The Nagas speak different vernaculars which belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and all these languages are mutually unintelligible. Nagaland is such a state where not a single tribe wants to learn the language of the other so as to facilitate the inter-lingual communication. This refusal of a group to learn the language of the other, has some socio-political reasons as its roots. Head-hunting among the tribes is cited as one of the major reasons which created animosity between different tribes in Nagaland.

The blood feud of the Nagas was what the vendetta of the Corsican was, a thing to be handed down from generation to generation, an everlasting and most baneful heirloom involving
between them. Thus, encouraging society's inclination to look down upon inter-tribe marriages and this life of mutual hostility ultimately resulted in an increased language distance amongst the tribes and as a result, the Naga villages have formed a kind of linguistic islets. This kind of social aloofness was also encouraged by the society as a whole because

...in Nagaland tribal of Village Councils regulate the social life. The regulation of 1945 gives powers to the tribal councils to try criminal as well as civil cases and impose fines. So long as the parties belong to the same tract, all civil suits are tried by the Council.\(^3\)

It means that the villagers do not have to interact with outsiders for the settlement of their claims. These kind of social rules further isolate the villages from each other.

But in order to survive, all the human beings need a language to communicate with each other. The Nagas also had to communicate sometimes with the other tribes. Since the Nagas did not want to learn the language of the other tribes because of the antagonistic attitude towards each other, they first developed a highly complex sign system which turned out to be inadequate keeping in view the day-to-day interaction. So, they eventually took up another languages, Nagamese, based on Assamese which is spoken in the neighbour state Assam as well

\(^3\) Statistical Handbook of Nagaland, Kohima, 1991, p. 3.
as understood in the whole North East. Nagamese is socially neutral, does not personally belong to a single Naga tribe, i.e., it is not the mother tongue of any of the Naga tribes. Hence, there is no apparent antagonism towards the use of Nagamese on the part of any of the Nagas. Above all, “Nagamese...is very easy to pick up and with a little application can be spoken perfectly. It is, moreover, an excellent vehicle for the expression of Naga turns of speech and thought.”

The change from the sign language like beating of a drum to the make shift language Nagamese for the use among the different Naga tribes was not a sudden one, and Nagamese, like any other language did not evolve in a single day. In order to evolve a lingua franca, one needs to have constant contact between the groups of people concerned. The Nagas are not exception in this regard. They maintained a day-to-day contact with the much superior neighbour Assamese. The evolution and development of Nagamese is closely related to the invasion of Assam by the powerful Shan race of Burma, popularly known as Ahom in Assam, in 1228 and their subsequent war with the different Naga tribes.

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To have a clear understanding about the origin of Nagamese, it is essential to know the relationship between the Nagas and the neighbouring Assamese during the pre-Ahom, Ahom and the post-Ahom period.

3.1 The Pre-Ahom Period

The systematic records of the Nagas were not available during the pre-Ahom period except for some stray references here and there. The Nagas have a legend to explain this absence of any chronicles. It is said that at the beginning of creation, God gave the knowledge of reading and writing both to the hillmen as well as the plainsmen. The plainsmen were given the paper to write upon while the hillmen were given skin. The hillmen, i.e., the Nagas devoured the skin when they found it edible. As a result, the Nagas have no record of their own of their past.

The first reference of the Nagas is found in the Vedas where it is said that the Nagas are a sub-tribe of the Kiratas. It is said in the Mahabharata that the Kiratas are the hill men living in the Eastern Himalayas. Bhima of the Pandavas is mentioned as having defeated seven Kirata rulers in the course of a triumphant tour. According to the Naga legend, Ulupi, the Naga princess fell
in love with Arjuna, the great hero of the Mahabharata when she saw him in his sojourn in Eastern India. Ulupi took Arjuna to Nagalok and they lived happily there for some time until Arjuna moved on to Manipur. The Mahabharata also frequently mentions Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha (Kamrupa). “He had a host of Kiratas and Chins and numerous other warriors that dwell on the sea-coast”.

