at once more patchy and more specific. They spoke about particular times when the ‘situation was very bad’, ‘the army was everywhere’, ‘life was terrible’, or about when an
army camp was constructed near the village. They also spoke about particular army officers, whose names they recalled, and whose demeanor, temper, and acts they remembered, usually for the worse. What follows, therefore, is not a linear account, but a bundle of short narrations, remarks, and memories by villagers, more or less adapted directly from my fieldwork notes, and which freely moves between the different phases of political violence.

I begin with Noksen. ‘I remember the sound of army booths. Black, heavy booths. They hurt badly when they kicked me with it’, a Noksen elder replied when I asked him what he remembered about the Indian Army. When the Naga Movement began several Noksen villagers joined in, and this had made the entire village ‘suspicious’ in the eyes of the Indian Army, which performed regular patrols across the village. ‘Twice the army set fire to this sector’, another villager recalled. ‘They wanted to punish us for supporting the NNC. Those days our roofs were not made of iron sheets, but of thatch, which made the fire spread quickly. Our house too burned down. All our possessions were lost.’ Other villagers talked about their experience of being herded, ‘like animals’, into an open compound, the elderly, women and children not excused, and them being asked, threateningly, the whereabouts of this or that villager. ‘When we did not know the answer they beat us. And they did not allow us to have our food or to use the toilet throughout the day.’ ‘We wanted to fight man to man’, an NNC veteran told me. ‘But the army went after our families. When they found out which house was my family’s they broke the roof and promised my wife they would kill her unless I would surrender.’ And surrendering he did. The exertion not just of threats but of physical punishments, including murder, on family, clan, and village members, in lieu of an NNC cadre, was a narrative I came across
several times in both villages. Sometimes it worked and the NNC member returned overground, but in most instances the relatives of murder or torture at the hands of the Indian Army did not become silenced by fear. More often, they joined in the fight.

The past event most talked about in Phugwumi was the villagers’ conscription into the construction of two spiked bamboo walls all around the village, and with ‘panjies’ (spiked pieces of bamboo) planted in between them. Fetching the bamboo from the forest, then cutting, sharpening, and connecting them; it had taken the villagers weeks of collective labour to complete. The army had wanted the wall to sever the supply-links that they thought existed between the villagers and the Naga Army that roamed the jungles below. Knowing that Phugwumi was an ‘NNC village’, the army resolved to construct a permanent outpost at the village’s outskirts. For this, a hillock was confiscated which, till today, has not been returned to the villagers but in the absence of a final political settlement has been placed in the possession of Nagaland’s armed police. With the wall built, exit and entry into the village was restricted to a single gate, staffed by soldiers around the clock and whose prerogative it became every day to decide who was, and who was not, allowed to leave the village to work in the paddy fields and forests below. When army intelligence suspected the presence of the Naga Army nearby, the village was sealed off completely, at times not allowing anyone to leave for days at a stretch. Soon, agricultural outputs declined, introducing, for the first time in the villagers’ memory, acute scarcity in the village. Cattle and pigs bred in the village, in turn, emaciated quickly or died as grasses and fodder could no longer be brought in. Even stories were no longer told: ‘Earlier, youth and elders would gather in open compounds and talk. But the army did not allow us to gather amongst ourselves. From a distance, the
army was studying our movements with binoculars and large flashlights. If they would see us gather in group action would follow.’

Of living in such a sudden encampment, one villager remembered the following instance:

“‘Why are you returning from the jungle so late?’ The soldier at the gate kept on asking me. Since we had not been allowed to look after our fields for many days, that day, when we were finally allowed, I tried to finish as much work as possible, making me to arrive back a little after dark. They accused me of being an NNC member. When I denied they beat me with their fists on my ear and in my chest. I have become deaf early in life. I know it is because of that day’s beating.’

Akin to the collective memory in Noksen, many in Phugwumi spoke about being herded together into an open compound. I was told thus:

‘They ripped off the shirts of the men. If their back was neat and clean they were arrest for being part of the NNC because those who worked in the fields usually worked without shirts and therefore dirt and sunburn would be visible on their backs. They also arrested those who did not look them into the eyes saying “you can’t face us so you must be NNC.” And those who were arrested returned in a terrible shape. They would not speak of what had happened. But we know it must have been terrible.’

Another villager narrated: ‘I must have been in my late teens. I had a strong physique and one day the army accused me of being part of the Naga Army. Just a few days earlier, an army patrol had been ambushed near the village. They now said I had been involved. When I denied they hung me upside down from a tree. Then they beat me with bamboo
sticks. It went on for a long time. I lost my consciousness.’ My field-diaries contain many such and similar narratives, but I confine this discussion to only a final example; ‘When I was growing up, our neighbour, who was also my uncle, joined the NNC. Then the Indian Army found out about it. They would come to our house, then in the morning, then in the afternoon, then in the middle of the night. Every time they questioned my father, asking him where my uncle was? My father and uncle had agreed that my father would respond: “yes, he came to our village recently.” For if he would say anything else, the army would not believe him and beat him up.’ Saying what the army wanted to know, even if it was not true; it was one of the strategies villagers adopted to survive.

‘Violence is not only enacted in the present – the immediacy of the act of harm – but violence has a tomorrow’, Nordstrom (2004: 224) writes. Political violence does not end when the physical onslaught is over, it does not have clear temporal boundaries, but, Nordstrom continues, ‘it reconfigures its victims and the social milieu that hosts them’ (ibid.: 226). The event of experience of violence, no matter how long ago, Veena Das (2007: 1) has shown convincingly, ‘attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life’ where it ‘is folded into ongoing relationships’, including, in our case, the ongoing relationship between Naga citizens and the state. Ursula Bowyer, who for many years had resided among the Zeme Naga, argued that as the result of the violence and hostilities few Nagas could identify themselves with Nagaland statehood. She wrote thus:

‘The grant of statehood has not been enough… Support for the Indian-recognised Naga People’s Council is limited and mainly urban, while the vast majority of villagers freely supports the NNC… Yet another item in the sum, and a grimly weighty one, is the hate and distrust of India which is growing in the long-
memoried Nagas. Matters are currently at such a pitch that things will probably bedevil Indo-Naga relations for the next two or three centuries, as the doings of Cromwellian generals in Ireland bore unexpected and bitter fruit in World War II.\textsuperscript{57}

As the result of the 1997 ceasefire the Indian Army returned mostly to its barracks. But while nothing of the political violence that had characterized the pre-ceasefire period has taken place in recent memory, both Noksen and Phugwumi villagers know that its potential re-emergence in ever more violent form always remains just behind the scene of the Indo-Naga peace negotiations. ‘Ceasefire or no ceasefire. Anything can spark the [Indian] army into action, and then anything can happen’, as a Phugwumi villager articulated the lingering volatility and ever present threat of violence. That ‘anything can

\textsuperscript{57} Letter by Ursula Bowyer. Derived from Digital Himalaya (http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r86277.html). On the contested creation of Nagaland state, Rustomji wrote: ‘It was not until ten years later [after the first incidences of violence] that the Naga Hills were granted Central Administration after the embitterment of prolonged military operations. By then, the gift had lost its grace, and the feeling among the Nagas was that they had won their new status through their own doggedness in the field rather than from any sympathetic or enlightened approach on the part of the Government and people of India’ (1971: 86).

