

Search for Peace with Justice

Women's Personal Experiences in Post-Conflict Sudan

Edited by Walter Schabas

North Eastern Social Research Centre



Search for Peace with Justice: Issues Around Conflicts in Northeast India

Editor

Walter Fernandes

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1. Conflicts and Search for Peace with Justice in Northeast India: An Introduction

Walter Fernandes

While in the rest of India the Northeast has the image of being a zone of conflicts, within the region one witnesses a search for peace, a concept whose interpretation changes according to the stakeholder. The state and non-state armed groups think of peace only as the absence of armed conflict, but most people of the region perceive it as a new society based on justice. Such a new society cannot be achieved without understanding the causes of conflicts and attempting a solution to them. That is what the present book attempts to do. Some authors try to identify the causes of conflicts in the region and others analyse the processes required for peace and possible actors in them. They also point out the pitfalls in the search for peace which is a long process of experiments with alternatives to the causes of conflicts.

About the Book

The nine papers in the book are arranged in three sections. The first part has four short theoretical papers on conflicts and peace. M. N. Karna gives a theoretical framework by identifying the historical experiences of the peoples of the Northeast that have led to the present-day conflicts. David R. Syiemlieh takes a global view of the processes that have resulted in conflicts and discusses the two World Wars and the Indian freedom movement before focussing on the Northeast. Ethel Syiem studies the conflicts in the Northeast and in other societies in transition as presented in literature and analyses the role of the spoken and written word in the peace process. Lucy Zehol gives the theoretical background of ethnic conflicts as found in anthropology with special reference to

Manipur. From that vantage point she studies some more specific areas of conflict, particularly the immigration issue.

Then follow three cases studies on conflicts and their causes in the Northeast. Nani Gopal Mahanta studies the situation of conflicts in Assam and asks why what was an identity search has turned into an armed conflict turning Assam into a state of ongoing conflicts. He ends his paper by pointing out the pitfalls in the search for peace and advocates the involvement of many more stakeholders, so that the solution to the conflicts might move beyond mere absence of violence and address the root causes of hostility. Walter Fernandes presents land alienation as the main cause of conflicts in the region and studies the immigration and developmental issues within that perspective. Binalakshmi Nepram Mentschel analyses the role that small arms play in perpetuating conflicts.

Finally two writers look at the possibilities of peace. At present negotiations are between the two armed adversaries i.e. the state and the militant groups. Such negotiations can at best achieve a temporary truce. A lasting solution requires a movement towards a just society. To achieve it the authors show the need for the involvement of more stakeholders. Thomas Menampampil speaks on the role of religious leaders in the process leading to peace. Rita Manchanda discusses the role of civil society in preparing the ground for the negotiations, in pressurising the armed adversaries not to abandon negotiations and to make their communities an integral part of the search.

The Background of Conflicts

The first step in the search for peace is an understanding of the processes that lead to conflicts. That is what the four authors do by providing the theoretical framework. In his brief analysis of the historical experience of marginalisation in the Northeast, Karna refers to the danger of one region or community or country declaring itself the mainstream, thus reducing others to the status of sub-streams. That seems to have happened in the Indian effort

to build a nation-state on the basis of one dominant region. Forgotten in this effort is the distinction between the people who form a nation that gives the community or individual an identity and the state that is a legal entity with a territory and confers citizenship on the people. As R. N. Datta (1990: 41) said two decades ago, the danger in India is the tendency of national leaders to speak of “one State, one nation” and “to take the degree of Aryanisation as the measure of Indianisation.” One of its results is that the identities of the regions that are considered sub-streams tend to become submerged in the “mainstream”. Karna studies this process in some regions of the Northeast, particularly in Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya.

By taking a look at the two World Wars, Syiemlieh shows how minor events can lead to a major conflagration. Once a conflict begins, the warring sides overestimate their own strength and underestimate the possibilities of a conflict being prolonged beyond their expectations. The German soldiers left for the front during the summer of 1914 with the hope of returning before Christmas. But the war continued for four years. The aftermath of these two global wars shows how the warring sides are not ready to abandon the conflict till the enemy is vanquished and accepts the humiliating terms that the victor imposes on him. This approach results in more wars. For example, the unjust peace treaty imposed on Germany and other losers after World War I could not but lead to World War II.

That lesson does not seem to have been learnt even today, as the behaviour of the dominant world powers shows in Iraq, Georgia and elsewhere. The interests of the strong dominate the decisions to begin wars. Those who impose a war on the weak also ensure that it ends with the surrender of the loser. One sees that process also in the Northeast: nationalist struggles of communities that are searching for an identity are considered secessionist, as such are put down with extreme vigour, with no concession made to them. Ethnic conflicts are based on the exclusive rights of one community over a region. Amid the

shortage of land and other resources caused by the encroachment on their land by immigrants from both within India and from other countries, acquisition for development projects, alienation of tribal land to non-tribals, lack of productive investment, and the perceived or real attack on its identity, every community of the region tries to establish its indigenous status and asserts its exclusive rights over an area whose first inhabitants it claims to be, to the exclusion of all other ethnic groups (Bhaumik 2005: 150-152). This intensifies the conflicts. A possible way out of this apparent dead end is the one that Mahatma Gandhi shows. His struggle for Indian freedom was marked not merely by its non-violent nature but also by his efforts to involve the masses and to reach a solution based not on the rights of one side but on the possibility of all the groups being beneficiaries.

Absence precisely of that approach is seen in the behaviour of the armed parties to the conflicts, as Syiem's overview of literature shows. Temsula Ao's account of the events in Nagaland shows the inhuman level to which the parties to a conflict can descend. On every side, some persons benefit from the conflict and develop a vested interest in its perpetuation. Literature can expose this selfishness and play a role in working towards peace as the Khasi oral literature shows. It also means that peace negotiations should go beyond the warring parties to the masses. Literature can play a role, though limited, in helping the people to internalise the ideology of peace as well as of war. How one deals with it depends on whether one is moving towards a conflict or peace.

Zehol continues this discussion in her presentation of the theory of ethnicity. The development of this thought is closely linked to the historical context of a given moment. For example, studies show a close link between the colonial context and the growth of anthropology. That shows the need to begin with the data presented in the past but to move away from the interpretation given in that context (Mbilinyi and Vuorela 1982: 310-312). Zehol substantiates her contention of science responding to a historical moment by analysing the link between the historical

context and the identification of the tribes in some areas of the Northeast, particularly Manipur. The identity that an ethnic group acquires—or is imposed on it at some point of history—does not remain static but keeps changing. Some tribes merge and attain a new identity, as those inhabiting the Naga Hills did at the beginning of the 20th century when they formed the Naga Club (Sanyu 1996: 115-116). Some other groups may separate from the body to which they were attached earlier, as the Thadou and the Kuki did in Manipur in the 1990s.

The Domination-Dependency Syndrome

In this context Zehol asks “Do we have a right not to accord them recognition when a group that wants to consider itself distinct from another with which it had identified itself earlier?” The Kuki, for example, were a conglomeration of many groups. But the mainstream/sub-stream or nation-state dynamics that has been discussed above in the interaction of the Northeast with the rest of India became visible at the local level as well, in the Kuki-Paite conflict of the 1990s. One group dominated that alliance and tried to impose its language and leadership on the rest. That attempt became the source of conflicts and the groups that felt dominated tried to find an identity of their own by separating themselves from the alliance and joining another religious denomination (Haokip 2008a: 189-191).

Integral to these ethnic issues is the question of immigration. As Zehol and others point out, in this debate focus has been on Bangladeshi immigrants because of the difference in their religion and nationality. However, Mahanta and Fernandes add that, the threat to the land of the local people remains real whether the immigrants are “illegal Bangladeshis” or are from Bihar or Nepal. All of them occupy land and prosper. All of them move out because of the same push factor, namely the feudal system, poverty and low wages in the region of their origin. The pull factor is the fertile land in the Northeast, especially the Brahmaputra Valley, and the legal system that makes encroachment with

impunity possible.

As a result, land has become a major component in the domination-dependency syndrome as well as in the ethnic and territorial conflicts in the region. To most communities of the Northeast, land is not merely an economic asset but also the centre of their culture, social systems and identity. As a result, an attack on their land is a threat not merely to their economy but also to their cultural and social identity. Because of this central role of land, many leaders of the struggles are able to present the conflicts as defence of their society, culture, political autonomy and identity. That is one of the reasons why in the Northeast the struggles combine the political, cultural and economic components into one (Datta 1990: 40).

Zehol takes up the suggestion made by some leaders that the “illegal immigrants” should be expelled from Assam. She considers this suggestion both dangerous in concept and impractical for implementation. Immigration from the erstwhile East Bengal is not recent. It began with the British policy of 1891 to encourage peasants from East Bengal to settle down in western Assam and cultivate what they considered wastelands. In reality what the colonial land laws treated as wastelands was the sustenance of the Boro and other tribes of the region. But the law that continues to be in force even today, recognises only individually owned land and treats community owned resources as state property (Ramanathan 1999: 19). Much of the land in Assam and in the rest of the Northeast continues to belong to the communities that sustain themselves on it but the law considers it state property. This makes it easy for the immigrants to encroach on it. As Fernandes says, it also makes it possible for the state to acquire tribal land in the name of development and for non-tribals to occupy tribal land.

That, as Mahanta says, makes the nature of encroachment and the type of immigrants irrelevant. The conflicts emanating from the legal system cannot be solved without dealing with the basic issue of land. Conflicts are bound to continue as long as this

issue is not taken seriously because land is an economic asset as well as the centre of people's culture and identity. However, the state facilitates its alienation by imposing the individual-based formal law on the traditional community-based system. These two systems are based on two different worldviews, but the state imposes its own worldview on the tradition of the people. That turns the land and other laws into a symbol of another type of a domination-dependency syndrome. The formal law of colonial origin is the "mainstream" with which the traditional laws that are the "sub-stream" have to be assimilated.

Mahanta adds that, Assam has become a state of ongoing conflicts. One of its main reasons is that the state experiences both types of the domination-dependency syndrome, not merely at the legal but also at the cultural and political levels. On one side Assam feels dominated by Mainland India. As a result, the United Liberation Front (ULFA) began as an assertion of Assamese identity against the Indian "mainstream". However, while the identity issue is important in the conflict, the economic factor cannot be ignored. Mahanta's interviews with the former militants show that unemployment has today turned into a major cause of the cadres joining the militant outfits. The leaders began the struggle around issues of identity and autonomy, but slowly the economic component took the centre stage. But this has not become exclusive: political and identity issues continue to play a role because many militants continue to view the economic situation through the prism of autonomy and identity.

On the other side, as the history of the last four decades shows, the minority linguistic and cultural groups in the state feel dominated by the majority ethnic Assamese. In their case the ethnic Assamese are the mainstream with which the minority sub-streams are expected to merge. That thinking is reflected in the debate on "Who is an Assamese?" Do the Assamese include all those inhabiting the territory of Assam, or only the ethnic Assamese and who speak the language? *The Official Languages Act 1960* signalled to the tribal and other non-Assamese speaking

communities that they had to be assimilated into the Assamese "mainstream".

The minority communities considered this law a threat to their identity and reacted to it. The Lushai were already resenting what they considered neglect by the central and state governments during the bamboo famine of 1959. The *Official Languages Act* added to their feeling of being a sub-stream that was not respected by the "mainstream". The Mizo revolt that began with it culminated in the Mizo Accord of 1986 and the formation of Mizoram in 1987 (Sen 1992). The All Party Hill Leaders' Conference, composed of the hill tribes of the present day Meghalaya, N. C. Hills and Karbi Anglong, was revived and resulted in the formation of Meghalaya in 1972 (Sangma 2008: 211). All the ethnic communities of Assam joined the Anti-Foreigner Movement 1979-85 but the Assam Accord of 1985 gave importance only to the ethnic Assamese. The resentment this caused among the Boros (Roy 1995: 32-33) and some other non-Assamese speaking communities is one of the reasons for intensified internal conflicts and the formation of militant outfits linked to each ethnic group.

Searching for a New Society

Genuine peace has to be based on justice for all. That objective can be achieved only by dealing with these and other causes of unrest. By and large the state treats the conflict as a law and order issue alone. The fifty-year old *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act* is one of its living examples. The state and non-state armed stakeholders involved in the peace negotiations do not follow the norm of dealing with the causes. As a result, most negotiations end with an accord that makes some territorial concessions to the militants or becomes a power-sharing arrangement between the state and the elite that leads those militant movements. These agreements ignore, for all practical purposes, the masses whose aspirations the conflicts raise and whom the leaders claim to represent. Mahanta reminds the readers that there cannot be lasting peace without dealing with the causes

of conflicts and moving towards a just society. When that step is not taken, some group that is dissatisfied with the accord starts another militant outfit and the conflict continues.

Since land alienation is the major cause of conflicts, the goal of a just peace cannot be attained without tackling this issue. With that in view, Fernandes analyses the link between conflicts and land alienation. Land loss takes three main forms, the first being encroachment by the immigrants. The immigration issue has been already dealt with above. Its push and pull factors have been analysed. It will not, therefore, be repeated except to say that this form of alienation cannot be taken in isolation, but has to be seen in the overall context of the local economy, culture and identity. One has also to emphasise that a solution to the problem has to be based on the principle of peace with justice for all.

How is one to attain this objective? As Zehol says, the immigrants cannot be expelled from the country without doing them injustice and causing massive bloodshed. But also the families that lose land to those immigrants have a right to justice. Injustice has been done to them by the pull factor of fertile land that is managed under an outdated legal system. In Tripura the law was even changed in order to make land transfer to the immigrants possible. However, the indigenous families that lost their land to the immigrants have not been able to get it back even when the tribunal ruled in their favour, because the plots that belong to them are right in the middle of the immigrant colonies. Their life would be in danger if they occupied it again (Shimray 2006: 14).

This situation shows that a change in the legal system is essential but inadequate in itself. Its implementation requires a social and economic base to support change in favour of the land losers. Moreover, immigration is not the only cause of land alienation. The state uses the same legal system to acquire community land by declaring it state property. Laws have been changed to make alienation of tribal land to non-tribals easy. So change in the laws to ensure security of tenure to the

cultivators essential but it inadequate in itself. A renewed social infrastructure is required to ensure their implementation.

The Role of the Civil Society

That brings one to the stakeholders in the march towards peace. Lasting peace is not possible unless the masses feel involved in it. Obviously the negotiations themselves will have to be between some representative groups, but which do not necessarily have to be only the state and non-state armed stakeholders. The civil society has to be involved in the negotiations, probably not directly but by becoming intermediaries between the people and the negotiators. The civil society cannot appropriate to itself the role that has to be played by the negotiators or the masses. It has to play a specific role between the two. On one side it has to give feedback to the negotiators and encourage them not to abandon their effort. On the other side, as Mahanta says, all the people cannot be involved in the negotiations. The civil society, as intermediaries, can keep the lines of communication open and help the people to feel involved in the negotiations.

Religious leaders are a major component of the civil society and Menampampil discusses their role in the peace process. They cannot any more be satisfied by preaching only an individual-based morality of adherence to social norms, obeying the law and paying taxes. In their preaching the religious leaders have to bear the welfare of the whole society in mind. They have to take a stand on moral issues such as corruption because these abuses do not affect the individual alone but destroy the very moral texture of a society. Religious leaders have to play their social role also by exerting pressure on the elected representatives to observe the social norms of honesty and serving the people who have elected them. Collaboration with other religious and social leaders is essential. No religious or social leader can claim a monopoly of knowledge of the peace process.

Menampampil also emphasises that peace can be attained only through a search for the middle ground. Religious leaders

have to avoid all extremist religious or social positions and all forms of fanaticism. Their role is to be the rallying point for people of all convictions. They have to interpret events in favour of unity and peace and invite people to think about the stands they take and thus take the process forward. They cannot tell people what they should think but have to encourage them to reflect on issues and events and move towards a new society based on justice and absence of conflicts. Discussing the lessons of history, the author states that peace is not a unilinear event but is a long process. The leaders who are involved in the peace process have to be ready for ups and downs because peace comes only after much effort.

Victory of one side does not necessarily lead to peace. As shown in the post-World War I peace treaties that resulted in World War II, the terms that the victor imposes on the loser can, far from leading to peace, result in a demand for revenge. That is the result of extreme positions based on the thinking that the only way of ending the war is the defeat of the enemy. As Syiemlieh has shown above, such an attitude cannot but lead to a feeling of revenge in the vanquished. As a large number of revolutions in Europe during World War I show, a prolonged conflict can also strengthen the longing for peace. Religious leaders have to encourage such aspirations and work towards a new society that can ensure a lasting peace based on justice, not merely on the absence of war.