He fought on the side of the Kauravas in the epic battle of the Kurukshetra along with his Kirata warriors and was defeated and he gave up his life in the battle like a true hero. Prakash Singh said that “in the great war of the Mahabharata fought at Kurukshetra, in which contingents of almost every Indian potentate participated, the Nagas rallied their might on the side of the Kauravas”. The Ramayana also mentions the Kiratas and said that they are able to move under water, terrible, veritable tiger-men. According to Dr S K Chatterjee, “the Kiratas were known to the Hindu world as a group of people whose original home was in the Himalayan slopes and in the mountains of the East, in Assam particularly, who were yellow in colour and presented a distinct type of

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6 Singh, Prakash, op. cit., p. 9
culture...they were a pleasant looking people, but terrible with their weapons, and cruel in war.\footnote{Chatterjee, S K, Kirata-Jana-Kriti, the Indo Mongoloids :Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India, \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal}, vol. xvi, no. 2, Calcutta, 1950, p. 21-22.}

There is no satisfactory account of the Nagas in the intervening centuries. Ptolemy, the historian, made a brief mention of them in the second century. The slender accounts that we have of the Hindu kings of Kamrupa between the 4\textsuperscript{th}, and the 12\textsuperscript{th} centuries are silent about the Nagas. In spite of all these, we can fairly guess from the above account that the Nagas were mixing with the people of the plains from the time immemorial.

3.2 The Ahome Period

The establishment of Ahom kingdom in 1228 had a far reaching impact as far as Ahom-Naga relationship and the evolution of Nagamese are concerned. We have enough written documents commonly known in Assam as Buranji (chronicles). This Ahom-Naga relationship ultimately paved the way for the development of Nagamese to be used as a common lingua-franca in Nagaland.
Sukapha, the founder king of Ahom dynasty, who originally belongs to a Tai race, had entered Assam from Burma in 1228 through the Tirap area of NEFA. The Ahom's first contact with the Nagas was with the Wancho, Nocte and Konyak Naga tribes. It is believed that Sukapha with a very large retinue of soldiers wandered the hill areas between Burma and Assam for 13 years in the early 13\textsuperscript{th} century till he reached the boundary of the Naga country. As Sukapha entered this Naga territory in search of a better place where he could establish his kingdom, Sukapha came under heavy attack of the Nagas who tried to resist his advance into Assam though their land. But “Sukapha defeated the Nagas and perpetrated frightful atrocities on those whom he captured. He caused many of them to be killed and roasted, and compelled their relatives to eat their flesh. This ghastly barbarity created such widespread terror that the other Nagas of the neighbourhood all hastened to make their submission”\textsuperscript{8}. After this, Sukapha left one of his nobles to rule the conquered Naga country. This terrible treatment by the Ahom king silenced the Nagas for quite a long time. During the reign of Suhungmung, fresh hostility broke out in 1535 and 1536. The king's son Suklen defeated the Nagas in the battle and the Nagas are made

\textsuperscript{8} Gait, Edward, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 73.
to pay a fine of one hundred mithun. Though there are frequent clashes between the Ahoms and the Nagas in the 16th, 17th centuries, the Ahoms, on the whole, were able to keep the troublesome Nagas under their control. For example, "in 1692, Nagas killed twenty-three Assamese subjects. For this king Gadadhar Singha took severe revenge, executing one of the Naga Chiefs and forcing other leaders to visit the capital and reaffirm their allegiance." The hostilities continued till the beginning of the 19th century. The last raid made by the Nagas was during the time of the last Ahom king Purandar Singha. The vanquished Nagas paid tribute to the Ahom kings in the form of mithuns and other commodities. The Ahoms, in return, granted to the Nagas revenue-free lands and fishing waters. These lands were called Naga-khats and were managed by the Assamese agents called Naga-katakis.