Or as Horam noted:
‘Nagaland Statehood, unlike the other States of India, was attained after much bloodshed and loss of many lives during violent activities over many years. No other State, save Mizoram, which much later followed the pattern of Naga insurgency, resorted to taking up of arms in order to achieve Statehood. States like Meghalaya, Manipur, Punjab, Haryana, etc., fought and won their Statehood through constitutional means. Therefore, if all that the Nagas wanted was Statehood within the Indian Union, they could have avoided all this loss of lives, time and materials’ (1988: 181).
‘One day a group of fully uniformed and armed cadres of one faction suddenly appeared in front of my house. This faction was not part of the ceasefire. They told me that they came to meet one of their leaders, who was from our village but they had found him not to be around. They asked me to serve them tea, which I did. What else should I have done? When they left I asked them whether they were going to stay in our village for the night. They told me they would not. But it was a lie. But that I found out only the next day.

The next morning our village chairperson called me to come to his house immediately because there was a “situation.” He did not tell me anything else; just “situation.” But when I left my house I noticed that the Indian Army was in our village in large numbers. When I was walking towards the chairperson’s house, three jawans pointed their guns at me: “Where did you change your clothes?”, they asked me. First, I did not know what they meant but later I realized that they were accusing me of being part of the underground. That morning, it seemed, the Army had received a tip-off about the presence of fully-uniformed and armed undergrads staying in our village. They had come with many soldiers and a brief stand-off had ensued, after which the undergrads had fled in all directions. No bullets had been fired, but anything could have happened.

I knew the army commander because in those days I was part of the Village Development Board (VDB). We were considered to be village leaders and the army wanted to be on friendly terms with us. Sometimes they invited us to their camp and served us drinks and chicken. But this time he was very angry. He kept on asking me
whether the underground had come to my house yesterday. I kept on denying, saying that no-one had come to my house. This made the commander only angrier. “Don’t lie! I know everything”, he shouted. Then he told me that they had come to my house at 11.30 the previous morning. I was taken aback by this information because it was true. But since I was already denying I could not change my position anymore as they would have surely beaten me up for lying. So I continued to deny. Eventually the army left.

The next day they called the village chairperson and me over to their camp in Pfutsero. When we reached there they asked us this and that, but we said nothing. There, too, I kept denying that the underground had come to my house. The commander told me he was disappointed with me, saying: “You are in the Village Development Board. We know each other well. We constructed a bank building and computer-room in your village. We helped you. We worked together, and now you are lying to me.” But I just kept quiet.

A few months later I met the commander in the bank in Pfutsero. He was in civil dress. He told me: “you are very brave. I knew everything. All the facts I knew. Still you kept on denying.” He patted me on the back. Now whenever we see each other we exchange smiles.’

There are a number of things to note about this conversation, but what I wish to highlight here was the Army’s apparent shift from ‘military action’ alone to also offering development projects, and, secondly, the Army commander’s expectation that the Phugwumi villagers would display loyalty and ‘truthfulness’ to him and his colleague as the result of this development assistance. It is this policy (the offering of development) and expectations (that development would result into ‘loyalty’) that brings us to the next
section, which discusses the, what I call, policy of ‘seduction’ that was resorted to by the Centre to contain Naga insurgency.

‘Development as Seduction’

To say that post-statehood development has not been an unmitigated success story in Nagaland would be an understatement of the corruption and malgovernance reportedly rife. Some achievements notwithstanding, Alemtemshi Jamir (2002: 2) confesses, Nagaland remains ‘under-developed’ with ‘a long way to go even to catch up with the rest of the country.’ The state’s lagging behind on most development indices – as compared to India’s national averages – is not due to any monetary neglect on part of the Centre. To the contrary, ever since its enactment Nagaland receives development budgets that proportionally outdo most, if not all, parts of India. Most development projects are designed and financed directly by the Centre, but in addition Nagaland’s annual per capital plan assistance has systematically been ‘much higher than the national averages’ (S.C. Jamir cited in L. Ao 1993: 176). This also applies to the state’s sheer numbers of civil servants, to the extent that Nagaland enjoys the country’s ‘highest ratio of government servants to the population’ (Patton cited in Nagaland Post 22-04-2016). Such seemingly enabling factors did not translate into effective and significant development, however.

While the overall aim of this chapter is to offer some worm’s eyes insights into Nagaland’s sinking morass of corruption and governmental disarray, here I wish to explore several other (but not unrelated) questions. Why does Nagaland systematically receive development allocations that are well above the national average in the first place
– especially given that Nagaland, while ranked below average, does not usually figure amongst India’s poorest states? What, from the vantage of the Centre, might justify such exaggerated development attention? Also, why, after decades of failed development, does Nagaland remain the uncritical recipient of what seems ‘more of the same’ development budgets and initiatives? Why does Nagaland’s crisis of corruption and malgovernance not alarm the Centre into more stringent action? And what, in its final evaluation, do all these development policies and projects effectuate locally, besides failing to bring overall material welfare?

To engage these questions I draw upon James Ferguson’s (1994) seminal work that approaches development as an ‘anti-politics machine’, one which ‘seem[s] to suspend “politics” from even the most sensitive political operations at the flick of a switch’ (1994: 256). Development is an ‘anti-politics machine’ because, first, it de-politicizes what are quintessential political (but also moral) questions of land and resource use, wages and profits, and wider economic arrangements into ‘technical questions’ that require superficially ‘a-political’ solutions. Development is further an ‘anti-politics machine’ because its policies, programs, and practices often end up enhancing the state’s political dominance and control of a particular area, and so irrespectively of whether a development project succeeds or fails. The entrance of development, including government functions and services, Ferguson explains, while ostensibly directed at the common good, ‘are never simply “services” provided by a “government” whose purpose is to serve, but must also be understood as “services” which serve to govern’ (ibid.: 253). This realization makes both the idea and practice of development a deeply political undertaking, but simultaneously one whose political
consequences are concealed in a ‘technical’ and ‘neutral’ vocabulary of progress and material welfare.

I find Ferguson’s insights helpful to understand and theorize the paradoxes, purposes and realities of state-led development in Nagaland, whose policies and practices must, I argue, be situated in the contested history and politics of the state. With the legitimacy of Nagaland state undermined by the NNC (and nascent Naga underground groups), which continued its armed struggle, and with a ‘military solution’ not forthcoming, the Centre shifted gears and supplanted hitherto policies of ‘coercion’, in which military force was employed to contain Naga insurgency, to a policy of ‘seduction’, or the deliberate usage of state largesse to co-opt a recalcitrant population by offering them a stake in the Indian dispensation. But whereas for Ferguson the augmented levels of state control that resulted from ‘development’ could well be an unintended ‘side-effect’, and ‘not necessarily the consequence of any kind of conspiracy’ (1994: 180), in Nagaland the use of state largesse, I claim, was the true political intent to stabilize things that would otherwise fail. Put differently, development became the conduit through which political domination was to be achieved in ways military subjugation had failed. In arguing so, I also align with Baruah’s (2003b 916-7) argument

58 In their historical analysis of the intrusion of expansive states, from the fifteenth century onward, into ‘tribal zones’, Ferguson and Whitehead (2000 [1992]: 8) distinguished between state-adopted strategies of ‘coercion’, usually military, and ‘seduction’, often through offering to the oppressed communities gifts, trading opportunities, and pledges of political support. Oftentimes ‘seduction’ was attempted when ‘coercion’ failed although both tactical alternatives also occurred simultaneously, in some kind of blend, and which would argue similarly applies to the Centre’s dealing with the Nagas.
for Arunachal Pradesh, but with implications for India’s northeast more widely, that India’s development policies on its (contested) frontiers have been first and foremost a ‘national security driven process’ in which ‘the logic of developmentalism is embedded in the institutions of the Indian state that have been put in place in pursuit of the goal of nationalizing space.’