Manchanda continues the discussion on the role of the civil society that includes religious leaders as well as others like social agencies, student bodies and women's organisations. The involvement of the civil society is essential for lasting peace, especially in South Asia which has a history of "divide and rule" even in peace initiatives. The state negotiates with one of the warring parties and comes to a power-sharing arrangement with it. Among several examples in the Northeast are the Assam Accord that responded to the needs of one community, the peace accord with the Bodo Liberation Tigers that excluded the National

Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and the ceasefire in Nagaland with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland IM to the exclusion of its rival led by Khaplang.

Such accords cannot but continue division among the people, though they can give temporary respite to the state and the militant outfits. That is where the civil society can facilitate unity and keep up the pressure on the state and the militants not to abandon negotiations. The civil society has to move towards the middle ground which both the state and the militant groups try to capture for their own objectives. This effort is important because peace building is a long process but the initiative is in the hands of the state. It decides when negotiations can begin and tries to capture the middle ground. Also the negotiators from the militant groups try to monopolise the process.

This shows the need for the involvement of the civil society, but it cannot be treated as a homogenous unit. Civil society is a conglomeration of various bodies and interests. The author discusses a few such partners. Taking examples from Nagaland, she shows how the church groups took initiatives to bring solace to the bereaved families in the early 1990s when the morning found dead bodies strewn on the roadside. They thus asserted the human right of everyone to death and burial with dignity. Once the ceasefire was signed, other civil society groups, particularly women, played the role of getting the general public involved in the process of continuing negotiations and of putting pressure on the negotiators not to abandon the movement towards peace. Women's groups even tried to get the warring militant factions to work together for peace though with limited success. She also discusses some student bodies that came together at the North Eastern level to convince one of their units to halt the road blockade since it was going against the rights of another community.

One has also to be wary of the pitfalls, the first of which is division within the civil society. The second is the danger of the state or non-state armed group trying to co-opt the civil society

groups. At the grassroots level there are examples of women from opposing sides negotiating peace between their communities. But in many other cases women's, students' and other civil society groups have functioned as representatives of their own community. As a result, those who should be searching for the middle ground tend to take an extremist position. For example, there are human rights organisations that limit their work to one community. One can ask whether one can speak of Naga, Khasi, Meitei or Kuki human rights, or does one stand for the rights of every human person? Fourthly, the state tries to denigrate the groups searching for peace and presents them as representatives of the terrorists. For example, when some older women staged a "nude protest" at the entrance of the Assam Rifles camp after a young woman was allegedly raped and killed by the defence forces, the state representatives spread the rumour that those women were paid by the terrorists to bare their bodies. The mainline media swallowed this version unquestioningly and many civil society groups, even of women in the Northeast, accepted it. The lessons of these strategies of denigrating persons working for peace have to be learnt in the effort to bring peace with justice.

Search for Alternatives

It is clear from the discussion in the book that genuine peace is much more than absence of armed conflict. It is the search for a just society. Certainly that search has to deal with the causes of the conflict, many of which have been analysed by the authors. Some causes are political, others are cultural or are linked to the identity of a community and still others are economic. One or the other gets priority in a given situation. As Mahanta says, the leaders of ULFA began with the political and cultural issue of Assam being treated as what Karna calls a sub-stream. Moreover, others like the hill tribes had the same thinking as the starting point of the conflicts. The next generation of their cadres do not ignore these questions but are conditioned more by the economic issue of unemployment that arises from a lack of development.

None of these issues can be ignored in the search for peace. The identity and nationality issues were predominant in the Naga and Mizo struggles. That is one of the reasons why the accord between their militant outfits and the Government of India resulted in the formation of new states and recognition of their customary laws that these and other tribes consider intrinsic to their identity. However, one cannot exclude the possibility that these accords have been between the elite of these tribes and the State and a majority of the people were not involved in them. The dissatisfaction among the Nagas and the failure to arrive at a permanent solution is an indication that such accords cannot succeed without the involvement of the community they claim to represent. The same can be said about the Assam Accord of 1985. It seems to have become an agreement between the leaders of one community and the Centre to the exclusion even of the elite of the remaining communities of the state.

These and other agreements show that involvement of the community as a whole has to be the first alternative in the peace process. Prolonged nationalist or other struggles cannot continue without some type of mass support, nor can lasting peace be achieved without involving the same masses. One has, therefore, to search for methods of involving the people but one cannot speak of a single mode of doing it. The involvement of the civil society is one possible mode of arriving at it. There are other modes of doing it. Whatever the approach, one has to begin with the conviction that people's involvement is a sine qua non for lasting peace.

That involvement has doubtlessly to deal with the issue of political autonomy but that, too, has not been defined. Some think of sovereignty as secessionism. But as the tension around the presence of the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and of the immigrants in Assam shows, the identity issue cannot be ignored (Chakraborty 2002: 162-164). Local people can be roused to action with the fear of a massive demographic change and the consequent loss of their identity. However, the experience of the

Assam movement and of Meghalaya state formation also shows that people come together against the common enemy but once the goal against this adversary is reached, internal division begins around economic issues. At this stage the economic, political and cultural aspects merge into one.

As a result, lasting peace requires the type of economic development that also responds to the cultural, political and social dimensions. A political response of state formation, autonomy, territorial adjustment or the Sixth Schedule can bring temporary relief. Treating militancy only as a law and order issue and repression of unrest through laws such as the *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958* can bring about the peace of the cemetery based on the absence of external violence. But lasting peace requires a solution to the problems that cause the conflicts.

Land is one such issue. Encroachment by the immigrants, acquisition for development projects and alienation of tribal land to the non-tribals have caused conflicts. That problem has to be solved. However, while moving towards a solution one cannot ignore the fact stated by more than one author, that land is not merely an economic asset but also the centre of people's culture and identity. In the traditional rural system land is not a commercial commodity for cultivation or construction. It is the sustenance of all those who depend on it, its owner, those who work on it without owning legally or provide other services as merchants, barbers etc (NCHSE 1986: II).

Some demand that the land be restored to the original owners. The Tripura experience shows the difficulty of doing this. Moreover, merely restoring land to the original owner can satisfy those who own land, but will not solve the problem of the rest whose sustenance it was without owning it. More than one writer has also pointed out the near impossibility of expelling all the "illegal immigrants". The killings of the Biharis shows that even Indian immigrants cannot be sent back to their land of origin without massive bloodshed. A solution has, therefore, to be found that prevents further alienation. That requires a change in the laws

that make encroachment on the common land easy. Implementation of existing laws has to be enforced in favour of the land losers.

That is only the first step. One has to go beyond it to create a new economy based on the land that is still left in the people's hands. That also requires a history that is different from that of a single crop in which the people of the region live because of the *zamindari* (landlord) system, *eksonia* (temporary) *patta* (land ownership document) or *jhum* (shifting) cultivation. The type of economic development that is being envisaged for the region is based on more land acquisition than in the past without even replacing the jobs lost because of it. 48 major dams are being planned that will destroy much of the people's livelihood without replacing it. For example, the detailed project report of the proposed Lower Subansiri Dam in Arunachal Pradesh states that only 38 families will be displaced and that they will be provided land for land. It ignores 12 more villages that are expected to be submerged and others that will be partially affected. It does not mention that these 38 families will lose more than 900 hectares of land but will be given only one hectare each of irrigated or two hectares of unirrigated land (Menon forthcoming). It does not include among the affected persons the estimated 5,000 persons living in the area that will be turned into a wildlife sanctuary to compensate for the one that will be submerged partially by the dam (Rina 2006). Because of mechanisation and the high cost of creating jobs, the proposed projects cannot create jobs for those who will lose their livelihood to them.

A solution to the land issue has to be based on an understanding of these and other issues and not merely on the prevention of further alienation. A new economy required for it demands a history away from that of a single crop. Production in the remaining land has to be geared to the creation of new types of jobs to solve the problem of massive unemployment. People have to be trained to produce new commercial crops that they can grow, without encouraging further monopolisation of land or increasing people's dependence on technologies coming from

outside. New crops alone are inadequate without processing and marketing because the biggest exploitation is in marketing. One cannot give here all the details of this new economy. One can only add that this economy has to be a tool of rebuilding the people's economy, community, culture and an identity meant for the present.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the nine papers that give the background of conflicts in the Northeast and some indications of possible steps towards peace. A common theme in all of them is that conflicts cannot be taken in isolation and treated as a law and order problem alone. The cultural, social, economic and political causes of the conflicts have to be understood and dealt with. It also means that peace cannot be achieved only through negotiations and accords between the state and non-state armed stakeholders. The people affected by the above causes have to be involved in the negotiations. It may be done by involving the civil society or other groups. Whatever form it takes, internalisation of the peace process by the whole community is essential because most of its members have also internalised the real or perceived grievances that result in the conflict. To achieve peace one has to go beyond a law and order approach to the conflicts and view negotiations as movement towards a just society.

2. Conflicts amid the Historical Experiences of Identity, Nation and the State in North Eastern India

M. N. Karna

An analytical paper of this type is usually an exercise in a sober look at academic inputs and is structured so as to create an aura of dispassionate analysis, especially if it happens to be on a theme like conflict and peace processes in India's Northeast. But the logic of histories we have been forced to live in have somehow taken away the comfortable world of such sober exchanges. The times are such in the country today that even off the cuff platitudes on conflict and peace are bound to be relevant. Despite that risk, I venture to make some remarks.

Methodological and Conceptual Problems

Let me begin with some methodological and conceptual problems involved in making comments on various aspects of conflicts and their resolution in the Northeast in general and Assam in particular. The first problem that one faces is that of authentic and reliable information on issues of our concern. The social scientists not belonging to the region falter to write freely about problems being faced by the people of the region as they are apprehensive of attacks by the locals. The native scholars, on the other hand, attempt to conceal the facts in order to camouflage the uncomfortable and outmoded practices of their community. Under such conditions truth is the casualty. That is why the portrayal of India's Northeast is more mythical than real. The rest of India gets a picture of the region only as one of conflicts. The contradictions the Northeast faces in its relations with the

so-called 'mainstream India' are never mentioned in the media.

The second problem is the absence of a language and concept native to the communities of this region. Therefore the articulation takes place in the language of ideologies shaped elsewhere and not internalised to any appreciable degree by the people from outside. The most appropriate example in this respect is the term 'nation'. Most of the stronger identities in this region have expressed their individualities in terms of their 'nation' and 'nationality' and have launched struggles to attain a 'sovereign' state. Those of us who are conversant with the modern discourse on nation and state are well aware of their conceptual and empirical difference. These two dimensions, the nation as a collective identity and the state as an expression of political sovereignty are properly delineated to grasp the coincidence between nation and state (Karna 1999a). The point which I intend to clarify here is that while ideologues of the organised and politicised identities in the Northeast articulate their stand as a nation, both the centralising Indian state and the people from central India fail to appreciate this point. The fact of the matter is that while the people of the Northeast have accepted the reality of the Indian state, they are yet to harmonise with the idea of the Indian nation.

The third dimension of the debate rests on the repeated notion of the 'mainstream' which has almost assumed the character of a cliché. The ethnic identity of the Northeast is invariably viewed in relation to what is called the 'Indian mainstream'. Obviously the idea of a 'mainstream' essentially implies that there are 'sub-streams' or 'side-streams' which are not part of it. In this context the moment appeals are made for joining the mainstream the Northeast is treated as a side-stream which has to merge with the mainstream for its survival. This formulation further implies a relationship of superiority and subordination. When there are several streams some of them definitely emerge as dominant ones towards which other streams are expected to flow and with which they are finally expected to merge. In fact the term mainstream is

exclusivist in nature. It implies that some other streams graduate to become part of it when they develop features commonly found in the mainstream (Phanjoubam 1999).

Under these circumstances when the mainstream becomes more structured and defined more and more side-streams may grow in course of time. However, the possibility of proliferation of sub-streams is greater in the multilingual, multiethnic, multiracial and multicultural societies like those of India. Thus the notion of a mainstream is expounded by the dominant groups to pressurise the smaller identities to assimilate with the larger whole.

It is argued these days that there exists a dominant national group in India which is identified as a Hindu-Hindi community besides several other smaller linguistic, cultural and religious groups. This dominant national group comprising the Hindi-speaking/knowning states of north and central India is acknowledged as the largest single block of states with Hindu-Hindi as a major concern. It is this large block of states that is considered the Indian mainstream which represents the heartland of India. Such a formulation denotes relations of dominance and dependence. Although the idea is not always based on a reality of discrimination and oppression of one region by another, in reality more often than not it is created to express one's distinctiveness under the condition of identity politics.

However, we reject the idea of the great Indian mainstream as the historical sub-stream of the Northeast is hardly represented in it.¹ The demand to join the mainstream has almost always been a call for the negation of the "sub-stream" region's 'collective memories of the past'. The underlying idea behind such an understanding is that the people of this region have no history of their own; therefore, it is not only appropriate but is even essential for them to adopt mainstream history as their own.

Tension around Identity and Nation

Let us now briefly examine the nature and extent of tension and conflict in the region and the role of identity politics in it. The identity politics of the region are a product of the historical experiences of various communities. This area has, of late, acquired ‘notoriety’ in India mainly because of conflicts and movements within states and between various ethnic groups located in different parts of the region. The prevailing ‘culture of movements’ has assumed several patterns; the most prominent among them being the extra-constitutional demands for sovereignty. It started with Nagaland, spread over to Mizoram, Manipur and Assam and eventually covered the whole region. Today almost all ethnic groups have started articulating their identity in terms of nation and national identity.

It is a fact that ethnic identity and its articulation in terms of ethnicity is not pre-determined or given. It is socially constructed and thus both Indian and non-Indian social scientists working in the field have categorically suggested that the politics of identity and ethnicity is the product of modern society particularly highlighted by the middle class in most of the developing countries. The situation obtaining in the Northeast comes close to this understanding.

Theoretically speaking, ethnic identity is the symbolic use of certain markers of culture by a community to differentiate itself from other groups and communities. It involves claims to a higher status as a group in relation to others. Such self-conscious groups develop their own criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. The use of ethnic identity for pursuing group interests is ethnicity which is initially utilised for people’s mobilisation. Subsequently the same identity turns into an instrument to seek political and economic advantages (Karna 1999b).

¹ For more on it see the paper of Lucy Zehol in this volume.

Areas of Conflict

I have so far presented a broad framework within which the prevailing scenario in the Northeast can be examined. Now the details that follow will generally cover the whole region but some of its units will assume a central place in the discussion which follows.

The discourse on the nature and extent of conflicts in the Northeast revolves around three major points of reference: politics, economics and culture. Although they are separated for analytical purposes, in the actual debate they are intimately connected with each other. An argument for political economy may include an argument for economic as well as cultural autonomy, a demand for economic self-sufficiency may be supported by an assertion of cultural identity and political freedom; and economic and political freedom may be seen as necessary constituents of cultural freedom. However, in spite of their intimate inter-relationship numerous struggles and movements launched by various communities in different states of the region have laid emphasis on specific issues to mobilise the people.

The region is characterised by a culture of movements. Almost all communities and groups are agitating but the nature and forms of their agitation and protests are different. In the matter of the political aspirations the peoples of the region are fighting at three levels and all these demands are determined by the concepts such as nation, national integration and the Indian constitution. Since the debate on nation and national identity is circumscribed by the limits of the Indian constitution, the movements for national ‘independence’ naturally turn into armed struggles or what is called insurgencies. “The official Indian response to this is an armed solution, whether in the shape of considerable army operations or of para-military and police action of various degrees of intensity” (Miri 1999). The second level of movements is for a separate state, more autonomy within the state, and for security against foreigners and outsiders. Some of these movements also

take a violent turn and some may even have armed wings which may eventually separate themselves from the parent body and acquire a structure of their own.

Nationalist Struggles and Historical Experiences

Whatever I have said so far apparently suggests that the nature and forms of conflict and attempts of the various communities to resolve them are the result of historical experiences of these groups of peoples. As their historical experiences vary their response to the emerging issues have also been different. We may illustrate these issues with the help of examples from Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. The selection of these three units of the region is purely coincidental and has been included only for reasons of convenience of the present writer.

The demand for a sovereign Nagaland is the oldest demand of this type in the country. The Nagas never talked of ethnic plurality, self-representation, and usufruct rights to land. Rather, their struggle contained from the beginning the issues of 'nationhood, self-determination, and inalienable territorial rights'. Thus they claim to constitute a 'non-state nation' and have been fighting for acquiring the status of a 'nation-state'. During the historical period the Nagas had only marginal interaction with the Ahom rulers of Assam. In the British days even such a limited interaction was stopped as the hill areas of the region were declared 'excluded' for administrative purposes. Moreover, the spread of Christianity and the distinctiveness of their socio-cultural identity set them apart from the neighbouring areas in almost all aspects of life.

The revolt in Nagaland assumed the shape of a secessionist movement when India attained independence in 1947. A pan-Naga national consciousness took a definite shape under the leadership of Zapu Angami Phizo in the 1950s. The emerging Naga nationalism shut itself away from the very beginning from the larger Indian nationhood. Thus the struggle has continued

for decades and it is now under the virtual control of the most powerful Naga group known as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingalen Muiva) popularly known as the NSCN (I-M). They are by an agreement involved in peace talks with the Government of India (Kaur 2006).

