Research Article

Sacred Spaces in Conflicts: Faith Based Organizations and the Peacebuilding Landscape in Northeast India and Southeast Myanmar

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Abstract

This study examines how Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) create and sustain moral, spiritual, and communal spaces for reconciliation in two protracted ethno-political conflicts, namely, the Nagas in Northeast India (NEI) and the Karen people in Southeast Myanmar (SEM). Using Religious Peacebuilding Theory and drawing from historical documents and informal conversations with FBO leaders, the study analyzes how faith communities operate as critical yet often overlooked peacebuilding actors. The findings show that both movements emerged from similar colonial disruptions, which helped shape early political consciousness and collective ethnic identity. Although each community pursued self-determination, internal fragmentation driven by ideological and leadership differences complicated political negotiations. In these divided contexts, FBOs created "sacred spaces" that nurtured trust,

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dialogue, and communal healing in ways state institutions often could not. Among the Nagas, a largely Christian social setting allowed faith-based actors to draw on shared ideas of forgiveness, and covenant. This moral coherence gave them strong legitimacy to mediate between rival groups, ease internal violence, and support political dialogue. In the Karen context, where both Buddhist and Christian communities shape social life, peacebuilders had to form intentional interreligious partnerships. Faith actors worked together to create inclusive spiritual and cultural spaces that encouraged unity, strengthened resilience, and mobilized grassroots involvement in peace efforts. The study concludes that FBOs advance peace not only through theology but by creating sacred relational spaces where divided communities can envision new futures. Peacebuilding policy should recognize them as co-authors of reconciliation, strengthen interfaith cooperation, and deepen contextual theological training for conflict transformation.

Keywords: Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), Karen & Naga People, Northeast India (NEI), Peacebuilding Landscape, Southeast Myanmar (SEM).

Introduction

Faith has long shaped political resistance and reconciliation in ethnically divided societies. The Nagas in Northeast India (NEI) and Karen people in Southeast Myanmar (SEM) struggles illustrate how faith-based actors influence peace trajectories in post-colonial Asia. Although located in distinct state system, both communities emerged from similar colonial encounters. They pursued self-determination through early political bodies such as the Naga Club (1918) and the Karen National Association (1880s), which later evolved into the Naga National Council (NNC) and the Karen National Union (KNU). Despite differing national contexts, both movements center on ethnic identity, land, cultural preservation, marginalization, and internal divisions that have complicated peace efforts. While much has been written on their historical and political trajectories, comparative studies remain scarce, particularly on the role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs). FBOs have long contributed to reconciliation and community cohesion in both regions, yet their impact on peacebuilding is underexplored. This study therefore addresses these gaps by asking:

1. What are the historical and political roots of the Naga and Karen struggles for autonomy and identity?
2. How have peace negotiations evolved, and what roles have FBOs played?
3. How do the trajectories of conflict and peacebuilding converge or diverge between the two regions?

The significance of this study lies in its comparative analysis of two long-running ethnic conflicts in South and Southeast Asia. It

reveals the overlooked role of FBOs where religion and ethnic identity intersect, showing how they shape peace processes. It also offers practical insights for policymakers, NGOs, and theological institutions on the potential of religious actors in complex political context.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars note that religion is ambivalent in conflict (Appleby, 2000). It can intensify violence, but it can also open pathways for forgiveness, healing, and coexistence (Appleby 2000; Smock 2008). Despite this dual role, the liberal-secular peacebuilding paradigm has often sidelined religion and tends to treat religion mainly as a source of conflict and ignores its constructive potential (Asadullah et al., 2021; Davie et al., 2018). Philpott (2009) and Abu-Nimer (2001) stresses the importance of engaging religious actors at all stages of peace processes. Through narratives of repentance, covenant, and communal healing, they help rebuild trust and reshape social relationships.

This study adopts Religious Peacebuilding Theory, which positions religious actors and FBOs as central agents in conflict transformation rather than peripheral supporters. The theory draws attention to the theological, moral, and communal resources that empower FBOs to act effectively in protracted conflicts (Appleby 2000; Gopin 2002; Philpott 2007). FBOs exist in many forms, including congregational initiatives and independent faith-inspired organizations, with varying degrees of religious identity and institutional affiliation (Bouta et al. 2005). They carry moral legitimacy, enjoy community trust, and hold spiritual authority (Steele & Wilson-Grau 2016; Subbotsky 2016). These qualities make them effective actors in shaping

reconciliation at both grassroots and elite levels (Bouta et al. 2005; Rogers et al. 2008; Matyók et al. 2015; Lederach 1996).