No sooner was Nagaland state enacted, Misra (2000: 54) writes, and ‘the Centre started pumping in massive sums of money in a clear effort to wean away sections of the Naga people from the politics of insurgency.’ This policy of ‘seduction’ has been variously noted by historians and commentators on the Naga struggle. Nibedon (1978: 201) refers to it as the sudden ‘overflow of cash and funds’, Singh (2004: 85) captures it as a ‘floodgate of money from the Government of India’, Nuh (1986: 128) as ‘money is poured on us’, while Sanyu (1992: 269) talks about the arrival of ‘material inducement in terms of crores of rupees.’ By the 1970s, writes Hazarika (2011: 241), the Central Government ‘had fully developed its strategy against the Nagas… one prong of the strategy was to pour in huge amounts of money to soften up the Nagas so that, as one Home Ministry Official at Delhi said, “they will become too comfortable to fight in the jungle again.”’

First, after statehood, were ‘seduced’ the elected politicians, newly appointed Naga bureaucrats, and other power elites, whose personal and political ambitions became

59 One local narration tells how General Thimaya, then Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army expressed the difficulties of fighting the Naga to Jawaharlal Nehru and reportedly requested a free hand to ‘finish the Nagas.’ As Nehru refused to give his consent for increased, and even more ferocious, military operations, General Thimaya proposed, as an alternative strategy to subdue the Naga, ‘to throw money to the people’ (Nuh 1986: 128).
– gradually and not without exceptions – streamlined with (and dependent on) Delhi’s administrative policies, making them a ‘prodigal partner’ of the Centre (Thomas and Das 2002: vii). The NNC, in a public communication, lamented ‘the conduct of a few Naga mercenary politicians who are thriving at the nursery of India and have carnivorous appetites’ (cited in Nuh 2002: 99). Visiting Nagaland in 1965, Pawsey, the last British District Commissioner of the Naga Hills District, found politicians in Kohima living ‘like fighting cocks, smoke player cigarettes, and consume vast quantity of spirits.’ He concluded: ‘It is unlikely that they will willingly renounce the sweets of office’ (cited in Steyn 2002: 137). Over time, the state, and particularly the resource it put on display, came to encapsulate the lives and imagination of increasing numbers of Nagas. Government positions were created at district and village levels and filled up by Nagas; national workers were promised government employment in exchange for their surrender; development offices were established in all parts of the state and through it schemes and projects were channeled to villages; special scholarships were made available to Naga students; loans and subsidies for framers; ration-cards for the poor; pensions for the elderly, and so on.

Whether it was salaries, scholarships, pensions, rations, loans, subsidies its political effect was similar in that it bound more and more Naga men and women to the state, giving them material stakes in the continuation of the political status-quo. The NNC understood the political intent that drove the government’s sudden generosity, and elders in Phugwumi recall how underground officers warned villagers against accepting government jobs or any other state benefits. In the beginning, those who defied these decrees were punished. Some were killed. But after heroically fighting the Indian army to
a standstill, the NNC was unable to contain the consequences of state largesse. Ao (2002: 2) reflected thus: ‘It is true to note, “it is easier to win over the minds of the Nagas with Indian currency than the bullets” as commented by Indian policy makers who have tested this method and found it perfectly working in contemporary Naga society. But even as the NNC and nascent underground groups no longer condemn those Nagas part of state and development apparatuses, NCSN-IM’s president nevertheless stated:

‘If, recognising the Indian Constitution, you work in the Government offices, I will not call you “traitors”. I only will say – learn work as much as you can so that in future you can serve our own national Government. We know, for a living you have to work, but don’t be greedy or indulge in luxury when the period will commence for the last struggle which is not far away; we hope, wherever you are you will fight from there’ (cited in Maitra 1998: 131).

Let us now return to some of the main questions raised in this section. Why is Nagaland a focal point of state-led development? And what are the purposes and realities of development in Nagaland if not working for the overall benefit of ordinary Naga men and women? I argue that post-statehood development initiatives conceal hidden purposes of extending India’s political domination in the Naga uplands. Thence, Nagaland received, and continues to receive, excessive development attention because from the viewpoints of the Centre development has not failed. Not because it has significantly improved material welfare in Nagaland, which it has arguably not, but because it has successfully dissuaded many Nagas away from the politics of Naga insurgency and made them dependent in their everyday lives on the continuity of Indian state and development apparatuses.
But if from this perspective, and from the vantage of the Centre, this has made the policy of ‘seduction’ a success, this success carries a number of side-effects and which have now started to reveal themselves. A former Central Government officer posted to Nagaland reflected thus: ‘The only thing absent in the [Nagaland] offices are work-culture and loyalty to the Indian Govt. The Indian Govt. is meant to squeeze money from in all possible and impossible ways. This fact everybody knows, from a common person to a politician’ (Maitra 2011: 159). In analyzing the inner workings of Nagaland state, Aier (2002: 119) is more upfront still; ‘the state’, she says, has become seen as a ‘cow to be milked.’ The reason behind this ‘squeezing’ and ‘milking’, Maitra (2011: 163) explains, is certainly in parts because ‘the young Naga generation consider the generous funds under various heads a ploy to make them lose their spirit of Independence.’ It is also my impression that many Nagas are aware of the Centre’s hidden politics behind state largesse. Besides Sekho, cited above, several others of my Naga informants and friends discussed this with me openly. Some concerns about these ‘side-effects’ of state largesse also reached the Centre. Speaking as Union Minister, Ramesh admitted that public expenditures have become part of the problem in Nagaland, as well as other conflict ridden areas in India’s Northeast; ‘We are using corruption as a mode of cohesion and we are not able to completely recognize its dimensions’ (Ramesh 2005: 2). State resources, Ramesh continued, primarily function to ‘ensure cohesiveness of this society with the rest of India through a series of interlocutors who happen to be
politicians, expatriate contractors, extortionists, anybody but people working to deliver benefits to the people from whom these expenditures are intended’ (ibid.: 3).  

Let us now turn, in ethnographic detail, to the villages of Noksen and Phugwumi where we will witness ethnographically the pilfering of state monies. However, rather than merely describing these happenings as evidence of corruption, fraud, and widespread malgovernance, in the pages that follow I suggest a different road by reflecting on the activities and moral reasoning of Naga villagers as they existed within the spheres of the superficially amoral pilfering of state resources.

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60 Within India's Northeast, Nagaland was not the only place in which state largesse was applied in an attempt to win local hearts, however. On Nagaland's south, in the state of Manipur and also home to lingering demands for Independence, a sudden, massive inflow of state resources translated into, what Phanjoubam (2009: 153) calls, a peculiar form of narcissism with a major section of the citizenry: 'craving only the fruits of development, without even bothering to think of the cost of having these – an attitude defined by such discordant traditions as demand for more electricity without paying taxes for it, more holidays but fatter salary packets, more employment but less work.'

To the north, crossing into Arunachal Pradesh, the state attempted, and arguably quite successfully so, to secure local patriotism on its contested edge with China by directing exceptionally high levels of development monies into the region. Arunachalese, Taylor (1996: 13) informs us, have become accustomed to this sort of leverage and consider it as a compensatory payment – 'receiving this investment in exchange for political stability.' Because of their local abundance, such state monies have taken on a 'curiously rootless quality'; portraying 'an ambivalence that makes it seem like something external to be exploited rather than something that comes from, and should return to, their people' (ibid.: 19).
The Dubious Craze for Government Jobs

While carrying out fieldwork in Phugwumi and Noksen I was struck by how often the idea of ‘government job’ figured in the everyday conversation of villagers. Sometimes the conversation was about who had managed to obtain a government job, and whether it was through political connections or through the clearing of competitive civil service exams. At other times conversations dealt with promotions, transfers, pay-scales, or perks that came with seniority, including armed body-guards and red beacon lights on top of office vehicles, the spotting of which inspired awe amongst many villagers. Nearly everyone agreed that obtaining a government job was the highest of achievements. It symbolized a life of ‘taking rest’ (as sitting in an office was perceived as easy and comfortable, especially when compared to cultivating paddy fields), access to various government facilities and benefits, automatic promotions with years of service, and lifelong financial security. And those still unmarried when bestowed with government employment seemed to turn, in the eyes of most villagers, into highly eligible bachelors virtually overnight, and, indeed, could expect to be accosted from various sides with prospective partners.