The situation of Manipur is substantially different from that of other states of the region. The Meitei are the major community of Manipur and actually only they are considered the Manipuri by the people from outside the state. They originated from a tribal stock but started transforming their occupations quite early perhaps in the fifteenth century when they abandoned shifting cultivation and adopted permanent cultivation. They settled down in the Imphal valley and the surplus generated by settled cultivation led to the process of state formation giving rise to the Manipur kingdom in the sixteenth century. The Meiteis adopted the Bengal variety of Vaishnavism which percolated from the aristocracy to the lowest level of the community within a span of two hundred years.

Manipur became a princely state within British India but subsequently joined the Indian Union in October 1949. Although no political party could be formed in the State as the king did not allow it, the Manipuri immigrants initiated some activities associated with the Indian freedom movement which eventually led to the formation of political groups like the Indian National Congress, the Congress Socialist Party, and the Communist Party of India. Obviously such activities increased the level of political awareness that reflected the Indian national consciousness. Thus secessionism was for all practical purposes unknown among the Manipuri during the early decades after independence. It was only in the late 1960s that the demand for self-determination came to be debated and discussed in the political circles. By the 1970s and 1980s numerous underground groups emerged which have been designated as insurgent by the Indian state.

Assam has been one area which has always been considered

to be associated and integrated with the mainstream Indian cultural and political life. The people of the area particularly the Brahmaputra valley consistently responded favourably to all pan-Indian social and cultural movements. During the sixteenth century the emergence of Vaishnavism marked the completion of the process of the sanskritisation of Assam (Choudhury 1999).² The people of Assam contributed significantly to the Indian freedom struggle especially after the entry of Gandhi in the national movement. It is thus recognised that the “Indianness” of the Assamese people emerged from within, acquired through their historical experiences and consolidated by the social, cultural, political and economic interaction of almost more than fifteen hundred years. This “Indianness” has now been challenged by the demands of a separate homeland for the Assamese articulated by the United Liberation Front of Assam.

Changing Nature of Tension and Conflicts

Having briefly examined the emergence of identity politics in the North Eastern region it is appropriate to discuss the changing nature of tension and conflicts which is taking place in the region as a result of the articulation of a new political consciousness. The struggles for sovereignty have very quickly turned into armed struggles which the Indian State has officially designated as insurgencies. Naturally the tension and violence generated initially by the government’s violent response towards the extra-constitutional strategy adopted by the various political groups located in different states of the region quickened the process of conflicts. The Indian state’s resort to such armed struggles was also an armed solution both in the shape of considerable army operations and police action of various degrees of intensity. Thus the continuing attacks and counter attacks led to further alienation and exclusion of the region.

Another dimension has been added to the deteriorating situation of conflict. While the continuing influx of people from

outside the country particularly from Bangladesh has assumed the form of communal tension, the never ending danger of inflow from the other states of the country has perpetually caused a terrible fear in the minds of the local people. Because of the influx of the immigrants, the possibility of a complete reversal of the demographic composition of the region is not ruled out. Under these conditions the demand for the deportation of illegal immigrants that started with the foreign nationals is now applied even to those who have come to this area from other parts of the country. Thus the frequent ethnic clashes between tribal-non-tribals, outsiders and insiders, and even inter and intra tribal quarrels have become very common. The proliferation of groups reposing faith in violent means to achieve intended goals also shows the internal ideological debates and clashes which result in factionalism and splits in the organisation itself.

In addition to the above, tension and conflicts are also generated by the continuing backwardness and underdevelopment of the region. Another explanation of the worsening inter-group relations in the Northeast is the deteriorating employment situation in the region³. Still another potential area of tension has been trade and business which by and large continues to be under the control of people from outside the region. Space does not permit me to go into the subject in greater detail. However, I would like to emphasise that disparities in the socio-economic development inevitably result in political fragmentation. Under the circumstances, dividing rather than compromising elements become the primary channels through which people express their grievances and even identities.

Conclusion

What has been narrated above is the outcome of the past history of the relationship with the so-called mainstream. I

would like to conclude this discussion by suggesting that the Indian parliamentary democratic structure has the capacity and resilience to accommodate the aspirations and cravings of the people of India's Northeast. But to tune the system towards this goal the democratic system has to deepen further to make it more inclusive. More voices of the region have to be included in the negotiations for peace.⁴ The involvement of more groups representing the people of the region and a more democratic process of negotiations can help the parties in conflict to face squarely the historical experiences of the people of the region that have led to the conflicts and find solutions that can deal with the causes. That is the challenge of the future history of India and of the Northeast.

² The term 'sanskritisation' used in the Northeast is not in the sense in which M. N. Srinivas has used it. It is not used with a capital "S" to mean "Brahminisation". It is used in a general sense of Hinduisation, a process which was active in this region.

³ For more on it see the paper of Walter Fernandes in this volume.

⁴ For more on the role of the civil society, see Manchanda's paper in this volume.

3. How Conflicts are Reflected in Literature : Transcribing Troubled Realities in the Written and the Oral

Esther Syiem

The art of "witness," in the words of the Manipuri poet Robin Singh Ngangom, devolves upon the artist who must by virtue of a personal commitment to art, "mirror" the "body and mind of the times". The artist stands in the "here" and "now" critiquing life and involving others in such a way that they can no longer remain the same after having read something truly "meaningful". The three narratives that have been selected for this discussion cut across all divides as they speak out about issues that tear lives apart. They trace conflicts but refuse to be defeated by them. They navigate the arduous journey through pain to an unyielding recognition of the polarities that circumscribe life.

In the light of the above I shall be looking at two short stories from Temsula Ao's book *These Hills Called Home*. I shall also be drawing from another text, *Cry, The Beloved Country*, a novel written by Alan Paton, a white South African, in 1948. I shall then conclude the discussion by attempting to recapture the resources of a Khasi oral tale, *U Sier Lapalang*.

Temsula Ao's Work

Temsula Ao prefaces her book with a brief note on the genesis of the stories. She explains the significance of "memory" (p. ix) as the force that has sensitised her to her people's past where she finds that there are "no winners, only victims" (p. x). This significant observation places the epicentre of each story within the realm of the human; not within the political or the social.

In *Soaba* which is the story of an idiot who has, through circumstances beyond his understanding, attached himself to

the household of Boss, the leader of a “flying squad” (p. 12), Temsula Ao begins her story by acquainting the reader with the new way of life that has overtaken Naga Society in the 1950s. A “new vocabulary” has begun to “creep into everyday language”. Words like “convoy”, “grouping”, “curfew”, and “situation” begin to “acquire a sinister dimension” (p. 10) suggestive of a violent political climate. Located in the heart of the Naga struggle, the story throws up men like Boss, “self-seeking entrepreneurs” (p. 12) and women like his wife Imtila, who become unwilling victims of his greed for money and power. Soaba, the idiot, remains throughout, a profound symbol of the humaneness that prevails in the face of conflict.

The story portrays the unthinking mind but not unfeeling heart of the idiot, Soaba, who is later shot dead by Boss in a drunken fit. Soaba’s capacity for love is unlimited. In a world of confused loyalties, he actually gives up his life to protect Imtila from her husband’s drunkenness. The thrust of the story is towards recognition of, if not reconciliation with, the “conflict of interests” eating into the “moral fabric of society where friendship and loyalty were the casualties” (pp. 11-12). It hones the reader’s attention to a dimension of life that remains neglected in the subterfuges of warfare. When Soaba dies, his death is understood to be almost sacrificial.

The rest of the story emphasises the sordid breakdown of Boss’s personal life. His collapse brings the wheel round full circle, for in the end Boss is no different from Soaba, the idiot whom he had shot down. As his faculties diminish he becomes as isolated, as alienated and as rejected from society as the murdered idiot Soaba was. Meanwhile the war of liberation continues to gain momentum, unimpeded by such paltry human factors as the death of an individual. The story lays bare the actual nature of war as it challenges a person’s humanity or reduces it to its lowest denominator. It also brings to light the inadvertent re-organisation of traditional social structures, under duress of war.

The Last Song is a story that presents the contradictory face of

Naga society. It begins with the story of the widowed Libeni, whose husband had a talent for singing. Their daughter, Apenyo seems to have inherited this gift, for at a young age she is always heard humming tunes to herself. The setting is an idyllic Naga community where the entire village has been Christianised. However, there is a note of foreboding in the lines: “the Independence movement was gaining momentum by the day and even the remotest villages were getting involved, if not directly in terms of their members joining the underground army, then certainly by paying ‘taxes’ to the underground ‘government’ in which this particular village is ‘no different’” (p. 26). Ironically, as the years fly past, a sense of expectancy is built up, for the village is now preparing for the dedication of a new church building. Apenyo will sing a solo. The choir, the church members and the rest of the village are all astir with preparations for the great occasion, unaware that at the same time, the army is also preparing to deploy its forces to arrest the leaders of the village for their “crime” of “paying taxes to the underground forces” (p. 26).

The ensuing chaos spells out in specific images the uncountable destruction that such communities have had to suffer. Apenyo alone stands firm in her resolve to sing. Hers is the lone voice that challenges the senseless destruction of the soldiers even as she is being carried off to be repeatedly raped by the soldiers of the Indian Army: “Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her” (p. 12). The old church is burnt down and many lose their lives. Apenyo and her mother die a senseless death, victims of the carnage deliberately wrought by the Indian Government.

In a postscript one learns that the story was told by an old woman who was witness to the killings. Her audience is the young people who make periodical visits home for their holidays and who call upon her often, to listen to her stories. “Tonight” she tells them, “is the anniversary of the dreadful Sunday” (p. 32). She enjoins them to listen to the wind. It is as if Apenyo’s song is heard again: “you heard it, didn’t you? Didn’t I tell you? It was Apenyo’s last

song” (p. 32). The old storyteller “passes on” (p. 33) the story of that Black Sunday when a young singer sang her last song even as one more “Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children” (p. 33). The singer haunts the present with her song. But the storyteller invests the past with a significance that must be kept alive. In these moments of emotive recollection, she tells everyone through her story that the tragedy may be transcended, and even death conquered and history re-interpreted.

There are several levels at which the two stories reflect conflict. Factual documentation occurs at the level of the narrative, where the author locates it within the disturbed milieu of Naga life whilst at the same time, providing eyewitness accounts of ground realities through characters like the curfew man, who is a government informer. He is the product of a society troubled by conflict and unrest and which has thrown up characters such as he, with occupations that navigate an “unpredictable area between trust and betrayal” (p. 38): an ambiguous area that has enveloped the normal, in Naga society.

At a human level the stories spell out the themes and issues that reach out to the reader in a very basic way. Character is given shape and identity through personas who are locked in a conflict that forms the historical backdrop, but who are irrepressibly human in their anguish and pain. Within the aesthetics of storytelling, where the author exploits the story’s relationship with its reader in order to create an atmosphere of expectancy through the employment of narrative devices, stories such as these create their own icons or symbols of human endurance that move beyond the ambit of the plot. Each story reflects the conflict that has made up the texture of the Naga struggle. There is no attempt to negotiate reconciliation of any kind. If at all, the vision that emerges is of the human condition, contradictory and self-defeating in its inability to conquer itself, and as it is undermined by factors that cause ruin and death. Knowledge of this does not alleviate suffering nor can it stop conflict, but it does sensitise the reader

to the disruptive currents and crosscurrents of a war-torn society. The contradictions that beset the human heart, of selfishness on one hand and of endurance on the other, create the double consciousness that complexly mirrors the human predicament in the short stories.

Alan Paton’s Book

Cry the Beloved Country (1948) written by a white South-African writer Alan Paton, sub-titled, *Comfort in Desolation*, presages the fight against *apartheid* in South Africa. Although the reconciliation offered at the end is Christian in spirit, the novel is more concerned with tracing the journey of Stephen Kumalo, the black South African preacher, from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg to bring his missing sister back. This, however, entails an unsuccessful attempt to rescue his prodigal son and to track down an erring brother; all victims of a political system that has systematically maligned the quality of life for the black South African. Stephen Kumalo’s odyssey brings him into close contact with the element of fear and suspicion that surrounds life in Johannesburg: “Have no doubt it is fear in the land. For what can men do when so many have grown lawless?” (p. 68). When he learns, in Johannesburg, that his son Absalom Kumalo has killed a white man, Arthur Jarvis, he experiences the overriding unease and despair that forms the substratum of life in Johannesburg. The lawlessness prevailing in the city is a manifestation of the breakdown that has occurred at all levels. Hence the “cry” that the book raises is for the “unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear” (p. 72), the cry for help that South Africa raises for its young citizens, uninitiated in the politics of power. The book dramatises the vicious politics of the power game, where, in the words of Temsula Ao, there are no “winners” only “victims”.

As he keeps vigil on the night of his son’s execution, Stephen Kumalo is filled with the conflicting emotions of a man who is torn between his responsibilities as preacher and as father. The underlying note of compassion and forgiveness, however, that cuts

across all human divisions cannot be simplistically understood, for though the book tells us that “such fear could not be cast out but by love” (p. 235) the conflict does not end simplistically. This may be seen in the truncated lives of Absalom Kumalo, his aunt Gertrude and his uncle John Kumalo. There is a vision of transcendence that is offered at the end but this can only come at the cost of pain and suffering. Consequent upon the life that one encounters in Johannesburg are the faces of death and decay. But the “comfort” that is born of “desolation” can only come from a vast ability to internalise forgiveness and hope, despite the contradictions that have destabilised life in Johannesburg (for more on it see Syiem 2006a).

The Khasi Narrative

In documenting only conflict and pain, literature becomes self-defeating in its inability to offer alternatives to them. It has to move beyond conflict into acceptance, insight or transcendence which is not a simple resolution but an initiation into a deeper plane of perception, one that can only be brought about by an ordeal through fire. This may be understood in the context of the oral narrative of the Khasis, *U Sier Lapalang* which is a tale that has significance for any society in search of itself. The tale speaks of *U Sier Lapalang's* disobedience and his mother's sorrow as she follows him deep into the Khasi Hills only to find that he has been killed by the brutal highlanders, the Khasis. These are men familiar with bloodshed but ignorant of remorse. They are representative of a breed of men committed to the preservation of their land (*ka ri umsnam*). On the other hand, *U Sier Lapalang*, who inhabits the surrounding plains and who is drawn to the picturesque hills, is the outsider foraging into their land. He must, therefore, in the interests of Khasi polity be removed (see Syiem 2006b).

The story verbalises the conflict raging within *U Sier Lapalang*: whether to venture or not into the highlands of the Khasi Hills when the aroma of herbs and fresh grass (*u jangew u jathang*) is so overwhelming. The conflict within *U Sier Lapalang's*

mother is the archetypal one, whether to tighten the reins of parental control or loosen them completely. There is also the tussle for power between an adolescent child and a protective mother—the one searching for adventure, the other attempting to rein in what she perceives to be a wayward adolescent.

The conflict between the Khasi warriors and *U Sier Lapalang*, however, is a confrontational one, between equals in strength and prowess. Besides, one must see them as belonging to opposite camps in terms of race, culture and orientation. One is a creature from the plains and the others from the hills. This places them within the familiar paradigm of conflict that has always subverted society and resulted in war, where the inevitable result is the predictably familiar round of violence. In the tale, the Khasi warriors are the definite victors as they bear trophy-like, *U Sier Lapalang's* body upside down on bamboo poles. The surprising twist in the tale, however, lies in the sudden break away from a note of violence to one of transcendence. When *U Sier Lapalang's* mother sees her son trussed up like plunder in warfare, she breaks into a mournful dirge for her son. The tale modulates into one of surpassing grief.

Such lamentation has apparently never been heard by the Khasi highlanders, for according to oral sources, her dirge so fills them with remorse that it overtakes all of them and subsequently initiates them into a worldview that is deeply inclusive of suffering and pain. Henceforward, according to oral sources, after the proverbial baptism of fire, the Khasis were initiated into the metaphysics of pain. *U Sier Lapalang's* mother had unwittingly brought them to the threshold of a worldview that takes them away from the primal concerns of survival to a perception of the dynamics of peace. The surpassing influence of an alternate worldview, represented by the mother, posits a great deal of hope for a generation dimly searching for answers. The tale ends with the change of heart within the warriors.

Realistically speaking the change can never be as dramatic as in the tale about *U Sier Lapalang*. But the implications move beyond the tale's confines to speak of the possibilities of renewal

within the human heart where the artist deliberately places himself/herself at the epicentre of a world fraught with the contradictions that he/she is depicting. Even in the oral tales of Khasi folk literature, the anonymous teller mirrors a value-system that has to move beyond conflict. Even as they witness conflict, these narratives are also driven by the impetus for life: the aesthetics of the vision that they offer are not solutions but possibilities that underlie the upheavals.