Within this study, Religious Peacebuilding Theory serves as the key analytical lens for understanding how Christian FBOs influence peace trajectories in NEI and SEM. The framework helps explain how FBOs such as the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR), and Karen Unity Building Group (KUBG) and One Voice of Kawthoolei (OVOK) have brokered ceasefires, reduced internal violence, supported dialogue, and provided humanitarian assistance. It also commented on how spiritual authority, theological narratives, and grassroots legitimacy enable these FBOs to shape reconciliation processes and political negotiations in long-running ethno-political conflicts.

Research Methodology

This research is shaped by the author's positionality as both insider and practitioner. Having grown up in Nagaland has provided intimate knowledge of Naga socio-political and cultural contexts, while nearly a decade of work with Karen communities in SEM has contributed valuable insights into their histories and political dynamics. Although this positionality strengthens the depth and authenticity of the study, careful attention has been given to potential biases through the use of critical reflexivity to ensure analytical rigor. Building on this foundation, the study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in a comparative case study approach (Yin, 2017) to explore the protracted ethno-political struggles of the Nagas in NEI and the Karen people in SEM. The

research is designed to examine the historical and political origins of these movements, trace the evolution of peace negotiations, and analyze the distinctive roles played by FBOs in peacebuilding within each context.

Data Collection was carried out through two complementary methods. First, a wide range of historical, political, and organizational documents were reviewed. These documents were analyzed through thematic coding, with categories such as identity formation, state responses, peace processes, and FBO engagement guiding the analysis. Second, a total of nine informal conversations were conducted—five with FBO leaders from NEI and four from SEM. These took place in their naturally settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016), mostly in workplace, after church services, and over the phone. Notes were taken immediately after each engagement, and the content was organized into thematic clusters such as FBO initiatives, negotiation experiences, and perceptions of peacebuilding.

The study applies a structured, focused comparison across both cases, examining them through shared analytical lenses: historical foundations of conflict, trajectories of peace negotiations, religious identity and mobilization, and the strategies and limitations of FBO involvement. This comparative framework enables the identification of both convergences and divergences, revealing how similar ethno-political grievances evolve differently under India's democratic system and Myanmar's militarized governance.

Findings and Discussions

1. Historical and Political Roots of the Nagas Struggle in NEI

The Nagas, an ethnic group indigenous to NEI and parts of northwestern Myanmar, have been at the center of longstanding political conflict due to their demand for autonomy and self-determination. The British first encountered the Nagas after the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which led to British involvement in the region (Venuh, 2005). Later on, the British sought to control the Nagas and also conducted punitive expeditions to quell resistance (Chasie, 1999). The British had effectively subdued the Naga resistance and established a formal administrative structure in the Naga Hills by the end of the 19th century. The British did little to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Nagas, but Christian missionaries, who were permitted to operate in the region, established hospitals and schools (Gupta, 2020). The missionaries' efforts contributed to the rise of an educated Naga middle class, distinct from traditional tribal leadership. This new class began to transcend tribal loyalties and seek collective political interests for all Nagas.

The early 20th century marked a turning point in Naga political consciousness. During World War I, the British recruited many Nagas as laborers and porters, and their experiences during the war helped foster unity among the different Naga tribes. This sense of solidarity led to the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 after they came back home (Longchar, 2011). This formation was a significant precursor to the Naga nationalist movement. In 1929, the Naga Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission, which was investigating constitutional reforms in British India (Gupta, 2020).

The memorandum requested that the Nagas be allowed self-determination once the British departed. This demand later shapes the political aspirations of the Nagas. Over time, the Naga Club evolved into the NNC, which initially called for autonomy within India and a separate electorate for the Nagas. As India gained independence from Britain in 1947, the Naga issue intensified. Led by Angami Zapu Phizo, the NNC declared independence from Britain on August 14, 1947, a day before India's independence. This act of defiance was a significant moment in Naga nationalism and initiated the first major internal conflict in post-colonial India. The NNC conducted a plebiscite in 1951, claiming that 99% of Nagas voted for independence (Longchari, 2016). However, the Indian government rejected these claims and viewed the Naga resistance as a law and order issue (Srikanth & Thomas, 2005). The NNC responded by establishing the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) in 1956, which launched an armed insurgency to continue their struggle for independence. In response, the Indian government deployed military forces to the region and enacted several stringent laws, including the Assam Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous Districts) Act (1953), the Assam Disturbed Areas Act (1955), and the draconian law Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958 (Iralu, 2009). These laws granted extensive powers to the military and resulted in widespread human rights violations.