Of course, government jobs came in different levels and gradations. But while a clear hierarchy was observed between those jobs, any government job holder was thought to enjoy life better than those who had to course life without it, still so if the latter possessed fertile paddy fields, plenty of cattle, or access to other sources of revenue. Government employment, in a word, was thought to safeguard a person from the toils and sweat associated with agriculture, the practice of which – while still the prime mainstay in both Noksen and Phugwumi – was increasingly painted as the destiny of the
uneducated and unsuccessful, a last resort rather than a viable livelihood. In Nagaland, getting inducted into the echelons of government often required political connections – or a ‘recommendation’ in local parlance (chapter VIII) – but it also needed education. This notion was instilled by parents into their children from a young age, and a quick round-call amongst school going adolescents in Phugwumi and Noksen indeed learned that entering the realm of government was the ambition of most. Clearly, government jobs had not just etched themselves at the centre of imagination, but the obtaining of which had turned emblematic of the ‘good life.’ Among Nagas, Chasie (cited in Thong 2012: 903) similarly asserted: ‘the bureaucrat and his lifestyle turned into the “role-model” for many.’

The obtaining a government job, while competitive, was a task easier for Nagas to achieve compared to those living in other parts of the country, if only for Nagaland, as noted, has the country’s ‘highest ratio of government servants to population’ (Patton cited in Nagaland Post 22-04-2016), and which produced a ‘huge overloaded governmental structure (Jamir 2002: 4). The reasons behind why this should be so are multiple but include the now longstanding ‘policy of seduction’ based, among others, on the idea that those co-opted as government servants are less likely to support the politics of insurgency, and – as I will discuss in detail in chapter VIII – a particularistic political sociality in which electors expect their political representatives to reciprocate their electoral support in various forms, including the brokering of government jobs.

61These observations fit oddly with Nehru’s adage that ‘we should not over-administer these areas [tribal inhabited hills of North-East India] or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes’ (Nehru cited in Elwin 1957: 3).
Seen in the light of the lingering Indo-Naga conflict, and the doubt cast on the legitimacy of Nagaland state locally, this widespread desire for government employment appears to sit uncomfortably with the objectives of Naga underground groups, whose ultimate aim remains the very abolition of present-day ‘Indian’ state structures in Naga inhabited areas. But if this strikes as paradoxical, let us continue this discussion by looking a little closer at those villagers holding a government job. As my fieldwork prolonged, I observed how many of the villagers employed in a state office were irregular in their offices, while not a few ever did little more than collecting their pay-cheque at the end of every month. Those employed in the government referred to their job as one of ‘taking rest’, as noted above, and I learned that this was often meant literally. Absenteeism, indeed, was widespread, often the norm rather than the exception.

‘Dr. Nicky [a then Nagaland Minister] asks government employees to be regular’, a headline in the Nagaland Post read. That such a statement makes a headline, rather than, say, be taken for conventional knowledge seems another case in point. The article read on:

‘Minister for Forest, Environment & Wildlife, Dr. Neikeisalie Kire has asked all government employees to be dutiful and attend office regularly. Inaugurating the new Dimapur district treasury office building… Dr. Nicky lamented that some government employees draw salaries without attending office and asked them to be responsible and attend office regularly. He also encouraged government employees to check bogus and proxy employments in their offices to maintain transparency’ (cited in Nagaland Post 10-03-2015).
Such ‘bogus’ and ‘proxy’ employments are thought to be many, and while official data is obviously hard to come by in 2010 a special investigation team unearthed ‘1156 bogus teachers and an additional 1084 absentee teachers across the state, together claiming 24 cores a year out of the state budget’ (cited in Morung Express 05-08-2011). Ezung (2012: 3-4), moreover, found how:

‘In 2006, the Public Work Department (PWD), Mechanical Wing, appointed and regularized 263 employees against the total vacancy of 63… in 2007, 1181 illegal appointments were made from the State Health and Family Welfare department without any advertisement… In the department of education 2140 employees were illegally appointed in 2004 against the actual number of employees of 719, thus making an excess appointment of 1421’ (Ezung 2012: 3-4).

During my fieldwork, I also encountered government job-holders for whom it was virtually impossible to actually attend to duty, even if he or she would have wanted to. For instance, I came across forest guards posted to areas without forest, typists in offices without computers, malaria officers in areas were no cases of malaria ever occurred, peons in offices without buildings, and so on. If for many villagers, then, government employment denoted pay without (much) work, certainly another factor behind the craze after government jobs was the privileged access to lucrative echelons of state resources, and the various ‘side-incomes’ that could come from this. Ezung (2012: 2) wrote thus:

‘In Nagaland, educated youths are under pressure from their parents and relatives to secure government jobs. 94% [of the] respondents viewed a government job as the most preferred job in the state and 96% [of the] respondents preferred the department that provided an opportunity to earn side income, other than teaching
jobs [which presumably does not provide such side-incomes]. The social status of
those working in a department that earns extra cash is high and acknowledged.’

Ezung’s finding that postings which could result in illicit side-deals, cuts, and
commissions were held in higher esteem, not just by the job-holders, but in the eyes of
the wider Naga society, appears telling. ‘This attitude of the people’, Ezung continued,
‘valuing those employees who earn extra money causes corruption because it inspires
people to be more corrupt’ (ibid.). Clearly, this observation defies conventional views
that ‘ordinary villagers’ are the helpless victims of self-seeing state functionaries, the
undue victims of malgovernance, and the persistent wishers of clean governance.

While the obtaining of a government job thus constituted a prime desire for most,
not all was lost for those failing to succeed in this. There was still, after all, the plentiful
world of state-led development, and the contracts, supply-works, development schemes,
projects, and subsidies it was made of. Access to these was pursued relentlessly in
Phugwumi and Noksen, and the next sections will turn ethnographically to this side of
‘state’ and ‘development.’

**Constructing a New Class Room**

When I went to see Alem in Noksen Town, a small hub built on land donated by Noksen
village, where I was then carrying out fieldwork, I found him busy inspecting the
plastering done by two Assamese masons (or self-proclaimed Assamese as Alem was
sure they hailed from Bangladesh, illegally selling their labour in India) he had employed
to help construct the two-room extension to the local Government High School. The
contract he had been commissioned by the Public Works Department (PWD) after a
recommendation by the constituency’s Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), in whose support Alem had rallied during the previous election. Alem had told me about the contract with much enthusiasm. The budget commissioned approximated 7.5 lakh (circa 10,000 euro) and Alem was confident that he would be able to ‘save’ at least half that amount. His proclamation had confused me. ‘Has not the government fixed the budget based on actual expenditures?’ Alem had smiled at my obvious innocence. ‘It will all depend on how I manage things’, he said. He explained:

‘I will hire workers from Assam. They are willing to work against lower rates than Nagas. Since everybody here knows about my contract they will expect me to pay them well, and also give them extras like meat and liquor, so narrowing my profits. In any case, only few Nagas are ready to do manual labour these days. Among labourers for hire in Assam, I will search for Bangladeshis, who charge lesser still.