But the Nagas were not always the enemies of the Ahoms. Though the Ahom kings regarded the Naga tribes as their subjects and collected taxes from them in the form of slaves, elephant-tusks, spears, hand-woven cloth and cotton, the Ahoms also granted the Naga chiefs land and retainers just like any other Assamese nobles as we mentioned above. During the

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reigns of Suchinpha and Jayadhvaj Singha, the relationship between the Ahoms and the Nagas improved a lot and there was an exchange of gifts such as gongs, spears and daos from the Nagas and ear-rings, beads etc. from the Ahoms. "The son of a Naga Chief was given the important official post of Barphukan". Gadadhar Singha before becoming the Ahom king even took shelter in the Naga Hills and he was treated by the Nagas with characteristic hospitality and when he became the king, he kept his two sons in the Naga Hills for protection. The Nagas also offered to the king two princess with slaves and female attendants. The Nagas were also recruited into the Ahom army by the Ahom kings especially during the Mughal invasion of Assam and the Nagas were quite able to hold their own against the well trained enemies. It became possible only because of the Nagas' unmatched courage and fearless nature and their capacity to survive even in the most hostile environment. It is said that the Ahom soldiers ate with the tribes including the Nagas in their houses during the expedition and therefore, the Ahom soldiers were considered by the Nagas as the men of their own fraternity.

10 Elwin, V, op. cit., p. 18.
From the above discussion, it certainly appears that there were periods of hostility as well as friendship and the Ahom kings never treated the Nagas as their conquered subjects. Sometimes, this friendship between the two communities led to marital relationships. For example, in 1504, the Naga Chief arranged the wedding of his daughter to king Suhungmung to uphold their mutual relations. Supimpha, the son of King Suhanpha handed over one of his queens to a Naga Chief. Similarly, Dihingiya Raja offered a princess to a Naga Chief called Khunbaw as a token of gratitude.

3.3 The Post Ahom Period

The Ahom reign of nearly six hundred years old came to an end with the first Burmese invasion of Assam in 1816. The Burmese were invited to Assam by Badan Chandra Bar Phukan and their subsequent victory over the Ahoms made the Burmese more cruel to the local people. The oppression during the regime of Mingi Maha Bandula became so unbearable that no one could be sure of his/her wealth or reputation or even of his/her life. In order to avoid the ordeal, many people fled from Assam to the neighbouring hilly regions where the Burmese can not reach them. Some of them took shelter in the Naga Hills and gradually
merged themselves socially and politically with the local Nagas by permanently settling down there. "The majority of them have migrated from the districts of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Nagaon and Kamrup".\textsuperscript{11} Later on some Nagas also migrated to the plains and merged linguistically and socially with the Assamese especially in areas like Sibsagar, Margherita of Upper Assam. They have also accepted Hindu religion. "The seven Sema Naga villages at Margherita of Dibrugarh district, Latum gaon and Ligiri Pukhuri Gaon (Konyak) at Sibsagar district are notable in this respect."\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, it seems that by the time the British came to Assam, the Nagas already had a good deal of social and cultural contact with the people of Assam and were already having some knowledge of Assamese and they must also be speaking a version of Assamese due to this kind of contact.

In 1826, the British defeated the Burmese and took full control over Assam and the Ahom rule ended with it forever. Keeping in view the violent nature of the Nagas, the British did not want to subjugate them but because of the Nagas' intermittent raid in the British territory, the British decided to put an end to these activities. In order to tackle this kind of situation, a headquarters was established in 1866 in Samaguting with an

armed police post but this place was abandoned first in favour of Wokha, then Kohima in 1878 and the 43rd Assam Light Infantry consisting of personals from Assam and other neighbouring regions was kept there to maintain the law and order situation in Nagaland as well as to check further forays into the British territory by the errant Nagas.

Here it may be pointed out that after the establishment of Ahom kingdom, "the mass of the Ahoms accepted Hinduism" and consequently Assamese was used by the Ahom as the language of the court. It also appears that the Ahom used Assamese with the Nagas and the British for the purpose of day-to-day communication.

For more than ten years after the annexation, Assamese was the language of the courts..., but it was then superseded by Bengali... The people protested loudly.... It was not until Sir George Campbell became Lieutenant Governor of Bengal that Assamese was restored to the position which it ought never to have lost. Since the Naga Hills were part of the British administration so it naturally means that Assamese was also used by the local administrations there as the language of the court. Hence, the Nagas were also using Assamese with the local administration.

In this regard, it will be appropriate to mention a letter written by

13 Gait, Edward, op. cit., p. x.
P T Carnegie, Assistant Commissioner of Jorhat to the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar on 10th July, 1873 where he mentioned that “in every tribe on this border (Naga border), however, some men are to be found who have learnt Assamese”.