In 1964, the NNC agreed to a ceasefire with the Indian government following appeals from the Naga Peace Mission, which had been formed and led by a FBO, the NBCC, leading to 18 months of negotiations (Srikanth & Thomas, 2005). These talks ultimately

failed, as the Indian government insisted on solutions within the Indian Constitution, while the NNC refused to accept anything less than full independence. By 1975, the conflict escalated further when President's Rule was imposed in Nagaland, and military operations resumed. During this period, a faction within the NNC leadership signed the Shillong Accord, which stated that the Nagas accepted the Indian Constitution "without condition" and agreed to surrender arms to facilitate future negotiations (Singha & Singh, 2016). However, this accord created a deep schism within the Naga nationalist movement and infuriated many radical elements within the NNC. Two prominent leaders, Isaac Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, openly rejected the accord (Das, 2007) and formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in collaboration with Khaplang. The NSCN quickly rose to prominence as a powerful political group. However, internal conflicts eventually led to a split within the NSCN in 1988 driven by both ideological differences and personality clashes (Iralu, 2009). This division weakened the Naga insurgency and led to the emergence of multiple factions. The Naga political struggle and conflict, which dates to early British encounters in the 19th century, has developed into a long-standing and complex struggle for self-determination and independence. Despite the creation of the state of Nagaland and multiple peace efforts, ceasefires and negotiations, the conflict persists, marked by intermittent violence and ongoing negotiations between the Government of India (GoI) and various Naga factions.

2. Historical and Political Roots of the Karen People Struggle in SEM

The Karen people, one of Myanmar's largest ethnic minorities, comprise an estimated population of 5 to 7 million (Kham, 2021) did not share a unified background during the pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms or under British rule (Charney, 2009). Tensions between the Karen and the Bamar majority, Myanmar's dominant ethnic group, date back to colonial times. The British employed a policy of "direct and indirect rule," (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012) which positioned Karen soldiers as agents of suppression against Burmese rebellions in the late 19th century. When Burma was colonized in 1885, Karen people, along with other ethnic groups, were recruited into the colonial administration, including the police force, to quash Bamar nationalist uprisings (Jolliffe, 2016). This sowed seeds of distrust between the Bamar and the Karen tensions that continued post-independence.

Karen National Association (KNA) was founded in the 1880s by educated Christian Karen elites, marking the beginning of the Karen nationalist movement. Under the leadership of Saw Ba U Gyi KNU was formed and followed the independence negotiations between General Aung San and the British in January 1947 (Jolliffe, 2016). Aung San's talks with the British, however, did not address the Karen demand for an autonomous Karen state. This lack of recognition prompted the KNU to boycott the constitutional development process. By July 1947, the KNU had formed the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), preparing for armed resistance. The conflict officially began in January 1949 when Karen-Bamar tensions escalated into open warfare (Garbagni & Walton, 2020). In August 1950, Saw Ba U Gyi, the KNU's founding leader, was

killed by the Tatmadaw (Jolliffe, 2016). Although the government created a Karen State in 1952 (today's Kayin State), it failed to align with the original demands of the Karen people.

After the country's first military coup in the 1960s, General Ne Win implemented the notorious "four cuts" strategy, which aimed to sever insurgents from essential resources by cutting off food, funds, information, and recruitment, a method inspired by earlier British colonial tactics. This strategy aimed to sever ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) from their civilian support base by forcibly relocating thousands of people from EAO controlled areas to sites near Tatmadaw camps. Tatmadaw continued this strategy into the 1980s, causing widespread devastation across SEM (Charney, 2009).

Following the military coup, Bo Mya rose to prominence and became the KNU chairman in 1976 and remained a key figure until 2000 (Brenner, 2019). While he was a staunch Christian, his marginalization of leftist ideologies and Buddhist members within the KNU caused internal friction. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the KNU forged alliances with other EAOs in a bid to form a federal, democratic union of Myanmar (Charney, 2009). However, the Karen movement was fractured by religious divisions. In 1994, a group of Buddhist commanders within the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) mutinied and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). This led to further splintering of the KNU (Jolliffe, 2016). Between 1994 and 2007, various factions of the KNU broke away and signed ceasefires with the government. The DKBA, originally formed by Buddhist commanders, played a significant role in this fragmentation (Smith, 1991). Throughout the late 1990s, the Tatmadaw intensified

its "four cuts" campaigns, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians and establishing military bases deep within KNU-controlled territory (Jolliffe, 2016). A significant number of civilians were compelled to move to locations near military bases. Hundreds of thousands of individuals sought refuge in refugee camps in Thailand or internally displaced person (IDP) camps (Charney, 2009).