‘Will this save you half the budget?’, I’d followed up. Alem’s said that it didn’t. But there were more ways still:

‘the biggest cut I will make from the purchase of construction materials. I will use wood from my family’s farm for the window panes, door, and frames, so cutting the expenses of buying and transporting wood from elsewhere. As for the cement, sand, iron rods and tin sheets, there are many different qualities and rates available in the market. I will opt for cheaper ones. And again, buying in Assam is cheaper.’

‘But is it not illegal to use second-rate materials?’ Alem shook his head. According to him it was not. ‘Everybody does it.’ He then explained that while the Government
department had provided him with a blue-print of how the new building should look like, nowhere had it been specified what the minimum quantity and quality of the building materials should be. Nor was it specified from where he was to employ his labourers, or the amount of daily wages he was expected to pay. ‘But certainly the building won’t be of good quality then’, I remarked. ‘Will the government not come and verify your work?’’Most government officers are only interested in securing their own cuts. As long as they get their share none of them will take the trouble of travelling all the way here’, Alem replied. ‘But how about the school?’’, I persisted. ‘Most certainly they won’t be happy with a second-rate building?’

‘When it needs repairs later they can submit a proposal for additional funds. Moreover, I don’t think the school will use the new rooms. Since there is no place inside the school compound, I will have to build it at some distance. And in any case, the school already has sufficient classrooms.’

‘Then why did the government give you the contract in the first place?’, I asked, reacting to Alem’s last point.

‘The school did not ask for it. My MLA arranged it for me. I helped him during the last election and now he is helping me in return. Since I don’t hold a government job, a contract is the only way I can get some money from the government.’

I then learned that Alem had tried to obtain a state contract for many years, filing applications in a host of government departments. But as such contracts were widely sought after, they were hard to obtain. Moreover, they usually needed the kind of political backing which, until recently, Alem did not possess. Alem had found his situation
changed after the last elections, during which he had actively campaigned on behalf of
the winning candidate. When, during the campaign, the candidate had offered him a sum
of money in reward, he had refused to accept it and instead requested the politician to
mediate him a state contract was he to turn victorious. The politician had not only agreed,
but after winning the constituency had kept his promise.

The news of Alem’s success in acquiring a state contract had soon spread in the
town, as well as in nearby Noksens. Many expressed their happiness for Alem: ‘he will
now have enough money to take care of his family properly.’ Others wondered how
much he would be able to earn out of the construction, and suspected the amount to be
high. And if some felt envious towards Alem’s success, they had to concede that he had
played his cards well. Those close to Alem’s family and with previous experience in
managing state contracts came forward with advice, suggesting ways and means through
which he could increase his personal cuts, for instance by readjusting the cement mixture,
or by somewhat decreasing the size of the room vis-à-vis the blueprint.

Yet, now at the verge of completing the building, Alem confessed the various set-
backs he had faced. While he was still anticipating a profit, as he had indeed managed to
complete the building with less than half of the designated budget, what he (as a still
inexperienced contractor) had not foreseen were the many commissions, gifts, and
‘donations’ he was expected to make. It had started in the Public Works Department
whose functionaries had reduced seven percent of the total amount he had signed for.
‘Office maintenance’ they had called it. Earlier, Alem already had to promise a senior
office functionary twenty percent of his net profit in return for him securing the smooth
movement of his file and payments, making sure that his application would not remain
struck on a desk but especially to prevent the contract from being allotted to another contractor at the last instance (the Department, after all, had to negotiate political pressures from multiple constituencies and directions). But if Alem could accept these as the necessary fees, the biggest financial set-back had come from multiple Naga nationalist groups, four of them in total, as each of them had dispatched him a letter laying claim over 5% of the commissioned amount. It was a ‘donation’ they expected to further the Naga cause. Alem, however, was critical and suspected that many such ‘donations’ disappeared in the individual pockets of national workers, pockets which, Alem mocked, seemed to be growing deeper and deeper each year (Chapter III):

‘Ever since the ceasefire [1997], national workers only seem to be collecting taxes. They insist that the money is for Naga Independence, but most underground leaders now live in big houses and drive vehicles. I am not saying that all national workers are after money, but some are. The problem is that the top leaders are not able to control their cadres’ behaviour in places as remote as ours. If they [national workers] want to have money, let them demand it directly from the government. They should not harass a small contractor like me.’

Alem felt adamant about paying them: ‘how can I ever make a profit if I have to give them five percent each?’ As he happened to have some acquaintances in the different factions, he planned to approach them with the request to exempt his contract from being taxed (Later I learned that while he had not fully succeeded in this, but he had been able to negotiate the demand down).

But there were more payments to be made still. An experienced contractor had advised him to gift some money to the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) in return for the
completion certificate only this officer was authorised to furnish, and which was necessary for Alem to claim the final instalment of the designated budget. Even if the SDO would not ask for this, Alem was told that it was ‘customary to offer him some.’ Finally, Alem was expected to donate ten percent of the project amount to the local church. It was a spiritual and moral obligation he could not escape without inviting criticism of being greedy and selfish, but an amount he was able to somewhat mitigate by instead of cash offering new furniture to the church office, and which he was able to manufacture at a discounted rate.

The Moralities of the ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’ of Development

‘Look at his belly’, Akho remarked in jest, pointing to a former member of the Village Development Board (VDB), whose belly protruded through his shirt. ‘Before he started dealing in development he was slim like us. Now, see what has happened. All our development must be stacked in his stomach.’ In Phugwumi, having one’s belly bulging out (or ‘being healthy’) was interpreted as the result of an affluent lifestyle and worthy of praise. What the remark suggested was a direct linkage between the former VDB member’s personal prosperity and his previous privileged access to the realm of development monies, whose influx into the village had witnessed a steep increase in recent years. Everyone present in the room, where a bottle of adulterated rum was being shared, laughed, including the ex-VDB member himself. ‘What to do’, he responded, also in jest. ‘I might never get such an opportunity again.’ Akho’s remark, to be sure, was not meant as an accusation but part of the little jokes and teasing that came after a few pegs of rum. In any case, no villager would be foolhardy enough to insist that those dealing in
development should not make some financial gains out of it, a point to which I will return shortly.

If the private appropriation of village development funds was framed in terms of ‘eating’, the local idiom of development also included frequent references to ‘drinking development’, which invoked the perceived excessive intake of liquor by village development practitioners, mostly VDB members. It was a crisp November morning when I accompanied Athe on a visit to the Village Health Centre. His over eighty years old left knee was giving him more and more trouble. The previous day he had called on the house of one of the village’s nurses employed in Phugwumi’s health centre, and she had suggested an injection, for which she told Athe to meet her in the clinic early the next day. It was on the path leading to the clinic that we crossed ways with a present member of Phugwumi’s Village Development Board. He was leaning against his vehicle, waiting for another VDB member to show up. They were going to Pfutsero, he said to Athe by way of greeting. ‘VDB duty’, he then added. Athe, like most villagers, suspected that such frequent trips to Pfutsero undertaken by VDB members usually ended up in one of the illegal local drinking dens where they used development budgets to indulge into beers, rums, and whiskies. ‘Please bring me a good bottle of rum when you return’, Athe asked him. The VDB member returned a hesitant smile. He knew he was being mocked.