Conclusion

Though there can be no exaggerated claims for literature changing lives or initiating peace, yet the act of writing or the spoken word itself, whether during peace or war, is a defiant gesture that subverts the complacent realities of “power and money”, “insensitivity and terror”. Thus was it necessary for the Russian Communist regime to try to silence a vocal witness like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, thus was Ken Saro Wiwa hanged by the Nigerian Government, and thus must the poets of the troubled Middle-East be heard in the outside world; literary witnesses all, projecting themselves into the fray, voices in the wilderness crying for sensitivity and compassion, and navigating the path beyond mere protest to a discovery of the humane and profound. These are dimensions that have always been sidelined in a conflict-ridden society. Literature then, has always used “words” like “currency”, that must “circulate” and penetrate the hierarchies of power. The more they “circulate the greater their value” as they challenge and subvert; and are effectively dangerous to the political or social dominant. This puts the writer in a position of great social responsibility and the work of art may thus be understood to be an oracle of profundity.

4. Lessons from Conflicts and Peace initiatives: A Historical Review

David R. Syiemlieh

A major theme in writing the history of humankind has been the issue of conflicts. History texts have more to say on wars, expansion and peace and their aftermath than on any other theme. It is only in more recent times that this genre of history is receiving less attention with historical research focusing attention on other significant issues.

The histories of conflicts, particularly those of a political nature, have generally been told by those who support the state or sympathise with the state perpetuating the conflict as one of the belligerents. Then there are the detractors, who often and justifiably take the other view of conflict situations. Conflicts appear to be embedded in human nature. The desire for peace is also ingrained in human nature.

With this albeit brief background I have chosen as my theme two international conflicts which have impacted humankind - the First and the Second World Wars. I then discuss the Indian National Movement because of its tremendous significance to India and the world. Thirdly, I dwell on the conflicts in the Northeast because of the need to draw attention from the conflict situations in the Northeast of India to an appreciation of its rich culture. Before working on the three issues identified above it may be of relevance to refer to the lessons that history has to offer. Just knowing the past is not enough. The past, even if drawn from fragmentary evidence, should influence our understanding of the present and direct decisions for the future. In Volume 1 of *The Second World War* Winston Churchill (1959: Preface) reminds us:

There never was a war more easy to stop than that which

has wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle. The human tragedy reaches its climax in that fact that after all the exertions and sacrifices of hundreds of millions of people and the victories of the Righteous Cause we will not have found Peace and Security, and that we will lie in the grip of even more perils than those we have surmounted. It is my earnest hope that pondering upon the past may give guidance in days to come, enable a new generation to repair some of the errors of former years, and thus govern in accordance with the needs and glory of man, the awful unfolding scene of the future.

The First World War

There is no simplistic explanation for the origins of World War I. European nationalism in nation states and submerged nationalities had a conflict of interests in many parts of the continent and particularly in the Balkans. Aggressive European colonial expansion to “find a place in the sun” in Asia and Africa in the last quarter of the 19th century further escalated tensions. Interestingly, rapprochement over issues in the colonial world at times influenced alliances in Europe. These and other factors drove Europe to alliances and the building up of armaments. Crisis situations amidst a Europe in a fast pace of industrialisation which required markets further aggravated the situation.

The July 1914 crisis which followed the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria could have been averted but diplomacy was not driven hard and carefully to avoid a local situation escalating into a war. Germany is said to have prepared for war and wanted war. It made use of the tensions between Serbia and Austria to make war inevitable. When the war did start it was a European War - the Great War as it was then called. “It’ll all be over by Christmas” German soldiers said going to the war front in France. For them it was a “bright and jolly war” (Joll 1981: 193). The war aims of both the belligerent parties pushed them into a conflict which soon showed the tremendous pace that

war machines had developed. There was no serious conflict outside Europe.

The war was not over by Christmas. It went on into 1915 and 1916, up to 1918. Very early in the war peace feelers were put out by the Pope, Japan and by those who wanted an early peace. But peace could not be arrived at other than by one of the parties in conflict defeating the other. As the war dragged on war weariness set in. This in part was a reason behind the February 1917 revolution in Russia. A second and more significant revolution occurred in Russia in October that year. Lenin in March the following year, much to the annoyance of his allies, made the first of the peace treaties of the Great War. The entry of the United States of America changed the fortunes of the war. The US brought in capital, men and machinery. Its President Woodrow Wilson spoke of making the world “safe for democracy”. Through the summer and autumn of 1918 a number of revolutions occurred in central and Eastern Europe, signs that people were concerned that the war was continuing too long.

Early in 1919 representatives from many countries allied with Britain, France and the US assembled in Paris. The peacemakers were confronted with a “Himalayan task” to make a lasting peace. Precedent was taken from the Congress of Vienna of 1815 and its peace settlement for Europe. Woodrow Wilson’s 14 Points, which were the basis for peace and the guiding principles for the discussion at Paris, were not easily implemented. The Paris Peace settlement and its five treaties were not negotiated settlements. Germany termed the Treaty of Versailles a dictated peace. The four other defeated states were given somewhat more lenient terms, as Arno J. Mayer’s research has shown, to counter a new threat for western democracy – Bolshevism (Mayer 1972: 35). Russia was not invited to Paris. The war, peace and its aftermath were responsible for the emergence of a number of new states in Europe. Europe was broken but “Germany remained united”(Taylor 1966: 285).

The Second World War

It was the hope of many at Paris in 1919 that war as an instrument of policy would not ever again be resorted to. In the background of the war just ended and the peace settlement, and influenced by the last of the 14 Points, was established the League of Nations. Its preamble, incorporated in each of the five peace treaties among other things, enjoined the signatory states to renounce war and to reduce arms. The League as an international body had a decade of some success before contradictions and concerns of militarisation brought its failure.

The origins of the Second World War are linked to the failure of the Paris peace settlement. Germany in defeat still had the potential to cause concern and this came with the rise of Hitler to power. The establishment of the Nazi Party and its 25-point programme gave very early indications that this party would get the attention of Germans. Hitler came to power constitutionally, first with an alliance with the Nationalists, by which time the Communists in Germany were eclipsed, and later setting up a Fascist state. Five years into his Chancellor's post, Hitler was still cautious. And then from 1935 he threw caution to the winds. Taking advantage of the weakness of the League of Nations and the conciliation of Britain and France, he undid the Treaty of Versailles. When he was not stopped he pressed for more. He invaded Austria and annexed it to the German Reich. He wanted the Sudetenland. He got this ethnically German province of Czechoslovakia in agreement with Italy, Britain and France. Later he annexed the remainder of the Czech state.

Three trends were clearly visible in the politics of the world. First, democracy was being challenged across the world. This came in the form of the second trend, Fascism. It started in Italy with the rise of Mussolini in 1920, drew adherents in the Baltic States, Germany became its model and its influence spread into Southeast Europe. The third significant force was militarism. Japan used this to spread its control over Korea, China and Manchuria. Italy used force to occupy Ethiopia. Germany had set the example of using coercive force to drive its policy of *Lebensraum* (living space)¹.

The League of Nations by the 1930s had become so weak that its decision to impose an embargo on Italy could not be implemented.

The test for Europe and the world came when Spain went into civil war in 1936. Russia came in support of the Popular Front Government. Germany and Italy openly supported General Francisco Franco. Non-Intervention was flouted while thousands of volunteers came to the support of the Spanish government. The Spanish Civil War was the dress rehearsal of the Second World War. Its horrors got Picasso to paint *Guernica* (1937), which depicts the bombings of the defenceless town of Guernica. Ernest Hemingway's report on the war furnished him with material for writing a play, a collection of short stories and his more famous *For Whom the Bells Toll* (1940).

The Second World War began with France and Britain opposing the German invasion of Poland. The war had a number of theatres of conflict across Europe, Africa and Asia. It involved many more participant states than the First World War. The loss of human lives was colossal. What made it all the more dreadful was the wilful massacre of millions of Jews and other innocent people. The cost of the war has not been estimated for its sheer scale. There was no peace settlement after the war as was done after the preceding Great War, in the sense that there was no treaty. The war ended with the surrender of the defeated party. The victors took unilateral decisions about the follow up. During the war the Allies signed the Atlantic Charter April 1941, for a world without conflicts and the right of all people to political self-determination. This was followed by the Tehran Conference, December 1943, then the Yalta Conference, February 1945, followed after the surrender of Germany by the Potsdam conference and the Nuremberg trials. The victor states occupied Germany and exercised control over Berlin. The USA made Japan sign a treaty.

Indian National Movement

The origins of the Indian national movement go back to

¹ Read the note on *Lebensraum* in Sabine 1973: 825-836.

Bengal and the beginnings of political agitation. In time each of the Presidencies and their headquarters at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and other urban centres such as Poona had the rising intelligentsia take up issues of Indians under British rule. The British had given political unity to India. One economy, one political system with variants within it, an administrative structure, a legal system and other unifying forces were legacies of British rule. And yet India was not free. Through the 19th century Indians petitioned the government for what they considered their legitimate rights. The revolt of 1857 was a bold bid against the East India Company rule. It failed and in its wake British rule was further consolidated.

The revolt however influenced generations of Indians to continue their struggle against imperial rule. They continued petitioning governments and they agitated. When these methods failed, recourse was taken to the use of violent means by a section of nationalists. For nearly two decades in the last part of the 19th century and into the first decade of the 20th, violence was preached and openly used. Extremism in Indian politics shifted into terrorism. Yet these methods achieved nothing but a galaxy of patriots, many of whom suffered imprisonment and worse under the colonial state. The lesson was learned that if India was to achieve its goal of freedom, it would have to be through peaceful and constitutional means. The hallmark of the Indian freedom struggle was its use of constitutional means. Mahatma Gandhi gave fresh direction to the struggle with his teachings of *satyagraha*, (search for truth) civil disobedience and non-cooperation.

The North East

Imperialism is a thing of the past. It has left its imprint on the lives of the people in many and varied ways. Imperialism came later into this region than to other parts of India. When it did engulf its green hills, imperialism took a different form. The tribal people

did not take part in the national movement. They should not be blamed for this. The British policy of exclusion and segregation of the hill tribes kept them aloof from the momentous developments elsewhere. As an integral part India today they have every right to be treated with equality and dignity. The tribes are being culturally, economically and emotionally integrated into the Indian ethos.

Nowhere in the world are there such a number of tribal groups living in so close proximity. Their migration into the region goes back in time. Inter village and inter tribal feuds were common for want of space. This is explained in the location of their villages and their defence pattern, the head hunting culture and their polity. These are things of the past. Today, however, it would be wrong to say that conflicts were part of their lifestyle. Each tribe developed its own ethos and culture. These cultures have made the region varied and colourful. Over time they have adjusted and adapted to the cultures of others yet keeping their own.

Lessons

The lessons drawn from the history of the First World War are that struggle and conflict appear to be ingrained in humankind. The events building up to the war made militarism something to be proud of and happy about. Not aware of the full impact the war machinery would have, generals and politicians were concerned about their own nation's war aims and nothing else. The length of the war also indicated that the statesmen of Europe were not concerned with peace. Victory was more important. Self-determination of subject peoples, one of President Wilson's Fourteen Points, was applied only to Europe. The European imperial powers were in no mood to apply this to their colonies. Nonetheless the struggle for freedom and self-determination quickly affected the national movements in the colonial world.

Of the many lessons history has of the Second World War, the more significant was that war as an instrument of policy was again used and failed. So humiliating was the defeat for imperial

Japan that it incorporated a no-war ideology into its post-war constitution. It has upheld that ideal. The war further brought to an end the expansionist policies of those countries that wanted more territories. Ironically, the aftermath of the war also witnessed the collapse of European and Japanese imperialism in Asia and Africa. The independence of India and the nationalist movements in south and South East Asia, through the late 1940s and into the 1960s, ushered in the independence of very many states formerly under colonial rule. Self-determination was applied to the colonies reluctantly and in some cases such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Algeria, after an armed conflict.

The methods used by Indians in their struggle for freedom were adopted in the struggle of subject peoples around the world against colonial and oppressive rule. It had taken the Indian people a century and more from the beginnings of the struggle to achieve their goal. The lessons learned from this epic struggle were put to good use elsewhere. The Gandhian methods became an inspiration for the freedom struggles in South Africa, Poland, the West Indies and several other African states. Another lesson drawn is that the control of a power over subject peoples will not be indefinite. History has shown that tyrannies will fall.

Finally coming closer home, most often it is the negative picture of the Northeast of India that is portrayed. Ethnic conflicts among tribes in the region and insurgency and concomitant violence are the two issues that draw attention. The harmony of the tribes and their wonderful and rich culture is getting lost in the mire of ethnic disputes. A kaleidoscope of humanity with all its facets of cultures, languages, dress, songs and dance remain which should be cherished and nurtured.

5. Ethnic Tension and Conflicts: North Eastern Experience

Lucy Zehol¹

Northeast India is home to many ethnic communities and is also rich in natural resources, yet relatively undeveloped economically. The social landscape has been characterised by a great deal of racial, linguistic and ethnic diversity that creates ethnic tensions and conflicts within individual states and across state and national boundaries. This paper summarises some thoughts on ethnic tension and conflicts in Northeast India and attempts to highlight the issues involved, which are of general interest and of concern for the region. The paper then proposes some popular solutions.

1. Theoretical Background

Historically, the region has always been a battleground of differences. It is only in recent times that the process of fusion seems to have overshadowed fissionary tendencies.

Defining the Problem

W. W. Hunter (1879) the British Administrator observes that different communities inhabited the mountains and plains of the Northeast starting from the tenth through the eighteenth centuries A.D. During these centuries, there were constant frictions and tensions between numerous ethnic groups, tribes and peoples of the valleys. A series of wars took place, with the Chutiyas, Ahoms, Kacharis, Tripuris, Meiteis, Mons, Burmese, Shuns and others struggling for the upper hand in the low-lying areas. The Hill people were involved in these conflicts one way or the other.

¹ I am grateful to my students who had participated and contributed in my teaching on this topic. I have revised and expanded my class lectures. I alone am responsible for all inadequacies.

Accounts of Elwin (1962, 1964), Furer Haimendorf (1969, 1976), Hutton (1921), Mills (1922, 1926, 1937) and other British administrators also show that various ethnic groups, for example the Angami, Sema, Lotha, Ao, Rengma and Konyak and other Naga tribes were involved in feuds, inter-khel (clan) quarrels and headhunting. It was only in 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club that a feeling of a common Naga origin and solidarity began. A memorandum signed in 1929 by 20 persons belonging to different Naga groups was submitted to the Simon Commission calling for protection of the Naga groups from the plainsmen (Das 1982: 41-43). Intra-Naga rivalry has surfaced again and again in recent years among the various militant groups. In Manipur, the tension is massive because of the multiplicity of ethnic groups (See Zehol 1998). A series of conflicts took place between the Hmar and Kuki in the 1960s (Chaube 1973: 210; Zehol 1998: 93). The Meiteis of Manipur have always resented the fact that assimilation between them and the Kukis never really occurred. Yet the major movement is not directed towards the Kukis but is for the deportation of the foreign nationals i.e. the Bengalis and Nepalis.

About Arunachal Pradesh, Elwin (1964: 13) wrote: "In temper aggressive, reserved and suspicious, they have quarrelled among themselves for generations; there are still old blood-feuds taking their toll of human life and cattle-theft had long been common." Ethnic conflicts have not ceased altogether, yet the people of Arunachal Pradesh are forming a broader solidarity to counter the interests of the Chakma (who came from East Pakistan when they were displaced by the Kaptai dam in the 1960s) and Tibetan refugees. In Mizoram, ethnic relations among the various tribal groups were not always without tension or conflict. But when there was a problem of outsiders mainly of the Chakmas, the various ethnic groups forgot their differences and fought the 'outsiders'. In Tripura, the major upsurge has been the diminishing proportion of the tribes as the outsider (Bengali) population has overtaken them by large numbers. The two are trying to hold on to what

is their land and security, so the tension and conflict persists. In Meghalaya, ethnic tensions were often reported among the major ethnic groups, the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos yet all of them participated in the movement for statehood until it was formed in 1972. Today, the Garos do not like the employment policy of the Meghalaya Government and there is a rising demand for a separate state under the initiative of the Garo, Khasi or Jaintia militant groups.

In a nutshell, conflict seems eternal in the Northeast. Ethnicity feels like a double-edged sword. It unites most communities for political demands from outsiders but fails to organise the communities within as a common entity. These observations show that ethnic tension and conflicts have been a part of the North Eastern reality. That is the focus of this paper. It discusses the ethnic groups of Northeast India, with examples taken from Manipur and Nagaland. After a look at the ethnic differences within each state, a reflection will follow on the immigrant issue. Some would like the "illegal immigrants" to be expelled. We will look at the implications of this stand and see whether that is the only alternative.