The Karen movement, initially a political and nationalist endeavor, has consequently transformed into a prolonged struggle that mirrors the wider ethnic tensions in Myanmar. Notwithstanding the several ceasefires and peace accords that have been ratified, including those involving separatist groups of the KNU, the Karen conflict persists without a resolution, resulting in significant displacement of individuals and continuous violence in SEM.

3. The Evolution of Peace Negotiations and the Role Played by FBOs in NEI and SEM

Answering the second research question, this section critically examines the evolution of peace negotiations in NEI and SEM, with particular attention to the role of FBOs in these processes.

3.1 Peace Negotiation among the Nagas in NEI: A Chronological Synthesis

Peace negotiations between the GoI and Naga political leaders began in the late 1950s but moved through cycles of compromise and setback. Rising tensions led to military operations and widespread human rights violations. In this context, churches emerged as a stabilizing moral force (Aier, 1997). Responding to the people's suffering, NBCC formed the Naga Church Ministers' Mission for Peace in 1957 (Longchar 2011a). Around the same time, the Naga

Peoples' Convention (NPC) initiated the first major political peace effort. Its 16-point proposal to the Indian government led to the 1960 agreement and the creation of Nagaland state in 1963 (Srikanth & Thomas 2005). While moderates accepted this as progress, the NNC rejected it as a compromise on the goal of full independence, allowing the insurgency to continue (Das 2007).

The second major attempt to establish peace was in 1964 with the formation of the Nagaland Peace Mission, initiated by the NBCC (Konwer & Rizvi, 2023). This mission successfully brokered a ceasefire between the GoI and the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN), bringing a temporary halt to the violence (Das, 2007). However, the peace talks eventually stalled due to deep-seated mistrust and an unwillingness on both sides to compromise (Srikanth & Thomas, 2005).

In the mid-1970s, the GoI declaration of a national emergency created a stifling environment for the Naga insurgency. A group of underground leaders entered negotiations with the GoI, resulting in the Shillong Accord of 1975 (Dutta 2015). Some scholars view the accord as a peace effort (Srikanth & Thomas 2005), while others argue it was meant to divide the Naga national movement (Longchari 2016). The NNC distanced itself from those who signed it, leading to internal fractures. During this time, the NBCC helped form the Naga Peace Council (NPC) in 1974, which submitted a memorandum requesting a ceasefire (Longchar, 2011a).

In the 1990s, the NSCN (IM) became the dominant faction and engaged in several rounds of peace talks with GoI in different locations. A major shift occurred in 2003 when the NSCN (IM) held

direct talks with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. During his visit to Nagaland, Vajpayee acknowledged the "unique history" of the Nagas, signaling a more open approach to dialogue (Srikanth & Thomas 2005). The 1997 ceasefire between the GoI and NSCN (IM) reduced state–rebel violence, but clashes among Naga factions continued through the 1990s and early 2000s, causing significant casualties (Hindustan Times 2008).

Amid this internal conflict, the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) emerged in 2008 as a Christian-led peace initiative involving churches, civil society, and tribal bodies (Chakhesang 2024). FNR sought to end factional violence through Christian principles of reconciliation and forgiveness (informal Conversation, FNR Convener, March 2025). A breakthrough came with the "Covenant of Common Hope" at the Naga Peace Summit III in Chiang Mai, which led to the "Covenant of Reconciliation" (informal Conversation, FNR Leaders, January 2025). This covenant marked a major decline in intra-Naga killings and was widely credited for reducing factional violence after 2009 (MorungExpress 2017, 2019). Baruah (2020) noted that while the 1997 ceasefire limited state–insurgent clashes, sustained reconciliation only followed FNR's intervention. These developments paved the way for the 2015 "Framework Agreement" between the GoI and the NSCN (IM), signed on 3 August 2015 (Roy 2018).

3.2. Peace Negotiation among the Karen People in SEM: A Chronological Synthesis

The Informal peace talks between KNU and the government of President Thein Sein started in 2011, however, this subsequently

led to internal conflicts within the KNU (Kham, 2021). All factions agreed on the aspiration for peace and the goal of political negotiations. However, they disagreed on how closely the KNU should work with the government and other EAOs. Distrust of external influence had grown within the KNU during the 1990s and 2000s (Brenner, 2017).