Athe, indeed, did not want the VDB member to bring him any liquor. He did not drink. Not since he had converted to Christianity in the late 1950s. The locally commanding Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), after all, defined the intake of liquor as sinful for Christians and had successfully lobbied with the state government to declare Nagaland a ‘dry state’, which it became in 1989. This made the intake of liquor
not only seen as ‘sinful’ in Nagaland, but also rendered illegal, and therefore expensive. While ‘eating’ development was, figuratively, understood by most as a VDB member’s inevitable appropriation of some development monies to secure his family’s present and future material necessities, and, to an extent, was morally condoned, the ‘drinking’ of development had turned into a lexicon to criticize development’s perceived depravities, which also included, in the eyes of especially elders, the diminishing of honesty, the rise of individualism, and the flourishing of greed, thus puncturing the more communitarian ethos of earlier days. Another critique that was voiced was that the influx of development monies rendered the new generation weak and indolent. One elder formulated this diminishing strength of villagers thus:

‘Before the arrival of statehood, we had to work hard. There were no government offices and no power tillers to plough our fields. But still, we managed to bring in large harvests. Today, the youth are lazy. It is because of the development schemes which provide them easy money without much labour. Whereas earlier we could finish harvesting one field with six persons in one day: today we need at least double the amount of manpower.’

In Phugwumi, the intake of liquor had seemingly become intricately related to VDB activities, and on various occasions, when I joined VDB members to ‘watch development’ (as some of them called it), for instance to see a JCB clearing a patch of forest to construct an agri-link road, the blacktopping of an existing rough road, or a drilling machine exploring new water sources, it usually did not take long for a bottle of rum and whiskey to appear, which was subsequently consumed by VDB members while they ‘supervised’ the development being done, which was mostly carried out by non-
Naga labourers. This made one village elder I spoke to wonder whether the six village clans always selected a drunkard to become a VDB member (for a set period of three years) or whether the entrance into the VDB transformed previously ‘simple’ villagers into perpetual drunkards. The wives of VDB members I interviewed seemed to suggest the second possibility as they complained how their husbands changed after entering the realm of village development: ‘Ever since he joined the VDB he refused to join me to our fields. All the work I am doing alone now. What is worse, he has started drinking a lot. Almost every night he comes home drunk. Earlier, he was a good man, but the VDB has a bad influence on him.’ I never found out for sure what caused this perceived correlation between VDB membership and the ‘excessive’ intake of liquor, but that this relationship existed was a matter of wide concern amongst villagers.

What did become clear, however, was that earning carved out of development activities was locally configured as ‘Indian money’ and ‘easy money’, as income gained without investing toil and sweat, and a distinction was locally made – both conceptually and morally – between development monies, and those monies achieved through hard and honest labour. To illustrate, while those villagers who had spent their day working for the Village Development Board expected, and were usually served, a few alcoholic refreshments after, or in between, the day’s work, liquor was neither demanded, nor served, after a day’s labour in someone’s paddy field. To illustrate further, while those villagers who let themselves serve liquor by the VDB found no contradiction in development monies being spent on liquor, any villager squandering his income reaped from the fields was condemned as both immoral and irresponsible, acts no self-respecting villager was expected to indulge in.
Let us return to ‘eating’ development. While VDB members were expected to carve out profits for themselves, this was, in the opinion of most villagers, not to turn into an indefinite feast, and many in Phugwumi opined that the VDB members were presently eating a little too much, doing too little to improve the villagers’ material welfare. In the words of a Phugwumi elder:

‘If they [the VDB] can use 50% of the monies provided to the village, it is quite alright. With that, some good things can be done. But nowadays they don’t even manage 25%. Too much they spend on liquor. See the road they blacktopped below my house. They proposed to blacktop one kilometre but in the end they only managed half of it.’

The crux of this criticism is revealing for the distinction it suggests between ‘official budget’ – which was the total amount sanctioned to the VDB by the government – and the amount ‘socially sanctioned’ by the village community, which equated roughly half of its official tally. The ‘grey’ or ‘twilight’ zone in between, while problematic in terms of official procedures, laws, and audits, indicate the range of socially and morally approved (or at least not disapproved) private cuts on part of VDB members and others with lucrative access to such development budgets.62

62 This, however, was not the whole story. Akin to Alem’s contract, and as discussed in the previous chapter, VDB budgets were subject to taxes by rivalling Naga underground groups. While earlier national workers would visit house to house to collect taxes, after the delegation of development monies to village committees undergrounds demanded lump-sums from annual VDB funds in lieu of house to house collections, thus freeing villagers from paying them from their own household budgets. It was the ‘audit gap’ between ‘official’ and ‘social’ sanctions that provided both the pool and veil for these transactions.
This social authorisation to ‘eat’ privately what was meant to be partaken communally seemed to correspond to the local distinction between state monies and income generated through cultivating paddy or other activities that involved toil and sweat. In Phugwumi, state monies were shrouded in moral ambiguity, they were seen as ‘external’, of uncertain origins, vague purposes, and unclear belongings, and often spoken about as ‘Indian money’, not ‘Naga money’, even though in both instances the currency remained the same rupee notes. Such a distinction was common across Nagaland: ‘All this is Indian money’, a former Nagaland Chief Minister commented on the widespread corruption in his state, ‘We don’t pay taxes here… so whatever is being done with the money is only benefitting some Nagas, it is not taking money away from them. It is only Indian money that is being used’ (cited in Hazarika 2011: 241; emphases mine).63

The kinship of ‘communitisation’

No account of Nagaland’s development paradigm can be considered complete without discussing the state’s unique policy and project of ‘communitisation’, which refers to a modality of governance that is neither private nor public, but presided over by village communities. It is unique because communitisation has its genesis in Nagaland, at the behest of R.S. Pandey, who was deputed to Nagaland in the year 2000 as its Chief Secretary. It was Pandey who presided over the drawing of the Communitisation of Public Institutions Act, and which was subsequently adopted by the Nagaland Assembly.

63On account of purported collective ‘backwardness’, Nagas are exempted from paying taxes to the government.
in 2001. What this legalisation entailed was the further transfer – after the earlier deregulation of development activities to Village Development Boards in the early 1980s – of government assets, functions, and the control over public services down to village levels with the overall aim to improve the delivery of public utilities.

When Pandey (2010: 1-2) first arrived in Nagaland he observed how ‘a sense of despondency in the society and the governance system was clearly evident.’ He wrote: ‘“Nothing can happen here”; “things will never improve” were some of the general feelings amongst the people. Although the feeling was most intensely associated with the common people, it was not exclusive to them. Even the civil society leadership and the government officers were in its grip. A deep sense of cynicism was evident. The option was to drift along with the current or to think of a change [of] process’ (ibid.: 2).

The problem, so Pandey diagnosed, was the pervasive malfunctioning of the government, whose record of delivering public services were ‘indeed pitiful’ and ‘abysmally poor’ (ibid.: 3). Things, Pandey concluded, had to change, and drastically at that. Complete privatization, usually seen as the opposite of government services, was no option given that ‘profit motive would take precedence over social service’ (ibid.: 12). What Pandey proposed instead was the communitisation of government services. As a vision, communitisation, Pandey explained: ‘is about the user community [the Naga villages], the real stakeholders taking charge of the institutions and services set up by the Government and turning them around. It involves empowerment, delegation, decentralization, building capacity, and much more, all rolled into one’ (Pandey 2010: ix).
In terms more concrete, it entailed the delegation and deregulation of responsibilities and funds pertaining the health and education sectors, as well as electricity and water supply, to the village levels. Each Nagaland village was to constitute a number of committee, i.e. a village health committee, education committee, power committee, and water committee. These committees were each to be headed by a selected chairperson from the village (with the condition that the person thus chosen was not him or herself a government employee) and would, as a committee, adjudicate over allocated government assets and resources. For instance, the purchase of stationeries, medicines, electric wires, the construction of new classrooms, the bringing of health facilities; all of these, and more, would no longer be carried out by the government, but transferred to empowered community-based committees. This delegation of duties went further still, and came to include the payments of salaries for teachers, doctors, and nurses, which became channeled through specifically created bank accounts in the name of the various committees. To counter absenteeism and malgovernance, the committees were particularly empowered to deduct percentages of any employee’s salary if he or she was found irregular, or unsatisfactory, in carrying out his or her duties.