In order to understand this issue, the paper will look at the theoretical issues before discussing some practical considerations. The tradition of academic writings on ethnicity and race relations has been influenced visibly by the academic heritage as well as the empirical location of the academician. To organise academic writings one can adopt the two schemes of academic disciplines and conceptual issues.

On the Basis of Academic Disciplines

Ethnicity and race are subjects which have come to the attention of every core academic discipline in the social sciences, to name them in alphabetic order, anthropology, economics, history, human geography, political science, psychology and sociology. It will be interesting to note the thrusts in each, and the pattern of shifts within each. Initially the anthropologists for the most part confined their study to tribal communities, while

sociologists to colour-race relations in the urban industrial areas. The psychologists may be said to have initiated their engagement with the analysis of the anti-Semitic situation in Europe. It yielded much literature on prejudice, but later they extended their focus to the analysis of urban situations with reference to the people of colour in an urban situation. This yielded much material on stereotypes. In political science, in a very different vein academic attention shifted to ethnicity formulated with comparative political analysis of developing societies and Third World countries. Such a neat designation of key thrust areas with each of the academic disciplines should not be carried too far. In course of time there has been a variety of academic excursions.

During the several decades in which study of racial and ethnic relations has occupied an important place among social scientists, theoretical disagreements have often rested on different levels of analysis from which they proceed. Rather than seeing these different levels as part of an inter-dependent system, the tendency in many cases has been to emphasise one level as fundamental. We can identify three broad categories or dimensions: a. The early observers, to whom prejudice and discrimination was the main characteristic. b. A second level of analysis, which sees inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations as expressions of a struggle for power, income and prestige. It is within this that the Marxist perspective of analysis has developed. c. The level of analysis, which draws attention to the process by which individuals are socialised and the nature of self-regard, wants and values instilled by their society.

An analysis of the tradition, which has developed in anthropology, needs some closer attention. According to one appraisal (Despres 1975), reflecting more specifically on the literature of social anthropology, one is tempted to consider ethnic studies B.B. and A.B. (Before Barth and after Barth). Before Barth, excluding a few studies of racial and cultural minorities, ethnic phenomena received their most explicit theoretical attention in the work of those anthropologists who were concerned with the organisation of plural societies. Barth perceived ethnic exchanges

as situations disclosing a more inclusive system of ecological, political, social and cultural relations and the structure and organisation of their respective communities, which needs to be explained in terms of part of this system. Barth (1969) thus explained that ethnic groups are formed to the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorise themselves and others for purposes of interaction. He added that a stable system of inter-ethnic relations presupposes a structuring of interaction along the boundaries of ethnic groups, that is to say, it presupposes a set of rules governing situations of inter-ethnic contact. According to one scheme a distinction can be made between the subjective view and the objective view of ethnicity. "Ethnic groups are defined both by the cultural modalities of their behaviour (including most importantly their linguistic behaviour), and by their subjective views of themselves and each other" (Van den Berghe 1973: 72). There is a striking lack of unanimity about the concept of ethnicity (see also Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 4). It was initially equated with race; later anthropologists recognised only the Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Negroid while ethnic groups were innumerable. In other words, an ethnic group redefines itself from time to time to include some and exclude others.

Conceptual issues

We may turn our attention to the issues relating to the definition of 'tribe', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity' with examples drawn from Manipur. A look at the theories that have developed around the ethnic communities, particularly those of Manipur can help one get an understanding of the conflicts because these theories are based on the authors' understanding of the field reality.

Tribes

There has remained considerable imprecision on the definition of groups, in terms of distinction between 'tribe', 'clan' and 'sub-tribe'. It has been possible to identify between 1873 (Brown) and 1986 (Kamkhenthang), nine different schemes for the classification

of the tribes inhabiting Manipur (see Zehol 1998: 123-129). Some of the main features noticed are:

Brown (1873), and Dun (1886) divide the tribes into two broad categories, the Nagas and the Kukis, Shakespeare (1912) refers to the Lushai-Kuki Clans rather than the Lushais or the Kukis. In his introduction he refers to “the many clans living in the hill tracts... of the Kuki race.” He explains: “The term Kuki, like Naga, Chin, and many others, is not recognised by the people to whom we apply it, and I will not attempt to give its derivation, but it has come to have a fairly definite meaning, and we now understand by it certain closely allied clans, with well marked characteristics, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock.” Brown, in 1873, identified 8 major tribal communities in Manipur. In 1981 the number has increased to 29, according to the official classification adopted by the Government of Manipur. It appears that Dun (1886) has multiplied the total number of distinct groups by including many more groups which hold village or lineage-based identity rather than any distinct ethnic identity.

The issue relating to definition appeared when we came to the definition of the Thadous *vis-à-vis* the Kukis. Do we consider the Thadous as a clan or a sub-tribe of the Kukis? Whatever decision we take, how do we define (a) clan and (b) sub-tribe? In the Chin-Kuki-Mizo experience, how do we define, each of the three, *viz.*, the Chins, the Kukis and the Mizos? In more specific terms, the question before us is: Do we consider each of the three, the Chins, the Kukis and the Mizos, individually as a ‘tribe’? In that case, what do we consider the double-hyphenated group, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo? Or are they to be considered a tribe or a bigger ethnic solidarity, within a larger territorial context? In case a common language, or more correctly, a language easily intelligible to each of the three is the factor for common identity of a tribe, then by referring to the ‘local’ cultural differences, what designation do we give to each of the three groups? In the Zeliangrong experience, how do we define each of the three, the Zemeis, the Liangmeis and the Rongmeis who

have given themselves the common nomenclature of Zeliangrong? Are they tribes? In that case, what designation will we give to the Zeliangrong? That of a tribe? In such a situation what would we like to consider as the comprehensive definition of a tribe?

This discussion is important because the Kuki-Paite conflict in the 1990s was mainly around the identity of the Thadou and the Kuki. The question raised was who is a Kuki? Is it only the Thadou whose language came to be used in the meetings of the ethnic groups that formed a common entity or do the smaller groups have equal rights? The feeling of the numerically small communities that the Thadou were using the organisation for their own domination was basic to the conflict (Haokip 2008a: 189-191).

The notion of a ‘tribe’ has engaged the attention of anthropologists nearly all through the history of the discipline, and without any conclusive results. The concept seems to have defied any standardised definition by the anthropologists all through. According to *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1960), “a tribe may be defined as a politically or socially coherent and autonomous group occupying or claiming a particular territory.” In the international Encyclopaedia of the social sciences, there is an entry on “Tribal Society” according to which in the general usage, the word ‘tribe’ is taken to denote a primary aggregate of people living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief. The unnecessary moralistic overtones that this usage implies can be avoided or minimised by the use of the expression ‘tribal society’ or ‘pre-literate society’. At the same time, the word ‘tribe’ need not be discarded. Indeed, it can be a technical term denoting a territorially defined political unit, a usage that recalls the original use of the word for the political divisions or patrician orders of the Roman state (Lewis 1968). The patrician-plebeian division was not identical to that of the tribes. The Roman division was based mainly on class and social categories while the tribes are divided territorially. However, the Roman division into social and cultural groups can function as a framework for an understanding

of the tribes.

The existence of distinct social or cultural groups within societies is widespread and ancient. It has occurred in the communities of Africa and in those of modern United States. It has occurred from such ancient days as those of the Old Testament, to those of the years on the eve of the 20th century. At this point, one may quote Morris (1968: 167).

It would be wise, for the sake of clarity, to make the distinction between a social group and a social category. By a group (we) mean an aggregation of people recruited on clear principles, which are bound to one another by formal, institutionalised rules and characteristics, informal behaviour... Members usually identify themselves with a group and give it a name. In practice social groups vary in the degree to which they are corporate, and in certain situations one of the principal difficulties of analysis may be to decide whether a particular social entity is in fact a social group or a mere category of the population, such as red-haired people, selected by a criterion that in the context socially neutral and that does not prescribe uniform behaviour". He later argues that, "Ethnic divisions may simply be categories of the population as are Welshman, and Scotsman living in England, or Indians, Chinese, and Creoles in Mauritius, who are beginning to lose a sense of ethnic separateness. It is, therefore, always important to be sure what is the exact sociological status of an ethnic or cultural division. Clarity in analysis depends upon it.

The issues before us, with such arguments, and also our own observations from Manipur, especially those emerging from the different schemes of classifications of the 'tribes' that have been made, are:

1. How to solve such issues as posed by Shakespeare when he relates about the Lushai-Kuki clans, and our own experiences,

such as those of Zeliangrongs? As asked above, how does one distinguish between a clan-tribe, sub-tribe and wider category such as the Kukis or the Zeliangrongs?

2. What criteria do we need to adopt in making use of the terms 'tribe' and 'ethnic group'. The answer to these questions came from a two-stage clarification adopted by us. In the broader context we adopted a classification as follows. Bearing in mind the nature of the field observation from Manipur, that of the communities involved in a constant process of defining-redefining their respective identity, we will need to base our analysis on the social category according to which the people identify themselves as belonging to a particular group.

We also felt that for purposes of clarity, it will be advisable not to press the academic, classical definition of a 'tribe', on the contrary, to adopt operational definitions for such notions as 'tribe' or ethnic group, and use the designations 'tribe', 'clan', 'sub-tribe', and 'ethnic group' synonymously, if and when necessary, but only after providing the operational clarification. Operational clarification, or adopting an operational definition, involves 'to operate' the empirical observations in terms of certain distinctions which will help categorisation, classification, and then ordering of the data. Whenever a concept is operationally defined, its meaning is made more explicit and more specific. The term hypothesis in such stands refers, in fact, to the assumptions, which the investigator makes at the outset.

Referring back to our field observations, we consider the Kukis as well as the Thadous, distinct tribes and sub-tribes at one point of analysis, and a tribe and its clan at another point of analysis. In the early history of these communities, the original group was the Kuki tribe, which was spread to a cluster of villages, within a specified territory. In the course of time, to be specific the translation of the Bible into the Thadou dialect of the Kuki tribe, began the process of this dialect group of the Kukis beginning to consolidate itself as a group distinct from the rest of the Kuki community. At this

point of history, for the purpose of analysis, we will designate the Thadous as a distinct tribe, with the explanation that it has emerged from the original Kuki tribe. We may view the situation from another position as well. In case the Thadous today want to be identified as a group distinct from the other Kukis, who are we to prevent them from doing this?

Ethnic Group

One of the issues before us, as will be clear from the foregoing discussion, is related to ‘substituting’ the notion of tribe or ‘community’ with that of ‘ethnic group’. In this relation the specific issues are: What defines an ethnic group? Does it substitute for the notion of tribe and of non-tribal communities? Does the use of the notion of ethnic groups foresee at some point of time later, the redundancy of the notion of tribe? In the process of formulating a reply to these queries, two situations drew our attention: Within anthropology, what implies the traditions of ‘ethnography’, ‘ethnology’ and now the study of ethnicity? Note, the root word ‘ethnos’ is common to each of the three. The paradigm shift is in anthropology, consequent upon the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* by Barth (1969). In anthropology, in fact, one can identify a two-stage paradigm shift, initially from early ethnography to ethnology and then to comparative analysis, and the second phase of paradigm shift with the publication of the volume by Barth (1969). The early ethnographers based their generalisations about a ‘particular society’ on the basis of observation from a micro-situation, often a village or on interviews with a few knowledgeable persons. As a result, the notion of ‘society’ was never explicitly enunciated. What attracted attention was culturally significant behaviour, rather than the ‘boundary’ of a society and the internal organisation/structure that distinguishes it from others.

After 1945, with the end of World War II, there was a marked shift in the approaches of the ethnographers. As observed by Firth, the classical study material of anthropologists seemed to be vanishing

fast, and they had to search for new subjects for their study, such as those of refined methodology, formulation of theories and the study of culture change. “Following World War II, ethnography began to attract more theoretical and methodological attention” (Conklin 1968: 174).

What comprises ethnology has, interestingly, three distinct sets of meanings. In the United Kingdom, the name ‘ethnography’ is generally used for purely descriptive accounts of a people or peoples. Ethnology goes beyond this description. In the first place it seeks to provide a classification of peoples by comparing them with reference to their similarities and differences. People or ethnic groups resemble or differ from each other by racial characteristics, by language, and by their modes of life and mode of thought, from the kind of dwellings they inhabit or the kind of clothes they wear to the kind of beliefs they hold. Ethnologists distinguish between the racial characteristics of a people and their cultural characteristics and between racial and cultural classifications (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 136).

One may note that Radcliffe-Brown, who represents the interpretation as adopted in the United Kingdom, refers to race, people and ethnic groups. This distinction, as we will note presently, has had a bearing on the present day perception and analysis of the ethnic phenomena.

In sharp contrast to the definition of ethnology in the United Kingdom, in Continental Europe ethnology refers to what comprises social anthropology in the United Kingdom. Much different from these two, in the United States, in the early years of Boas and Kroeber, ethnology is referred to as the study of the evolution of the communities. Towards the end of the 19th century, two schools of ethnology were founded, one by Boas in the United States and the other by Ratzel and Frobenius in Germany. Both schools emphasised the historical processes of diffusion and migration. In the United States, by the 1950s, Murdock laid the foundation of cross-cultural studies, and through this, that of comparative analysis. Such cross-cultural studies stem from the

evolutionary interests of the 19th century.

The principal weakness of most cross-cultural studies so far is that their instances hop, skip and jump across the map in such a manner that continuity of geographical distribution and other clues of genetic explanations are missing.... Although significant positive correlations in cross-cultural research are relatively easy to find, causal relationships are more difficult to establish, and the direction of causation is still more elusive.... Naroll (1964) has drawn attention to the many problems surrounding the nature of the ethnic unit used in cross-cultural correlations. Its definition is crucial to such studies (Driver 1968: 184).

As regards the redundancy of the notion of 'tribe', the straight answer to this has to be that 'such notions cannot be redundant as long as the people identify themselves as such.' Given the paradigm shift that has appeared among anthropologists with the publication of the volume by Barth (1969: 2), the guiding argument is that, "the starting point for such an examination must be a recognition that 'ethnic group' are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves." With such guiding consideration, the notion of 'tribe' will obviously never be redundant as long as the people identify themselves as such. It may be interesting and relevant to note here that with the paradigm shift from focus on tribe to ethnic groups, there has been a concurrent shift in focus from structural organisational considerations of the respective group to process-based experiences of inter-group relations. While the early ethnographers confined their attention to the structural features and cultural traits of a particular tribe, the paradigm shift took the attention to the processes of inter-group relations.

While such a paradigm shift appeared in the perspectives of social scientists, and more so, in that of anthropologists, social analysts have not been able to distance themselves from the issues

of race identity. As a result, any discussion on ethnic relations has invariably included a discussion on race relations as well. As Mason (1986: 5) explains:

The problem of origin has long dogged the study of many aspects of human behaviour. It takes on special significance in the field of race and ethnic relations.... Ethnicity may be a resource in the making of a group's history, but the process of categorisation, of which racism is the most striking example in the 19th and 20th centuries, illustrates that the superior capacity of some groups to define the circumstances under which that history is made is a crucial feature of a symmetrical power relations.

In the realm of sociology of knowledge, academic disciplines like ethnography, ethnology as well as analytical concepts such as ethnicity, ethnic group relations, carry their own history. Knowledge is society specific and time specific. "Traditionally, the plural society thesis has been seen as the principal example of the attempt to develop a special theory of race and ethnicity" (op. cit). The notion of 'ethnic groups' over a period of time and in different soils has referred to different categories of groups. To the Western colonisers, it referred by and large to the tribal communities in Africa and Asia. The colonisers and the academicians in communion with them found the notion of race more convenient to refer to them. Across the Pacific, in the United States, the notion of ethnic groups draws attention to cultural minority groups, like those with a Mexican, Italian or similar origin, who have now settled in the United States. With the development of their resistance in the United States in the 1960s, many of these groups are also identified now as ethnic groups.

In Manipur, the distinctiveness of identity and all that it can mean to the person or persons concerned, is clearly defined through two factors, territorial affiliation, and the language or

dialect of the people. A Thadou distinguishes himself from the neighbouring Kabuis on the basis of the difference of language, while the Chin-Kuki-Mizo appellation provides a good example of how territorial affiliation brings different names to the same cultural-linguistic group. The section of population which resides in Manipur has been known for long as the Kukis, while those who have inhabited the neighbouring Mizo Hills are known as Mizos and those across the border in Myanmar (Burma) are designated as Chins. With all such examples from Manipur, and the academic debate on the issue of identification of ethnic groups, we consider it operationally convenient to refer to each community, which wants to be identified differently, such as the Chins, the Kukis, the Thadous and numerous others, as an ethnic group. The issue of defining the boundary of an ethnic group is not to be decided in terms of any set criteria adopted by the analyst. Instead, it has to be in terms of how the people themselves feel: the distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’, the ‘insider’ and the ‘outsider’.