In 2012, the 15th Congress of the KNU marked an important shift in the organization's political direction. New leaders were appointed, and formal economic and development policies were introduced (Jolliffe 2016). That year, the KNU also reaffirmed its commitment to working with other EAOs toward a federal union based on democracy, equality, and self-determination.

As part of broader unity-building efforts, a seminar was held on the Thai–Myanmar border that brought together religious leaders from different traditions (informal conversation, KUBG leader, March 2025). The aim was to involve religious actors in the peace and reconciliation process. This gathering led to the formation of KUBG, composed of 11 monks and 9 reverends tasked with promoting unity among fragmented Karen factions (Burma News International, 2012; Karen News, 2012). The KUBG has since played a key role in easing tensions among splintered Karen political groups. It has helped mediate disputes, particularly those influenced by religious divisions. It has also contributed to wider peacebuilding efforts among the Karen people (informal conversation, KUBG leader, February 2025).

In the same year, the KNU also signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement as a strategic step toward organizational cohesion. This

bilateral ceasefire laid the groundwork for subsequent negotiations, both bilateral and multilateral, involving the KNU, other EAOs, and the Myanmar government. These negotiations eventually led to the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, which the KNU and several other EAOs endorsed as a milestone toward inclusive peace (Kham, 2021). This shift laid the foundation for ceasefires that continued through 2016, resulting in increased development activities and local-level cooperation between the KNU and the state. However, the Tatmadaw maintained a forward military posture in ceasefire areas, eroded confidence in the ceasefire. Throughout the peace process, divisions persisted within the KNU (Kham, 2021; Thawnghmung, 2012).

Hopes for lasting peace collapsed after Myanmar's 2021 military coup. The Tatmadaw resumed harsh military operations, including airstrikes, village raids, and widespread violence. Armed resistance intensified as ethnic armed groups, and the newly formed People's Defense Force retaliated. Fragile ceasefires and earlier optimism for a political settlement gave way to renewed instability. In this crisis, FBOs have continued to play a significant role. One such actor is OVOK, which is led by a small group of religious leaders. It has adopted a multifaceted advocacy approach that combines grassroots engagement with international lobbying (informal interaction, OVOK leaders, May 2025). OVOK promotes peace through music and media activism under the 3Rs Movement—Renew, Restore, and Rebuild. This initiative uses digital platforms to spread messages of peace, healing, and cultural resilience (personal conversation, OVOK leaders, March 2025). Through music

competitions and community events, OVOK has mobilized youth, artists, and local communities, offering creative spaces for participation in the wider peace process.

4. Convergences and Divergences in Peace Trajectories

The peace trajectories of NEI and SEM reveal both convergences and divergences rooted in their distinct historical, political, and socio-religious contexts. This section aims to highlight a comparative analysis of the Naga and Karen movements on how colonial legacies, ethno-political aspirations, and state responses have shaped their respective struggles for autonomy and peace.

The converging trajectories of the Naga people in NEI and the Karen people in SEM, both regions experienced early encounters with British colonial rule. The Nagas in 1826 and Karen people in the 1880s, which introduced modern political consciousness and organizational frameworks. This led to the expressions of collective ethnic identity and political agency in both the regions. The aspiration for self-determination was formally articulated in the Naga memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 and the Karen demand for an autonomous state in 1947, coinciding with the formation of the KNU. Similarly, both movements eventually experienced fragmentation, marked by the split of the NSCN in 1988 and the emergence of the DKBA in 1994.

Each movement has pursued ceasefire and peace agreements as strategic milestones. The Nagas entered a ceasefire with the GoI in 1964, leading to further negotiations and the Framework Agreement in 2015. The Karen struggle followed a similar arc, with the KNU signing ceasefires with the Myanmar government

and eventually becoming a signatory to the NCA in 2015. In both cases, religious actors played significant roles in promoting peace, as seen in the KUBG and church-led peace initiatives by the NBCC and FNR among the Nagas.

Despite similar goals, the pathways and outcomes of the two movements differ considerably. The Naga movement, while also armed and fragmented, has seen stronger institutional recognition within the Indian political framework. This is seen in the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 and ongoing political negotiations. In contrast, while a Karen State was formally created in 1952, the Karen struggle has remained largely outside the central political apparatus, continuing in the form of armed resistance and limited autonomy.