This far-going decentralization of state functions and assets, so Pandey envisaged, would put a halt to endemic forms of corruption that he found raging across government departments, as well as providing ‘ordinary’ Naga villagers with a much larger stake in their own development. This was expected to reduce corruption, eradicate absenteeism, and minimize malgovernance given that, unlike state functionaries, many of whom had proven to be self-seeking in their behaviour, villagers were thought to be inclined less to indulge in the private appropriations of resources designated for the welfare of their very
own village. While this policy of communitisation may be interpreted as an admittance of state weakness, of the state’s local failure to act as a guarantor and provider of the public good, more importantly, according to Pandey, communitisation was building upon the rich social capital characteristic of the traditional Naga ‘village republic’; ‘the cohesion, or, in other words, the rich density of the social capital, within the villages of ancient vintage, continuing through generations. Connections and bonds among the people belong to a tribe which covers several villages also exist, but the cohesiveness is stronger in a village than in a tribe as a whole’ (2010: 23). It was this village cohesiveness, its pre-existent communitarian ethos that Pandey saw as the ‘social capital’ that would near mechanically create and sustain ‘good governance’ locally. The concept and implementation of the new communitisation policy in Nagaland was lauded widely, and Pandey was awarded the Prime Minister’s Award for Excellence in Public Administration as well as the United Nations Public Service Award.

Resuming our ethnographic approach, the remainder of this section will evaluate the functioning of communitisation at the grassroots in Phugwumi. I will argue that in a context in which the legitimacy of the state remains contested, and villagers express a lack of moral commitment and belonging to that state, the rationale of the communitisation policy was turned topsy-turvy as it was precisely because of close and affective social and kinship bonds in the village – which Pandey envisaged as indigenous harbingers of ‘good governance’ – that absenteeism and the pilfering of state resources was permitted to continue. To substantiate this argument ethnographically, I will focus on the complexities, intricacies, and negotiations that lie behind the functioning of Phugwumi’s health centre.
Phugwumi’s health unit, housed in a spacious and neatly plastered building, was located a little off the main village. In its immediate vicinity, a handful of quarters had been built for the doctor and nurses to occupy during their tenures in the village. Budgets for their construction had been allocated by the government, and the quarters were built sufficiently large to accommodate a family each. And yet, each of them, without exception, was locked permanently with sturdy padlocks; its walls overgrown with moulds and shrubs, its wood decaying, and most of its windows broken. Ever since their construction, they had remained vacant as neither any of the doctors nor nurses posted there had agreed to reside in them. The doctor, who, at the time of my fieldwork, was also a Chakhesang, preferred his house in the state capital of Kohima over the rural scenes of Phugwumi, and visited the village only intermittently. If, before communitisation, the villager could have done little about his absenteeism given that the doctor was answerable not to the villagers, but to his department heads, this changed after the health-centre was communitised and placed in the jurisdiction of a newly enacted village’s health committee. In actual practice, however, this only meant a shift in the authorities the doctor had to negotiate his absenteeism with, which became delegated from his department’s secretary or director to the chairperson of Phugwumi’s health committee. He had, indeed, called on the chairperson to plead his case. According to the chairperson, whom I interviewed, the doctor had reasoned along the following lines:

‘My wife and children live in Kohima. They go to school there. I can’t travel up and down from Kohima every day. It is simply too far. And it will not be good for my family if I would have to live separately from them. Moreover, the nurses are here to take care of the patients. And if anything serious happens, patients need to
come to Kohima anyway given the limited medical facilities present in the village.’

The doctor had also played the ‘tribal card’, asking the chairperson for his understanding since they were both Chakhesang. The chairperson had heeded to his request. ‘We have to understand his personal situation’, so the chairperson explained. ‘Then too, he is a fellow Chakhesang. We need to help one another.’ It was hence agreed that the doctor would attend to duty in Phugwumi only once a week, and further that the Health Committee would abstain from either reporting his absenteeism to higher-ups or deduct any of his salary. In return – or in reward – the doctor assured the committee a monthly ‘donation’ from his salary to the village’s Health Committee.

With the doctor having secured his continued absenteeism in the new framework of communitisation, drawing among others on the Chakhesang identity he shared with the Phugwumi villagers and the sentiments of mutual cooperation and understanding such common identification implied, I now turn to the nurses attached to Phugwumi’s health centre. Unlike the doctor, whose permanent residence was in Kohima, nearly all the nurses employed in the health centre hailed from Phugwumi itself. In most cases, their first postings had been to different parts of the state, but over time they had managed to pull ‘political strings’ – or secure ‘recommendations’ from local MLAs (more in chapter VIII) – to see themselves transferred to their natal villages. However, despite the nurses’ close proximity to the health centre, both in terms of the minimal distance they had to traverse, and in terms of social bonds as the nurses simultaneously fulfilled social roles of wives, children, aunties, neighbours, and clan-members of Phugwumi’s patients, most of them were irregular, often grossly so. None of them, moreover, occupied the quarters
allocated to them. They, after all, had their own ancestral houses in the village, or had joined the extended families of their husbands as social norms prescribed.

Most days no nurse was to be seen in or around the clinic, and those who did attend to their duties usually stayed in the clinic only briefly. Villagers knew this, and anticipated on the nurses’ absence by calling, in case of sickness, not on the clinic but on the private residences of one of the nurses within the village. Most nurses kept a stock of medicines there, as well as basic tools to diagnose a patient. When a villager nevertheless needed to visit the clinic, for instance to have him or herself examined more thoroughly, to receive an injection, or to collect prescribed medicines, he or she would make sure to first call around to find out if any of the nurses intended to attend, and if so around what time of the day. Going to the clinic unannounced was considered foolhardy.

Some in the village were sceptical about the continuing absenteeism in the health centre, and especially about the presence of a doctor only once a week. Nurses, after all, they argued, were trained to do only so much. ‘What in the event of an emergency?’, they questioned. The closest hospital was in Kohima, which was a couple of hours’ drive away. The presence of a doctor within the village could therefore save lives. Those who were critical expressed discontentment with the village’s health committee: ‘they now have the authority. They can insist on the doctor and nurses to be regular. But they don’t.’

Most in the village offered a more nuanced understanding, however. ‘What can the health committee do?’ Vezehü, a village elder, said. He continued: ‘Only those in the village who do not hold any government job are eligible for membership in the committee. That means most members are uneducated. How can it be their responsibility to oversee the health centre? How can they control a highly qualified doctor? Is this not
the duty of our government?’ Moreover, while Pandey envisaged that pre-existent social capital and the affective bonds that characterized village life would ensure, after communitisation, that villagers would unite in ensuring the smooth functioning of village-based government institutions, in Phugwumi it was precisely the strong social bonds that provided especially the nurses with the social leverage not to attend to their duties. ‘This is the problem when government employees are from the village itself’, Vezehü explained, then continuing:

‘They have so many other things to do in the village. They have to go to their fields, or do household chores. During transplanting and harvesting periods they have to go to the fields. Moreover, most of the nurses are mothers too, and have to look after their children. They are our own family and clan-members, how can we tell them to forsake their duties as wives and mothers and be regular in the clinic? That would be quite wrong on our part.’