Ethnicity

As regards ethnicity, the same as in relation to the cognate concept of ‘ethnic groups’, we need to view it from the standpoint of the content as well as the context. In terms of content, ethnicity refers to an overt expression of feeling of differentiation, such as the situation of how the other Kuki group of people differentiated themselves from the Thadous. This is a consciously expressed feeling. In social science literature, we find extensive discussion on the notion of ethnicity, but a close look at these readily reveals that the attention to this notion has refracted to diverse directions rather than going deep to an analysis of what it implies. Smith (1981: 3) argues that ethnicity should not be treated as a given, like primordial givens. As we note from the available data, every discussion which is intended to be on ethnicity, refracts to a discussion on ethnic group boundaries and identities.

Etymologically, the term traces its origin from the “ethnic”,

which relates to a community of physical and mental traits posed by members of a group as a product of their common hereditary and cultural traditions. According to Webster’s Dictionary (1978), it is a noun from the expression ethnic, and refers to certain qualities or affiliation based on hereditary as well as cultural considerations. Winick’s (1964) Dictionary of Anthropology does not include an entry on ethnicity. It has an entry on ethnic, which refers to a group distinguishable by certain common cultural attributes such as language. It is interesting to note that such unconcern or marginal reference to the notion of ethnicity has continued with the social science disciplines. As a result, thus far no comprehensive definition has been provided.

2. Northeast Experience

Coming back to the main discussion, ethnic tension and conflicts have been a part of the Northeast reality. In pre-colonial days, tension and conflicts were based on tribal principles of heroism, justice, honour, pride, recognition, customary obligation or feeling of revenge. The recent conflicts and solidarities appear to be guided by common interests like the ‘deportation of foreigners’ rather than natural and inherent characteristic of tribal life. One can see this in the works of Hutton (1921); Elwin (1962, 1964); Furer Haimendorf (1969, 1976); Chaube (1973); Das (1982); Kabui (1982); Majumdar (1982) Mukherjee and Mukherjee (1982) and Zehol (1998).

Hills and Plains Relations

In the colonial times, Assam in the area today known as the Northeast was characterised by “... unstable relations of the indigenous population with the colonial rulers on the one hand, and the plains people on the other” (Roy Burman 1984: 174). This unstable relationship between the tribal people in the hilly areas and the rulers in the plains continued even after Independence. In addition, the plains people of Assam had themselves to face uneasy

inter-ethnic relations. After India's Independence the relationship between the political centre and the tribal folk in the Northeast was characterised by mutual alienation (Lal 1984: 202) arising from an inadequate understanding of each other, including a "colossal ignorance, even in otherwise informed circles, regarding these areas" (Horam 1984: 190). The tribal people felt neglected by the centre and the centre feared the insurgencies in this sensitive border area, particularly in Nagaland. Horam (1984: 192) claims that the 'trouble' of these regions has political and not economic roots. Hence, we see the problem of 'understanding' as a major issue in the Northeast.

The most obvious tension, caused by development, is the problem of the large number of Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam. This theme is getting more and more attention and is being well described in the social science literature. Dubey (1984: 134) argues that Northeast India is part of a social-cultural plural India, stating, for example, that the Nagas and Manipuris are mentioned in the Mahabharata. He stresses the fusion of mainstream India with the tribal areas, including the tribal areas of Northeast India. However, Roy Burman (1984: 175) states:

They may have had historical relations with some parts of the country. In others they had such relations with other countries. At the same time, the ethos of their social organisation has often been different from that associated with caste. In fact, caste formation and permeation of caste values have been formal, only in some of the areas of the region, and those too in an incomplete manner. Hence, the network of traditional social relations linking up the region with the rest of the country covers only limited areas. One thus sees that even among scholars there is no consensus on the relationship between Northeast India and "mainland" India.

Development and Immigration

The most prestigious aim of post-independence India is to rise up as a modern and united nation-state. Ethnic tension, conflicts and backwardness are therefore seen as threats to the state. However, at times both goals seem to be hampered by impracticability. In general, we might assume that a successful development of industry with low unemployment makes an impact on the stability of a society, but the opposite, too, can be the case. Today's development is accompanied both by cross-border trade and exchange of goods and of labour. P. C. Goswami (1984) highlights this relationship between development and immigration on account of the population growth in Assam. When employment opportunities are abundant then immigration does help to develop the economy of an area. But once the demand for a particular type of unskilled labour that comes from an immigrant group is satisfied, ethnic tensions against the immigrants are likely to appear because of the fear that the immigrants may take up work that is normally done by the local people.

One example from Northeast India is the immigration of Bengalis into Assam. B. P. Singh (1987: 140) says that: "In attempting to enhance the land revenue and augment the exchequer by exploitation of the natural resources of the region, the British found that the shortage of manpower in Assam was the greatest obstacle to the fulfilment of their plans." Consequently, immigration became a social factor in Assam ever since the development of the tea gardens around 1850. The plantations required a large number of workers, who were conscripted from all over India. After 1891 those workers were joined by Muslims from East Bengal and also from the beginning of the 20th century, unnoticed, by Nepali graziers. Already around 1935, ethnic tension became visible as labourers started to settle down on tribal land to cultivate it. Even so, in the beginning they contributed to the strengthening of the Assamese economy. Later, as they began to settle down, they also contributed to the competition in the Assamese economy for

resources, in particular for adequate employment opportunities (Ganguly 1984: 106; Goswami 1984: 37).

Immigration continued and was even speeded up after India's independence by the development of this region. As a result, some claim that 50 percent of the Assam population is made up of those who migrated from outside at some point in time. The local people felt that this was a point of danger and crisis (Goswami 1984: 39; Singh 1987: 163). This has special relevance to a democratic country like India where the relative number of citizens decides political elections and the distribution of power. In course of time 'migrant communities' could gain more and more control over primary sources of livelihood like land and over secondary sources like government jobs (Singh 1987: 141). Goswami (1984: 39) further claims that: "This state of affairs (immigration) has encouraged the growth of anti-India and secessionist groups amongst the tribals." By giving census data, B.P. Singh (1987: 140-141) shows that the population growth between 1901 and 1981 in the present day Assam is 505.01 percent; in Mizoram 491.71; in Nagaland by 661.48; in Tripura 1,088.63, in Manipur 404 percent, and in Meghalaya 289.95 percent.

Writing on immigration tends to be biased and full of the writer's prejudice. For example, Goswami's (1984: 40) prejudices become clear in sentences like: "The united and aggressive immigrants from foreign countries have already created disturbances in the hitherto peaceful countryside, in the name of looking after minority interest." When one pays attention to the adjectives he uses to characterise both sides, one realises that such writings can become easily social and ethnic dynamite in the struggle for resources like employment, education and land.

Goswami (1984: 59) also supports the stand that a large number of foreigners in Assam should be deported to their country of origin. Public opinion is often in favour of deportation as a quick solution, but this is a conceptual error as well as an unworkable policy, particularly in the case of Assam and Bangladesh. The

first reason is that Bangladesh is a neighbouring country. The Government may perhaps be able to forcefully deport people from far-off places back to their home but not to one's neighbour with whom one shares 4,096.7 kilometres of border and with whom one needs to have good relations particularly in a globalising context. The relationship between India and Bangladesh is likewise close, as this border area was an integrated market in pre-independence days and "a symbol of traditional pattern of economic exchange and long socio-cultural intercourse" (Lama 2006: 5). People complemented each other, including in what Barth (1969: 16-19) describes as ecological interdependence.

The second major reason is that, given the extremely high population density of Bangladesh and the relatively low density in Assam, a balancing out of the population seems to be unavoidable. Immigration will have to become an inseparable part of development programmes in Assam. However, there has been an insider-outsider issue around immigration. The feeling of hostility to those who are "not like us or not from where we are from" is only natural. In this light, the North Easterners may be a little cruder, while in other cultures the notion that the immigrants are 'tribal' people and are 'savages' automatically gave rise to a superiority complex towards the outsiders. The original inhabitants felt that they refused to learn the local ways and manners as they practised their 'outside' habits which are seen as a nuisance. So attempts are made to get rid of them.

The important question should not be *if*, but *how* to handle this growing challenge for the common good including the good of those immigrants already living for decades in Assam. One agrees with B.P. Singh (1987: 162) that: "However tempting it might be, no State system can order or reorder in a chronological fashion the processes of cultural, economic and political change or, in the alternative, keep the social system in static form."

Resources and Removal of Poverty

All in all, immigration in a way allows one to learn new things as well as to try to hold on to the past. So one can only hope that immigration is not seen as a stumbling block to development but as a step towards progress in all spheres of life. That requires access to resources. The Constitution of India obliges the Government to uplift the “scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes.” In competing for the funds of the Centre J. B. Ganguly (1984: 101, 103) claims that, contrary to public opinion, the North Eastern States of India have not been neglected but that they have benefited from this positive discrimination by getting support from the Centre far above average, since the region has a relatively high proportion of tribal communities.

Ganguly tries to find out why the Northeast could not make a very effective use of the financial aid given to it. It seems to me that it is not simply the amount of money given by the central government that makes the mainly tribal population of the Northeast feel that the government cares for them, but the outcome of development projects. The development projects do in many aspects bring benefits such as education to the Northeast. But Ganguly (1984: 104) claims that the educational institutions are not tailored to the needs of the region with its different cultural and developmental needs, but are just a copy of the mainland educational system and therefore often ineffective, leaving behind huge numbers of highly qualified but unemployed young people.

Like Goswami, he too takes Assam and its problems with development and immigration as an example. But he goes beyond it to suggest a solution. He suggests that the main objective of economic planning should be removal of the poverty of the masses, not high economic growth in itself. He adds that employment opportunities should be spread over the whole region and concentrated in a few areas by limiting development to them (Ganguly 1984: 109).

Pattern of Ethnic tension

Ethnic tension in the Northeast follows a clear hierarchical-horizontal pattern, stratified by the number of people, quantity of money, amount of power, attention and privileges that a group is perceived as getting from the government. The overall perception is that on top of those who get the benefits is the Hindu mainstream, followed by the Bengalis. Then come the Assamese and, right at the bottom, are the hill tribes (Chaube 1973, Singh 1987). Psychologically the conflict is stimulated mainly by the fear of losing privileges.

That takes many groups back to their own community which they perceive as indigenous that keeps losing privileges. Development itself implies a dynamic process. Within this dynamic process, seeing the numbers, power and resources shrinking a section of society fears assimilation into the growing group that is considered superior and is presented as the mainstream of India. On the other hand, the section of society that is presented as the mainstream and is growing depends for their livelihood or security heavily on those peripheral sections and their resources. That makes demography a very sensitive issue (see Barth 1969: 20). Thus, demography becomes crucial in ethnic tensions and conflicts. The immigrants would thus gain centre stage.

In an article “*Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development*” Steward (2001: 2) argues that conflicts which look like clashes between different cultures very often have their origin in “severe inequalities between culturally defined groups”. She calls them *horizontal inequalities*. Steward predicts that given “... inequalities in resource access and outcomes, coinciding with cultural differences, culture can become a powerful mobilising agent that can lead to a range of political disturbances.” This could be a summary of the ethnic tension and conflicts in Northeast India.

Conclusion: Search for Solutions

One can conclude from what has been said above that a reduction of tension must be achieved through a reduction of

horizontal inequalities. How does one reduce these inequalities? Steward (2001: 31) states that: "Development policy ought to include policies to monitor and correct such horizontal inequalities." These affirmative actions are aiming at the "... elimination in discrimination and providing positive bias in favour of certain groups' affirmative action." Another way suggested is verticalisation of the decision-making process. The concept of verticalisation, which is not new but has been stressed by many scholars for decades, does not mean explicitly decentralisation or distancing power from the centre. It involves bringing the decision-making process either to the people or the people to this process not as observers but as equal and active participants. Many think that this approach is a departure from the colonial or post-colonial concept of 'development from above' or the so-called 'downward filtration theory' or the trickle down effect, based on the assumption that development will trickle down to the grassroots after the elites

6. The Role of Land in Ethnic Conflicts in the Northeast

Walter Fernandes

One would be labouring the obvious if one were to repeat that the Northeast is known in the rest of India as a region of conflicts. While that is common knowledge, what is not known generally is that most conflicts in the region centre on land. One cannot conclude from this fact that the economic factor alone facilitates unrest. In this region in general and in its tribal areas in particular, especially in those depending on the common property resources (CPRs) land, apart from being an economic asset, is also the centre of people's social and cultural life. Many conflicts in the region are between tribal and non-tribal groups but others, particularly the more recent ones, are between the tribal communities of the region. They begin as a result of external inputs but end up as ethnic conflicts because of the shortages they cause. Land alienation is basic to these conflicts.

This paper will look at some of the processes that result in land alienation. Three main sources of alienation are immigration, development projects and loss of tribal land to non-tribals. The legal system influences all three of them. In immigration, focus has been on the Bangladeshis but in order to understand the problem one has to go beyond this group because other immigrants too encroach on land. The focus in this paper is on tribal land because both their dependence on land and the attacks on it are greater than on other communities. In order to understand the conflicts this paper will discuss at first the extent of tribal cultural, social and economic dependence on their CPRs and individual land and will then study the external as well as internal factors that lead to alienation and conflicts.

Dependence on Land

A majority of the inhabitants of the Hill States are tribal but they are a minority in the populous states in the plains. The 2001 census shows that the tribal proportion is as high as 94.5 percent in Mizoram, 89.1 percent in Nagaland, 85.9 percent in Meghalaya and 64.2 percent in Arunachal Pradesh. They are a substantial minority (34.2%) in Manipur where most tribals inhabit the hill areas while the non-tribal Meitei and Pangan, who are around 60 percent of the state's population, live on 10 percent of its land in the Imphal Valley. Tribals are 31.1 percent of the population in Tripura but only 12.4 percent in Assam, which accounts for around two thirds of the region's population. Thus the tribes are concentrated in the hill areas.

The degree of their concentration and clustering is more apparent in the districts and blocks and much more so at the village level. Some think that their tendency to cluster in small villages characterised by low agricultural potential explains the lack of adequate interaction between the tribal and non-tribal populations (Nayak 1998: 165). Though this assimilationist stand is unacceptable, one cannot deny that the tribes were relatively isolated from "Mainland" Indian political and cultural systems. Because of such isolation, the tribal movements of the region have been essentially political in nature. Both in the colonial and post-independence era they were seeking goals ranging from autonomy to independence. In this search some relied on constitutional methods and others on armed struggle. Common to them was the effort to resist alienation from their culture, land and identity.

This effort was facilitated by the fact that during the 20th century several tribes acquired new ethnic-territorial identities by coming together as new conglomerations. For example, from the early 20th century, the educated leaders of different tribes in the Naga Hills came together to form the Naga Club in 1918. Soon the Naga Club assumed political dimensions, changed its name

to the Naga National Council and became the centre of a Naga search for autonomy and of their nationalist struggles. During the decisive moment of the Japanese invasion in the 1940s, A. Z. Phizo, a traditional Angami leader succeeded in bringing 27 tribes together under the Naga umbrella (Sanyu 1996: 115-126).

The Customary Law, Land and Identity

Such processes united the tribes and helped them to acquire a new identity based on self-respect. That laid the foundation of later Naga, Mizo and other nationalist struggles in the sense that the tribes felt that they would lose these achievements if they were assimilated into the "mainstream". That also explains why an important component of their search for autonomy was protection of their identity. This is basic to tribal land relations and was also linked closely to the tribal customary law, according to which they managed their civil life in general and land in particular. The headman, invariably a man, and the village council made up of men alone, interpreted this unwritten law. As such, it was not egalitarian from a gender perspective but it ensured equity in the rest of their life. The village council both controlled and managed the land, some of which was individually owned, some of which belonged to the clan and the rest to the whole village (Fernandes, Pereira and Khatso 2007: 29-38).

This paper will not go beyond saying that the customary law was basic to tribal identity and land relations. Specific to most tribal customary laws is their community-based area-specific management of natural resources and the rest of their environment. Land and forests were the main components of these resources. The practices based on this law centred around agriculture, especially *jhum* (shifting cultivation) and helped the tribe to be self-reliant (Gangwar and Ramakrishnan 1992: 106). Among most hill tribes of this region the village chief had the administrative and judicial power required to regulate the use of land and water. His power of allotting *jhum* land to each

family has become somewhat weak with an increase in individual ownership, but even today most tribes accept the authority of the customary laws. Though many of them have become Christians or Hindus their value system based on their customary laws remains almost intact. Many values have changed, but not the customary laws around resource sharing, maintenance of ethnic identity or regulation of marriage.

That creates the first contradiction that leads to conflicts. While their tradition has been one of community ownership, the colonial land laws that continue to be in vogue in the country recognise only individual ownership. The above discussion on the extent of their dependence on land can also show the impact of land alienation on its people. As stated above, the three main sources of land alienation are immigration, development projects and loss of tribal land to non-tribals. The legal system influences all three of them. This paper will, therefore, discuss them one by one.