Another divergence lies in state responses. The Indian government's approach has oscillated between militarization, evident in the imposition of the AFSPA in 1958, and political engagement, culminating in the 2015 Framework Agreement. Conversely, Myanmar’s military has consistently applied counter-insurgency strategies such as the "four cuts" policy and has been slower to integrate ethnic groups into a federal framework, despite signing the NCA.

Religious dynamics have played distinct and influential roles in shaping the peace trajectories of both the movements. In the case of the Nagas in NEI, Christianity has functioned as a unifying force, fostering a collective sense of identity and solidarity that has undergirded the broader movement for autonomy. Predominantly Christian FBOs have emerged as key stakeholders in the peacebuilding

process, leveraging shared religious values, church networks, and moral authority to mediate between conflicting parties and promote reconciliation. Their theological frameworks and community embeddedness have allowed them to play a sustained and credible role in facilitating dialogue and advocating for non-violent solutions.

By contrast, the Karen people's struggle in SEM has been marked by religious diversity, particularly between Christian and Buddhist communities. This religious heterogeneity has, at times, contributed to internal divisions within the movement, most notably exemplified by the 1994 split that led to the formation of the DKBA. Such divisions have complicated the cohesion of the Karen resistance and introduced additional layers of complexity into the peacebuilding landscape. Nevertheless, religious actors from both Christian and Buddhist traditions have increasingly engaged in peace initiatives, often working collaboratively across faith lines to promote dialogue, address grievances, and foster social healing. Their involvement highlights a pluralistic and interfaith approach to peacebuilding that contrasts with the more homogeneous Christian-led efforts in the Naga context. These contrasting dynamics underline the critical role of religious identity in shaping nature, challenges, and potentials of faith-based peacebuilding in ethnically and politically contested environments.

Analyzing these trajectories shows that, although the Nagas and Karen people movements share parallel timelines and strategies in their pursuit of peace and autonomy, their diverging experiences with state structures, internal cohesion, and socio-religious dynamics

highlight the complexity and contextual specificity of ethno-political peacebuilding in Asia.

A key theoretical insight emerging from this comparison is the way Christian identity shaped collective action differently in each context. Among the Nagas, a shared Christian worldview created a common moral and institutional foundation that cut across tribal lines. This coherence allowed religious leaders to speak with broad legitimacy, mediate political fractures, and sustain reconciliation efforts. In the Karen context, however, Christian identity did not generate the same unity. Although many Karen are Christian, large Buddhist communities hold parallel authority, and this religious diversity intersects with longstanding political rivalries. As a result, Karen society experienced deeper internal fragmentation, and faith-based actors faced greater difficulty articulating a unified moral stance. Peacebuilders therefore had to build interreligious alliances to mediate tensions and support community cohesion.

These contrasts show that the effectiveness of faith-based peacebuilding depends not only on theological resources but also on the wider religious landscape and how it shapes ethnic identity. State responses further influenced these dynamics. India's gradual movement from militarization to negotiation created space for sustained religious engagement in Naga peace efforts. Myanmar's persistent militarized governance, in contrast, restricted the ability of faith actors to participate openly and undermined earlier ceasefire processes. Together, these contextual variations reveal that religious peacebuilding must be understood within broader

political structures and state–religion relationships, which either expand or constrain the possibilities for faith-led reconciliation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research examined the historical and political roots of the Naga struggle in NEI and the Karen struggle in SEM. It shows how colonial legacies, contested identities, and marginalization fueled prolonged resistance to state integration. The study highlighted how peace processes in both regions remain fragile despite repeated negotiations. Central to the study was the role of FBOs, whose grassroots networks, moral authority, and community legitimacy allowed them to mediate dialogue, promote reconciliation, and fill gaps left by state-centric or secular models. The comparative approach revealed striking parallels between the two contexts, demonstrating how faith-based approaches can offer context-sensitive alternatives to conventional peacebuilding paradigms.

Key recommendations from this study include integrating FBOs as co-architects of peace initiatives rather than treating them as peripheral stakeholders. Practical implications include the need to support interfaith dialogue, encourage grassroots reconciliation efforts, and strengthen the conflict-transformation skills of religious leaders through theological education and capacity building.

As an exploratory inquiry, this study prioritized breadth over depth. While it contextualized the importance of FBOs in both regions, it could not fully examine the symbolic, liturgical, or theological dimensions of their peace interventions. Future studies should therefore pursue in-depth case analyses of specific FBOs,

their theological frameworks, and the ways these shape their strategies for peacebuilding and community healing. Such research would deepen understanding of how religious ideas and practices can contribute more effectively to political negotiations, social cohesion, and long-term peace in conflict-affected societies.

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