Apart from this kind of political contact, a regular day-to-day contact between the Assamese and the Nagas was maintained for centuries together in the form of trade. The Nagas used to come down daily to the plains as well as to Sibsagar, the capital town of Assam of that era for buying and selling essential commodities. Apart from this, rubber was also brought down plenty by the Nagas. Most importantly, the Nagas were in possession of brine springs of considerable value. From these brine springs, the Nagas manufactured a large quantity of salt and sold it to the plainsmen. As a matter of fact, these salt wells were the sole property of the Nagas. No doubt, “the Ahom kings exercised ownership over a few of these springs and on this issue the Nagas and the Ahoms had a kind of understanding which lasted till the British took over Assam”. The dependence of the Nagas on the Assam markets for the exchange of salt for grain and other articles, has contributed to a mutually good

15 Mackenzie, A The North East Frontier of India, New Delhi, 1884 (reprint 1994) p. 400.
understanding between the two different linguistic groups of people and "the Nagas have been always permitted free access to the markets on the frontier."\(^{17}\)

By 1863, tea plantation flourished in Assam and though most of the labourers were brought from different places like Bengal, Orissa, Chotanagpur etc., there were many labourers and clerks from the neighbourhood including the Naga Hills. Apart from working in the tea gardens, the Nagas in large groups voluntarily offered their services to road construction and building the stations in different parts of greater Assam which included Naga hills.

In order to make the life of the Nagas pleasant and happy, the British allowed the missionaries to carry out missionary work and convert them to Christianity. In 1872, Rev. Clark baptised 15 Nagas and in this regard he was helped by an Assamese evangelist called Godhula who later on did missionary work entirely for Naga Hills by permanently settling down there. To improve the daily life of the Nagas, wherever the missionaries went they invariably opened a dispensary along with schools and they gave training to many Naga girls and as a result of this,

“many Naga nurses at a later stage served in Jorhat and Guwahati Christian hospitals”.\(^\text{18}\)

During the World War I, a force was raised from the Naga Hills and majority of it came from the Sema Naga tribe. Similarly, World War II played a major role in the British-Naga relationship. The Japanese were defeated in the Kohima battle and throughout the fighting the Nagas not only remained loyal to the British but also rendered them valuable assistance. The gallant Nagas' loyalty never faltered even in the most depressing times of the invasion.

It is worth mentioning here that before the creation of a separate Nagaland state, Assamese was taught to the Naga children for some time in the government schools of Naga Hills along with their individual tribal mother tongues. But after the formation of Nagaland state, Assamese was abandoned in favour of the indigenous Naga languages and English. As Elwin said,

...for a long time past Nagas of different groups have talked to one other either in broken Assamese or in English, and the Nagas themselves observed with some amusement that at a conference at which they demanded separation from Assam, many of the speakers made their speeches in the Assamese language. Assamese has been useful to the Nagas for the purposes of trade and to promote unity between the different tribes.\(^\text{19}\)


Therefore, it may safely be asserted that Nagamese must have evolved as a common lingua-franca due to several types of contact such as migration, trade, services, marriage etc. between the plainsmen and the Nagas. But the impetus for the widespread use of Nagamese came not from the Nagas themselves, it seems, because of their denial of its knowledge, but from the campuses of Assam Rifles and Border Road Task Force (BRTF) situated in Nagaland as pointed out by Sreedhar (1974). Nagas of different tribe were recruited into Assam Rifles and BRTF in large numbers along with other men from different linguistic communities like Assamese, Bengali, Bihari, Garo, Kachari, Nepali and south Indians. The employees learnt Nagamese in order to communicate with their colleagues and with the local Naga population. Because “Nagamese, though a somewhat clumsy vehicle of conversation, is very easy to pick up and with a little application can be spoken perfectly. It is, moreover, an excellent vehicle for the expression of Naga turns of speech and thought, and therefore, infinitely better as a medium for conversing to Nagas than Hindustanti.”

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20 Hutton, J H, op. cit., p. 327.
respective villages as well as to other places in Nagaland, they took with them the knowledge of the language which ultimately spread from village to village without any major hurdles since the people in general already had some basic knowledge of Nagamese due to the various kinds of contact with the Assamese as mentioned earlier. This is probably the way Nagamese came into existence.