Immigration and Land Laws in the Northeast

In the discussion on immigration focus has been on the Bangladeshi Muslims, though both Hindus and Muslims have come from Bangladesh to the Northeast, as have Nepalis and people from Bihar and the rest of the Hindi region. Immigration from the present day Bangladesh began in the 1890s when the colonial regime encouraged the landless labourers of East Bengal to cultivate what it considered wasteland in western Assam. Apart from increasing food production, cultivation of this land and exploitation of other natural resources was also an attempt to enhance land revenue. The British administrators also assumed that Assam had a shortage of labour and that workers had to be brought from outside (Singh 1987: 140). After the East Bengal peasants came the Nepali graziers from the early 20th century. The immigrants contributed to the Assamese economy but also caused tension because what the administrators considered wasteland was in reality the means of fundamental sustenance of the Boro and

other tribes who managed it according to their community-based customary law, but as such did not have individual titles (*patta*). The colonial land laws recognised only private ownership deeds and treated the CPRs as state property that the administrator was free to allot to the immigrants without getting the consent of the communities whose sustenance they produced (Bose 1989: 38-39).

Then came the Bihari immigrants and at the Partition came an estimated 1,000,000 East Pakistani Hindu refugees into the Northeast. By official count 174,703 East Pakistani Hindus entered Tripura alone between mid-1947 and February 1950. Their immigration continued even after 1950 but it is difficult to call them Partition refugees. By official count 435,295 persons entered Tripura from 1951 to 1956. Apart from this official figure of registered immigrants who were granted rehabilitation facilities, a large number of others came on their own and found their own mode of rehabilitation without official assistance or registration (Bhattacharyya 1988: 14). That this Bangladeshi Hindu influx continued after 1956 and even beyond 1971 can be seen from the fact that the tribal proportion in the State has declined from 58 percent in 1951 (Chattopadhyay 1990: 101) to 31 percent in 2001 (Banthia 2001: xlvi).

Refugees at first and immigrants later also came to Assam and other States of the Northeast. That migration resulted in the anti-foreigner Assam movement, 1979-1985. The Assam accord signed in 1985 between the leaders of the agitation and the Central Government fixed March 25, 1971 as the cut off date for recognising the immigrants as persons legally domiciled in Assam. But the 2001 census shows an excess of 4,000,000 persons over and above the natural growth of the population of 1971, around 1.7 millions of them Bengali-speaking Muslims, presumably of Bangladesh origin, and 2.3 millions of Bihari or Nepali origin (Fernandes 2005a: 3238). Also the remaining states of the region have immigrants or refugees, for example, Burmese in Mizoram (Lianzela 2002) and the Chakma, Hajong and Tibetans in Arunachal

Pradesh (Subba 2002), but they are fewer than those in Tripura and Assam.

The people of the region pay less attention to the origin and religion of the immigrants, i.e. whether they are Bangladeshi, Bihari or Nepali, or Hindu or Muslim, than to the fact that they encroach on their land. The immigrants also do low-paid jobs as construction workers, rickshaw pullers and others that the local people do not do easily. However, land is of greater concern because much of it is CPRs. It is the basis of sustenance of tribal and other communities and is administered according to their customary law without a *patta*. Since the law considers it state property, to encroach on it the immigrants need only the consent of the state, not of the communities whose sustenance it is. That consent may even be obtained through fraudulent means. For example, a study showed that several Bihari families have their *pattas* at Lanka in the non-tribal Nagaon district of Assam for the land they own in the neighbouring Karbi Anglong district, which comes under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution that is meant for the hill tribes and bans land alienation to non-tribals (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 79). Such an arrangement could not have been done without corruption in the administration.

On the other side, land is the main attraction for the immigrants, most of whom were landless agricultural labourers before they came to the Northeast. They lived in a feudal system of lack of land reforms, low wages and poverty. That functioned as the push factor (Majumdar 2002: 107-108). Fertile land in the Northeast, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley, is the pull factor. In addition to this are the land laws that make encroachment relatively easy. Moreover, some laws have been changed to suit the needs of the immigrants. For example, in 1960 Tripura enacted *The Tripura Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act 1960* (TLR & LR Act 1960), which is the local version of *The Assam Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act 1886*. Through this comprehensive legislation Tripura abolished all the land area reserved exclusively for the tribes,

repealed all land laws as well as land tenure in existence up till then and vested the ownership of all land in the state. The declared objective of this act was to bring the cultivators in direct contact with the state and guarantee permanent heritable and transferable rights over the land they cultivated. It declared that stopping tribal land alienation was one more of its objectives. So Section 187 of the act imposed restrictions on tribal to non-tribal land transfer without prior permission of the District Collector (Debbarma forthcoming).

However, the follow up action shows that the main objective of the Act was land takeover for the rehabilitation of the refugees and immigrants. The Act stipulated that all land be registered, but recognised only individual land for registration. Most tribal land was community-owned, so that the tribal families that were living in a community tradition could not record it since the law did not allow the CPRs to be registered. Moreover, most of them were illiterate and were not in a position to register even the individual land in their possession when the cadastral survey was conducted. That made it easy for the State to treat all such unrecorded and unregistered land as state property, alienate it from them and hand it over to the immigrants for their rehabilitation. Moreover, the government encouraged some immigrants whom it recognised as refugees to buy land by giving them cash for the purpose. They used this money to buy land from the tribal people. Some others were involved in money lending as a tool of appropriating land. As a result, the local tribes lost more than 60 percent of their land to the immigrants by the late 1960s (Bhaumik 2003: 84).

Development Projects and Land Alienation

Another source of tribal as well as other land alienation is development projects. In this case too the legal system goes in favour of the state and against the tribes and thus becomes a

source of land alienation which lays the foundation of conflicts. The study on development-induced displacement in Assam shows that according to official sources, the State used only 393,236.7 acres for all development projects 1947-2000. In reality it used not less than 1,411,184.8 acres. What is recorded is private land and is only 28.06 percent of the total used. The remaining 1,017,948.7 acres (71.94%) are common land or of an unknown category, most of it belonging to tribal or fishing families (see Table).

Further, an ongoing study of development-induced displacement in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura indicates that more than 70 percent of the land used for development projects in these states is tribal CPRs. An example is the Dumbur Dam in Tripura. As stated above, by 1970 the indigenous tribes had lost more than 60 percent of their land to the Bangladeshi immigrants. But in the early 1970s the State announced the Dumbur Dam in the tribal majority South Tripura district in which a large number of tribal families who had lost their land to the immigrants had settled down. The tribes protested against the acquisition of their land but the state went ahead with the dam that submerged 4,562 hectares (11,268 acres) and acquired more land for the infrastructure. According to official sources the dam displaced only 2,361 families (2,119 tribal and 244 Dalit) when the reality was 8,500 to 9,000 families. The state counted and compensated only the families that had *pattas*. The remaining 6,500 to 7,000 families were not even counted among the displaced because according to the colonial land law that has been legitimised by the TLR&LR, their sustenance is state property (Bhaumik 2003: 85).

Table:
Total Land Used For Development Projects in Assam 1947-2000

Category	Private	%	CPRs	%	NA	%	Total
Water Res	41835.34	21.87%	84938.42	44.4%	64534.39	33.79%	191304.15
Industry	11317.31	36.03	20092.88	63.97	00		31410.19
Mines	105.47	0.37	7894.53	28.05	20145	71.58	28215
Non-hydro	2187.17	19.94	8781.29	80.06	00	00	10968.46
Defence/Security	9483.03	35.91	1988.04	7.52	14933.44	56.56	26404.51
Environ. Prot	46002.2	55.91	36279.82	44.09	0	0	82284.02
Transport- Com	7054.36	5%	11999.41	0.26%	96459.05	95%	115512.82
Farms/ Fisheries	239250.48	1383.94	1%	227269.24		95%	10597.3
Refugee s	16297	4.66	333703	95.34	0	0	350000
Social Welfare	17254.3	99.75	42.44	0.25	0	0	17296.74
HRD	647.77	35.68	1167.89	64.32	0	0	1815.66
Urban	1193.33	100.00	0	0	0	0	1193.33
Education	2464	10.66	500	2.16	20656	89.34	23120
Health	19190	56.72	2699	43.99	0	0	60599
Administration	225992.66	83.89	43307.06	16.11	0	0	269300.72
Others	7046.79	100.00	0	0	0	0	7046.79
Total	393236.7	28.06	786622.9	55.71	227325.2	16.23	1401184.80

4%

One finds such examples in other states too, for example in the Loktak hydro-electrical project of Manipur. In Arunachal Pradesh, according to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) the proposed Lower Subansiri Dam will displace only 38 families from two villages (WAPCOS 2001). During the public hearing the project authorities were made aware that in reality it will displace at least 12 more villages and will affect more families on both banks of the river (Anon 2002). However, the Detailed Project Report prepared after the public hearing sticks to 38 families from 2 villages.

The legal system also facilitates tribal land acquisition and displacement without rehabilitation or compensation. Rehabilitation is weak even for the families that are counted among the displaced. In Assam, for example, there were signs of partial rehabilitation in fewer than 10 out more than 3,000 files studied (Fernandes and Bharali 2006: 108). The project authorities of the Lower Subansiri Dam in Arunachal claim that the displaced families will be reha-

bilitated on the basis of land for land. In practice, though, the 38 families counted will lose 960 hectares, they will be given only one hectare of land each, or a total of 38 hectares. That they will get only one hectare of irrigated or two hectares of un-irrigated land each was confirmed by the state Rehabilitation Policy that the Chief Minister announced in his Independence Day speech on August 15, 2008 (Times of India 2008).

Other Forms of Land Alienation

Land is alienated in other ways as well. Two of its most important forms are takeover by non-tribals and monopolisation by the tribal elite. The first step in both forms of alienation is privatisation of CPRs. Tribal land was not exclusively community-held. Only a few tribes such as the Aka of the West Kameng district of Arunachal lacked the concept of private ownership. Individuals could cultivate irrigated land on the riverbanks but not own it permanently. All other land belonged to the village community and was controlled by the village council on its behalf. In the *jhum* season each family cultivated as much land as it needed for its sustenance. After that the land reverted to the community. Most other tribes had a combination of clan, individual and village ownership but they managed even private land according to their customary law and treated it as their sustenance, not as a commodity (Fernandes, Pereira and Khatso 2007: 31-38).

That culture has changed with commercialisation. On one side are legal changes meant to facilitate transfer of tribal land to non-tribals and on the other is the new culture that facilitates monopolisation of land by the tribal elite. This paper has discussed above the legal changes in Tripura and the consequent loss of more than 60 percent of tribal land to the East Pakistani immigrants in the 1960s. Similar changes were made also in Assam because of which the number of tribal blocks in which land alienation to non-tribals was banned declined from 35 in 1947 to 25 in the 1980s. In Manipur the hill (tribal) areas do not come under the purview of the

Manipur Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act 1960 (MLR & LR Act 1960) but efforts are being made to delete this clause in order to allow non-tribal inhabitants of the Imphal Valley to acquire land in the tribal areas. The legislative assembly has not been able to change the law because of tribal resistance (Shimray 2006: 12-15).

Basic to land alienation alongside monopolisation is privatisation. It may be through legal changes as in Tripura or through commercial crops as in Meghalaya and the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. When the state or other bodies such as the Coffee, Tea or Rubber Boards want to introduce these crops, a condition they put for subsidies and loans is private ownership, with or without a *patta*. Powerful individuals in the tribe who see the advantages of planting these crops, exploit the traditional mechanisms to their own advantage and monopolise community land. For example, some powerful Garo individuals of Meghalaya used the scheme of the Rubber Board to get the consent of the *nokma* (chief) to plant trees, got subsidies and loans from the Board and banks, and kept control over that land. They thus used their traditional system to turn community land into their private property (Fernandes, Perreira and Khatso 2007: 45).

Such cases of using the traditional system to privatise land are found in most areas of the Northeast. For example, among the Khasi of Meghalaya an individual family could keep control over the developments it made on community land such as trees planted on it, without the community losing its ownership. Many families have started planting perennial trees on that land or have put up structures that in practice turn it into their private property (Nongkynrih forthcoming). In some Khasi villages, the council members misused their power to transfer community land to their own families (Mukhim forthcoming). Also the Dimasa of North Cachar Hills, Assam, are allowed to keep control over a plot of community land for some years if they plant trees on it. By taking up long-term commercial crops like tea, coffee and rubber, the Dimasa elite turn it into their private land (Barbora 2002). Among

the Aka of Arunachal, individuals are allowed to use irrigated land on the riverbanks for settled agriculture for a few years. In practice some powerful families have turned it into their private land. The elite also use medical emergencies or the need for funds for education to give loans and so eventually appropriate the private land of tribal families. Thus land alienation is not one-sided from tribal to non-tribal families. The tribal elite, too, has been influenced by commercial values and uses their tradition to monopolise land (Fernandes, Perreira and Khatso 2007: 43-45).

Conflicts Around Land

Thus the basic issue is competition for land. It may be alienated because of the push factor of the feudal system and high population density in the area of origin of the immigrants, the middle class need for development projects or the non-tribal or tribal elite hunger for land. Whatever its cause, alienation creates situations of conflict around land. Other factors add to the conflict. For example, most immigrants, being agricultural labourers, are familiar with cultivation techniques. So they prosper by using these skills to grow two or three crops on the land they occupy. For example, the Bihari immigrants in the Karbi Anglong district occupied the best land. Even people who had the tradition of a single crop may take to commercial crops once they are forced out of their original habitat. For example, the Kuki who were forced to move out of Manipur during the Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s have settled down in Karbi Anglong and are growing ginger (Damzen 2008: 57-58). That increases the gap between the immigrants and the local people who live in a single crop culture. *Jhum* cultivation restricts the tribes in the hill areas to one crop. Even in the plains, the *zamindari* (landlord), *eksonia* (temporary) *patta* or *adhiar* (share cropper) systems deprived the peasants of motivation for more than one crop, since the tenants had to make all the investment but had to pay half the produce in rent to the landlord (Mazumdar 2002).

Thus, the local people and the immigrants represent two different histories of land use. That creates a situation of conflicts. Because the history of the immigrants results in their prosperity, the local people feel that the immigrants prosper at their cost, by appropriating their land and developing it further. That explains why, among others, most killings in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam are of Biharis (Fernandes 2007). As stated above, in Tripura land acquisition for the Dumbur Dam came after the tribes had lost more than 60 percent of their land to the immigrants. That was the last straw and the conflict against land loss to the immigrants began in the mid-1970s (Bhaumik 2003: 85). The emerging conflict in Arunachal around the Chakma and Tibetan issues is both because the number of new immigrants has implications for political power and because of the fear of losing land to them.

Basic to these conflicts is the changeover of the concept of land as sustenance to land as territory. As the discussion above shows, the social, economic and cultural dependence of the people on land as sustenance is intrinsic to the tribal ethos. Today their communities have accepted the colonial construct of land as territory. This concept was expressed in the division of the hill areas of the Northeast into “excluded” and “partially excluded” territories (Fernandes 2005b: 94-95). Its most important expression in the Northeast was the *Assam Waste Land Settlement Rules 1838* which paved the way for acquiring the CPRs owned by the Boros and Kacharis of Assam for the tea gardens. Then came the *Assam Land and Land Revenue Act 1886* that removed many restrictions on land alienation (Bora 1986: 40-45). In other words, territory was linked to the changeover of the concept of land from sustenance to commodity.

The ethnic groups of the region have unconsciously internalised this concept. By and large the conflicts today are more for a territory than for sustenance. An example is the demand for the integration of all the Naga-inhabited areas with Nagalim. This caused the Meitei-Naga conflict in 2001. In addition, the Naga-Kuki

conflict in the 1990s was for a territory rather than for land. Western Assam witnessed the conflict for a territory in the Bodo area after an accord was signed in 1993 granting a Bodo Autonomous Council without defining its boundaries clearly. When the Assam Government refused to include several hundred villages in the Council on the plea that they did not have a Bodo majority, efforts to “create a majority” resulted in attacks on Bengali Muslims in 1993, Bengali Hindus in 1995 and Santhals in 1996 (Bhaumik 2005: 150-165). The Karbi-Kuki conflict, too, was more for a territory than for land. The Kuki demand for an autonomous regional council was a threat to the Karbi who dominated the Karbi Anglong District Autonomous Council. The Karbi tribe considered control over this territory central to its identity while the Kuki who cultivate ginger on much of the land they live on, wanted a part of the territory as their own (Damzen 2008: 58-60).

Thus, the concept of exclusive control over a territory rather than right to land as sustenance goes hand in hand with the transition from community to private ownership. In order to lay claim over a territory, every ethnic group rewrites its history to declare itself the first inhabitants of a given area, as such indigenous to it and having exclusive rights over that territory. For example, the Dimasa leaders demand Demaraji or a Dimasa kingdom in the territories of Assam that once belonged to it. They also claim Dimapur in Nagaland as the land that they once ruled. Some Bodo leaders claim that the Bodo-Kacharis are the first inhabitants of Assam and as such have exclusive rights over its territory (Daimary 2002: 2).