It was this cross-cutting of kinship bonds and loyalties that not only prevented the health committee from enforcing those employed in the clinic to be regular, but equally applied to the teachers at Phugwumi’s government high school, most of whom, too, hailed from Phugwumi itself, and many of whom, too, were regularly absent. ‘But how can we deduct salary from a fellow-villager, a clan-member, or even a neighbour?’, a member of Phugwumi’s educational committee expressed. ‘That would be a very bad thing to do on our part. We can ask them indirectly to be serious, and we try to do that, but that’s all we can do.’ At times, such cross-cutting of social bonds took one more complex forms. Vezehü explained:
‘Look, the members of the health committee too have family members, and some of them work in government departments. If they will deduct the salary of a fellow-villager for the reason of absenteeism, surely the family but also the clan of that person will feel bad. Then, if they find out that the son or a relative of the member who deducted the salary is not regular, they will take revenge by telling the committee in charge to deduct his salary. In this way, communitisation, if we enforce it, will only cause conflicts and resentments. In the end, we are all related in the village. They can’t expect us to control and punish one another. Only the government can do that, but they should do so without interference from us villagers.’

Vezehü, who was clearly concerned with the dismal functioning of particularly the health centre, suggested that, if communitisation was ever to succeed, only doctors and nurses from distant villages should be posted in Phugwumi. ‘If outsiders are employed in the village, they have no family responsibilities, fields, or other works to look after. They can stay in the quarters and carry out their duties on a daily basis, leaving our village only during holidays.’ I came across similar arguments vis-a-vis the teachers of Phugwumi’s Government High School. Among them, the only teacher thought to be regular was Mr. Gupta, who hailed from faraway West Bengal. The villagers appreciated his dedication, and explained his punctuality and commitment to his duties so: as an outsider, he did not own land or officially belonged to a clan, and unlike local teachers there was therefore no need for him to forfeit his teaching obligations.

To be sure, there was certainly no policy on part of the government to staff local schools and health clinics with local villagers, but most villagers preferred postings in
their natal village and were ready to explore all means to secure a transfer ‘back home.’

What this ethnographic snapshot, thus, suggests is that in the absence of moral commitment to the state and its resources, the close social bonds and social capital Pandey praised as characteristic of the social substance of the prototypical Naga village, rather than offering an ‘indigenous solution’, to widespread absenteeism, corruption, and malgovernance, was both reworked and invoked by government employees to have their continued absenteeism excused.

Towards a Moral Economy of State Resources

From the various ethnographic incursions and historical subtexts discussed in the various sections above, a number of threads seem to emerge.

First, nobody in Noksen and Phugwumi opined that those engaging themselves in development activities or state contracts should not secure private cuts. In the case of Alem, some of his acquaintances with past experiences in handling state contracts readily offered advice on ways and means through which he could enlarge his personal profits. VDB members in Phugwumi were similarly expected to carve private earnings out of their privileged access to the village development funds. Thus, if ‘audit societies’ (Power 1999) and ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000) are thought to be on the rise, and a host of national and international organisations promote ‘good governance’, the implicit moral consent, certainly to an extent, granted by Noksen and Phugwumi villagers for those presiding over development budgets to siphon off personal cuts seems at least problematic. This also challenges the conventional notion that ‘the public’ is everywhere the passive and defenceless victim of corrupt practices. But rather than conjuring this as
further evidence of how deeply ingrained corruption has become in Nagaland, this must also make us reconsider the meaning and understanding of the ‘public good’ and the historical role of the state as its provider locally. Most Naga villagers’ experiences of the state informs them that the state is not a servant of the people, does not shield from physical violence, and that it pursues its own agenda in providing largesse.

Second, both Alem and Phugwumi’s VDB members felt no moral compulsion to carry out projects in ways it was instructed. In the case of Alem particularly, it is also imperative to consider the long and arduous road he had plodded to finally obtain the government contract he had long desired. For him, the contract was first and foremost a reward he had duly earned by actively campaigning on behalf of the sitting MLA. That the contract was a gift to Alem, and not, say, based on a local need-assessment was evident from the fact that the school already possessed sufficient classrooms. Indeed, when I visited Noksen again six months after Alem had finished the building, it came as no surprise that the new classroom had not been put to use. A similar absence of moral obligation to carry out government duties can be discerned from the activities of government job-holders at the village levels, many of whom (though not all) readily ignored their ascribed duties, resulting in widespread forms of absenteeism even the much-praised policy of communitisation could not turn around. The example of communitisation, more broadly, indicates that in a setting in which villagers profess little moral obligation to the local state, relations of kinship, and affective social bonds more widely, may work to continue absenteeism, rather than doing away with it, as the policy of communitisation was expected to achieve.
Third, what seem to have emerged locally is a ‘dual economy’, not in the sense of Polanyi’s (1944) economic substantivism versus formalism but based on a conceptual and moral division between state, or ‘Indian’ resources – which are seen as fast cash, morally dubious in character, and ‘external’, as belonging to nobody in particular and therefore the property of whoever is able to lay their hands on them – and ‘Naga’ monies generated internally, mostly through cultivating paddy fields, and which carry a more conservative quality. That such a distinction appears to exist not just in Nagaland, but in conflict-ridden areas in the region more widely, can be read in the following words of a former Governor to Manipur: ‘the loot of Indian money is [seen as] legitimate business by the people at large’ (Marwah 2009: 151). That the pilfering of state monies was seen as ‘legitimate business’ locally underlines, if anything, that even if the post-statehood political economy of ‘seduction’ succeeded in co-opting many, it came at the cost of an absence of moral commitment, belonging, and accountability to the state and its resources.

Fourth, and in continuation of the previous chapter, the realm of local development monies and their ‘misuse’ cannot be understood without reference to the authoritative presence of nationalist Naga groups. While formally opposing the state, at the grassroots these groups have meticulously inserted themselves as additional and complicating layers of governance, including regimes of taxation, and with which local contractors and Village Development Boards need to reckon with. To reiterate: while, in terms of audits, the distinction made in Phugwumi between official and socially sanctioned budgets offered space for VDB members to secure their own cuts and
commissions, such a gap was simultaneously imperative to conceal the monetary ‘donations’ the VDB was forced to pay to Naga underground groups.

Fifth, the absence of moral commitment towards the state and its resources does not preclude the existence of another set of moral obligations on part of state beneficiaries. Had Alem, for instance, forfeited on donating a part of his budget to the local church – even though he was able to somewhat reduce the expected amount by making an offering in kind rather than in cash – the absence of moral denunciation with regard to his private cuts might have waned. While ideas of the ‘public good’, and the state as its provider, remain ambiguous at best, for many Nagas the ‘Christian good’ was a fundamental value, and no self-respecting person would try to escape from it.

Finally, while there is much talk about the ‘crisis of corruption’ as it is experienced and condemned in places across India, the case of rural Nagaland shows that the promised nation-wide combat against corruption through the adoption of more stringent anti-corruption laws might disappoint those advocating such measures. In Nagaland, such an approach, if anything, would denote ‘a premature closure on the question of how to define “corruption”’ (Shore and Haller 2005: 3). Locally, as this chapter has variously sought to illustrate, ‘corruption’ is hardly an issue of law but exists and persists in relation to a particularistic moral economy vis-a-vis state resources that indicates a clear absence of belonging to that state, and through which ‘state monies’ are configured as ‘external’ and ‘morally ambiguous.’ This observation, and which runs through all the sections of this chapter, should however not be read as merely a sign of local depravities, but one which must be understood in the light of the complex and contentious political and social history of the Indo-Naga conflict, the contested creation
of Nagaland state, and the subsequent shift from Centre-led policies of ‘coercion’ to ones of ‘seduction.’ While in recent years the topic of corruption seems to have become more of a concern locally, especially in urban and uneducated circles in the state, this has however not percolated down to village levels. If laws can be changed, tightened, or altered overnight, moral judgments, lingering resentments, and contested loyalties are a great deal harder to change. Until and unless this would happen the pilfering of state resources and widespread absenteeism in Nagaland seems unlikely to abate.