Ethnic Conflicts

Such histories not only cause ethnic conflicts but also legitimise the conflicts as protection of the identity and culture of an ethnic group. For example, the Dimasa claim over Dimapur causes a conflict with the Nagas. Since land shortage is caused by external inputs such as encroachment by the immigrants or by loss of the CPRs to development projects or land alienation to non-tribals,

many conflicts begin with attacks on the outsiders. But more often than not they turn into conflicts between the ethnic groups of the Northeast. Thus most conflicts today belong to this category. Among several examples are the land-related Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur in the 1990s (Haokip 2008b), the Dimasa-Hmar conflict in North Cachar Hills (*The Telegraph*, April 23, 2003) the Boro-Santhal conflict in Western Assam in 1996 and the Karbi-Kuki conflict in Karbi Anglong that was around a regional autonomous council. But basic to the conflict was the Kuki and Karbi identity linked to a territory (Damzen 2008: 60). The 2001 Naga-Meitei conflict, too, was around a territory and power linked to land. Only a few like the Karbi-Dimasa conflict of 2005 presumably engineered by a “third party” do not have land as a major component.

The conflicts that the Northeast has experienced for two decades have caused hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDP). The Anti-Foreigner Movement in Assam, 1979-1985 displaced 137,000 persons. The Bodo conflict with the Muslims, Bengali Hindus and Santhals, caused 350,000 IDPs, 190,000 of them Santhal. The tribal-Bengali conflict in Shillong in Meghalaya in the 1980s caused 25,000-35,000 IDPs. Some 1,400 Bengalis and 280 tribals were killed and 190,000 persons were displaced in the 1980s in Tripura. The Kuki-Paitei and Naga-Kuki conflicts in Manipur resulted in the burning of 10,000 houses, death of 2,000 persons and displacement of more than 50,000. In Mizoram, over 30,000 Reang (Bru) tribals have been displaced by the action against them (Bhaumik 2005: 150-165). At least 100,000 persons have been displaced by such conflicts since 2003.

Linked to ethnic conflicts is the formation of community-specific militant outfits. Many of them splinter and cause intra-ethnic tension. Assam, for example, has the United Liberation Front of Asom, two outfits each of the Bodos, Adivasis, Dimasa and Karbi. Manipur has at least three militant groups representing the Meitei and more than one each of the Kuki, Naga and others. The Naga group has split into three, as have the militant organisations

in Tripura. The Home Ministry, Government of India, estimates that, the region has more than 30 militant groups. Others count an even bigger number (<http://www.satp.org>). It is thus obvious that the laws aimed at curbing militancy are ineffective.

Lack of Alternatives

Land shortage becomes a bigger problem in the Northeast than in the rest of India because of the lack of alternatives. Unemployment is high, as is the level of education in the region. For example, inaugurating a seminar on Peace in Assam, Chief Minister Mr Tarun Gogoi stated in August 2001 that the state had an unemployed backlog of 20 lakhs (two millions). According to the State's Economic Survey 2003-2004 the employment exchanges had 1,571,996 registered job seekers in late 2003 against 1,524,616 in late 2001 (*The Times of India*, 16th June 2004). Subsequent Economic Surveys give similar figures. It is well known that employment exchanges that are urban-based underestimate unemployment. Their registers exclude the rural unemployed and even much of the urban informal sector since most such unemployed persons are unable to register themselves (Rayappa 1992: 362-363). So the reality would be not less than double the number registered in the employment exchanges.

That gives a minimum of three million unemployed persons in Assam and at least another million in the rest of the Northeast, or around 25 percent of the region's active workforce. This has to be seen in the context of high dependence on land. In 1991, 83.3 percent of the tribal workforce in the region depended on the primary sector (agriculture, forestry, mining) and only 2.3 and 14.4m percent respectively on the (productive) secondary and tertiary (service) sectors (Dubey and Gangopadhyay 1998). The division of employment by sector and tribe is not yet available for 2001. In 1998, 75.26 percent of the Nagaland workforce, 74.81 percent of Meghalaya, 73.99 percent of Assam and 70 percent of Manipur was in the primary sector against an All India average of

67.53 percent. The secondary sector employed some 4 percent of the workforce in 5 States and 8 percent in two, against an All India average of 11.97 percent. The tertiary sector employed 24 percent in Arunachal, 20.45 percent in Assam, 21.46 percent in Meghalaya, 21.26 percent in Nagaland and 29 percent in Mizoram against an All India average of 20.5 percent (D'Souza 1999: 16). Data show that the situation remains more or less the same in 2001. Moreover, most jobs in the tertiary sector are in the administration.

The large proportion of the workforce in the tertiary sector is a result of the high level of education and low investment in the productive secondary sector, especially in the tribal majority states. In 1996 the seven States together had only 166 major and medium industries, 118 of them in Assam (D'Souza 1999: 14). No new unit has come up and some old ones have been declared sick or closed down including all 16 in Nagaland (Ezung 2003). Even small-scale industries (SSI) are closed down. For example, Assam had 5,686 sick industrial units including SSI in 1985 and 11,448 in 1994 (Bhattacharya 1998: 2). That shows that employment generation in the secondary sector has declined.

Conclusion

From the analysis given above, the need to search for solutions by dealing with the causes should be obvious. But most solutions attempted till now seem to deal only with the symptoms. For example, the state and central governments treat the conflicts only as a law and order issue. Intrinsic to this approach is the *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act* (AFSPA) enacted by the Union Parliament as a temporary measure on 22nd May 1958. It continues to be in force today. When it was enacted, the Naga National Council was the only major militant group in the region. Today, even according to the Home Ministry, the Northeast has over 30 such groups (<http://www.satp.org>). AFSPA has been ineffective in dealing with the problem but there is resistance to its repeal though there are many allegations of violation of human rights

with impunity.¹

The second solution is negotiations with one of the militant groups and a peace accord that deals with mainly the territorial demands. The civil society and the people in general are excluded from the negotiations. As a result, the accord becomes a mode of power sharing between the leaders, not of dealing with the causes.² Another suggestion, coming from some political and students' organisations and even some civil society groups, is expulsion of the illegal foreign immigrants. This solution is impractical and cannot be implemented without massive bloodshed.³

Since others have dealt with the solutions, this paper will stop at saying that the causes of conflicts have to be dealt with. Land is basic to the conflicts not merely as an economic asset but also as the centre of people's social and cultural life and very identity. The legal system is not the only cause of encroachment but it does facilitate it. The fact has to be faced that the immigrants and others who have encroached on tribal and non-tribal land cannot be expelled. They are not merely illegal Bangladeshis, as some would have us believe. Besides, because of the communal slant given to the issue the fact that many of the Bangladeshi are not Muslims is ignored. Many of them as well as most Bihari and Nepali immigrants are Hindus.

Whatever their origin or religion, the main issue is land and not religion or region of origin. One has also to face the fact that it is not possible to recover much of that land, as the Tripura experience has shown. Ways have to be found of preventing further encroachment and of optimising the use of the land that is left in the indigenous hands. Land, used in a more creative way would have to become the main source of employment generation. That demands that the local people move away from the history of a single crop and move towards new crops that they can cultivate without massive external technical inputs that can make them dependent on outsiders. This change can deal with the economic problem as well as the identity issue that is linked to land. Monopolisation within the tribal

community cannot be ignored because peace is possible only with a more just society.

¹ See Manchanda's paper in this volume

² See Mahanta and Manchanda in this volume.

³ For more on it see Zehol in this volume.

7. Armed Conflicts and Small Arms Proliferation in Northeast India

Binalakshmi Nepram Mentschel

The human society is now drifting in the direction of a self-contradictory, multi-layered ‘new middle age’... A world in which the significance of territoriality declines and the range of the claimed authorities and conflicting types of legitimization expands dramatically ... a world defined by the spread of plagues of private violence and permanent ‘civil war’ sanctioned by uncontrolled powers – new warlords, pirates, gun runners, gangsters, sects – to which the modern state was supposed to have put an end.

John Keane

Northeast India, comprising the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura¹, comprises an area of about 255,182 sq. km or 7.6 percent of the land area and 3.6 percent of the population of India. Bound by four countries namely Bhutan, Bangladesh, China and Myanmar, the region has immense geo-political significance. The Northeast is home to more than 70 major ethnic groups and sub-groups, speaking approximately 400 languages and dialects. The region has at least 272 tribes and more non-tribal ethnic groups, thereby earning the name of a Miniature Asia². The main non-tribal groups are the Assamese (Assam) and Meitei (Manipur).³

One finds a large variety of conflict dynamics in this region ranging from sovereignty and autonomy to terrorism and ethnic

¹ Sikkim joined the North-Eastern Council in 1999.

² Break-up of Scheduled Tribes: Manipur-29, Meghalaya-3, Tripura-19, Nagaland-16, Arunachal Pradesh -110, Mizoram-15, Assam-more than 4.

³ Meiteis form 60 percent of the Manipur population and they live

clashes. No other region of India, South Asia or the world must have seen the existence of so numerous ethnic based insurgent outfits as Northeast India does, nor does any known part of the world witness the proliferation and mushrooming of militant outfits as in this region. Thus it forms a complex matrix. It has been facing the onslaught of ethnicity-based armed conflicts since the late 1940s. Violent and vociferous demands by various ethnic groups for sovereignty or for new states have been occurring over the past five decades. To it one may add the problem of continuous inflow of migrants and the fight over resources.

Violence that has engulfed this strategic region for half a century or more makes it one of South Asia’s most disturbed regions. Violence has also held development to ransom. Socio-political instability and economic backwardness, isolation and inaccessibility compound the problem further. The cultural chasm between the people of the Northeast and those of Mainland India is so deep that this region is unlikely to be psychologically integrated with India for some time to come. Perhaps the map too, does not help in developing this mental state. While every other part of India is joined integrally to the mainland, the Northeast hangs on a 22 km “chicken neck” of land between Nepal and Bangladesh (Verghese 1996).

Genesis of Ethnic Conflicts and Proliferation of Armed Groups

According to Subir Bhaumik (1998: 301) the North Eastern region of India is both a “Colonial Construct” and a post-colonial region created by the Partition of the sub-continent. Ancient or medieval Indian geographical discourse has no reference to a ‘North-East’. The concept does not figure in any ancient or medieval Indian writings until the advent of the British. During the 19th century they evolved the concept of a North-Eastern Frontier for their Indian territories after the conquest of Assam and other tribal and princely kingdoms located between Bengal and Burma (Rustomji 1983: 15-21). These areas were administered more as

a territorial appendage than as an integral administrative unit. Only Assam with its oil and tea potential was partially integrated into the imperial economy and secured some marginal benefits of investment in the infrastructure like the railways.

The Kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura were left to survive as princely states with a degree of sovereignty, which went a long way in reinforcing their sense of distinctiveness. The remaining tribal homelands around the Brahmaputra-Surma valley region, once they accepted British suzerainty, were left to live in their own way, somewhat frozen in a time warp. The tribesmen traded with their neighbours, sometimes fought with them and amongst themselves, but remained largely oblivious of the ways of the outside world until the Christian missionaries arrived to Christianise and educate them. The missionary efforts created many pioneers in the tribal societies and pioneers of discontent too. Missionary education not only started a new elite formation process in the Northeast, it also provided the emerging class with fresh aspirations and a worldview (Baruah 1970).

This world-view largely differed, in content and form, from India's new emerging elites. The new leaders of India, however, did not seem to understand or respect this distinct identity of the Northeast Indian region. The communication gap, thus created, persisted into the post-colonial era as India emerged from the British rule, divided but determined to protect its political identity as a unified nation-state, almost to the point of overlooking the limitations imposed by its enormous heterogeneity.

Then followed the Second World War, which brought the global conflict between the Allied and the Axis powers to the doorsteps of the Northeast. Some of the fiercest battles of the war were fought in the Kohima and Imphal regions. They ended up as part of the Great War folklore, its battles resembling the battlefields of Somme (Rooney 1992: 148). The distinctness and identity of the region had already emerged. As the partition of the British Indian dominions became imminent, it was only natural for the people of

the region to ponder over their future.

The concept of the North Eastern Frontier that began with the British conquest, changed with their withdrawal from India. The Partition of 1947 led to the conversion of the Northeast into a distinct region. When East Bengal became East Pakistan this frontier region was left completely isolated, hanging tenuously to the Indian mainland through a small 22 km wide corridor in North Bengal. It was this very general sense of isolation that gave the region the sense of being so different from the rest of the country (Verghese 1996: 2).

The Origin of the Conflicts

Thus, as the British left India in 1947, the Naga movement led by Angami Zaphu Phizo who did not want to join the Indian union with a centralised administration, sowed the seeds of militancy in the region. This was followed by Manipur where the seeds of insurgency were sowed by what many of its people considered the “unconstitutional merger of the state under duress” with the Union of India on 21 September 1949. Then followed the Mizo nationalist movement in the 1960s and a decade later in the late 1970s Assam saw the rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The 1990s witnessed the ushering in of a new phenomenon in many parts of the region. Many North Eastern ethnic communities took up arms within the state boundaries and their demand was autonomy within the Indian Union. Among them are the Hmar People's Council (HPC) started in 1990 led by Hming Chhungunga. It demanded a separate Hmar autonomous district council. Another outfit, Hmar Revolutionary Front (HRF) was formed to realise the Hmar aim of an autonomous council. The HRF operates in the Cachar district of Assam, northern Mizoram and the Tipaimukh sub-division of southern Manipur. Another outfit called the Accord Implementation Demand Front (AIDF) was formed with the same objective of pressurising the Mizoram government to fully implement the Hmar People's Convention Accord, but there are

differences between the two outfits.

Table 1: Tracing the Origin of the Armed Struggles in India’s Northeast

Year	Happenings
1940s	Nationalist Struggle by peaceful means starts in Nagaland & Manipur.
Early 1960s	Groups of insurgents (Naga and Manipuris) go to China via Kachin Corridor for arms and training. China provides these free of cost.
Late 60s	Militants return with Chinese arms and ammunition. Help is said to be coming also from Pakistan. The Mizo struggle begins after the ‘Mautam’ famine episode.
1970s	Training of insurgents and supplies taken over by Burmese rebels... for a price.
1980s	Militancy in Assam starts in protest against illegal migration. A prairie fire of militancy engulfs Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram. Drug addiction on the rise in the North East. Boom time of opium cultivation in Myanmar and other Golden Triangle Areas.
1990s	First HIV case detected. HIV/AIDS epidemic spreads in the region due to intravenous drug using. Ethnic clashes start occurring between: Kuki-Naga (Manipur) Kuki-Paite (Manipur) Tribals-Non-Tribals (Tripura) Reangs vs Mizo (Mizoram) Bodo vs Santhals (Assam) Assamese vs Illegal Migrants (Assam)
	Insurgency engulfs the comparatively peaceful states of Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Mayhem unleashed in Tripura.

Then came the Kuki-Naga clashes in Manipur followed by the Kuki-Paite conflict resulting in the formation of Kuki militant

outfits, which started demanding a separate state for the Kukis within the Union of India. In Manipur, besides the PLA and UNLF, other outfits, which are operating, are:

Peoples’ Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)

Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL)

Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP)

PLA, PREPAK and UNLF have together formed the Manipur People’s Liberation Army (MPLF).

Table 2: Insurgency Related Gun Killings in Northeast India, 2002 - 2007

Year	Assam	Manipur	Tripura	Nagaland	Meghalaya
2002	445	190	175	36	64
2003	505	198	295	37	58
2004	354	218	167	58	35
2005	242	331	73	40	29
2006	174	285	60	92	24
2007	201	125	15	59	1
TOTAL	1921	1347	785	322	211

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (www.satp.org)

In Assam emerged the armed struggle of the Dimasa in the North Cachar Hills to achieve an independent Dimarji, a kingdom which once existed under the Dimasa rulers. An outfit, Dima Halam Daoga (DHD) was formed on December 31, 1994 to realise this aim.¹ Apart from armed struggle, the DHD is also involved in measures to free the North Cachar hills society from alcohol and other ‘evils’. The DHD activists are also warning the people against poisoning river water in the name of fishing. The DHD has reportedly been getting support from the NSCN-IM.² Another outfit emerging in Assam is that of Karbi National Volunteers.

¹ North East Sun (New Delhi), 15-31 August, 1998

² North East Sun (New Delhi), 15-31 May, 1998

Even in a less disturbed state like Arunachal Pradesh, three insurgent outfits have sprung up (Hazarika 1996). They are:

United Liberation Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (ULVA)

United People’s Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (UPVA)

United Liberation Movement of Arunachal Pradesh (ULMA)

In Meghalaya too, three militant outfits had sprang up. They are:

Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA)

Hynneiwtrep Volunteer Council (HNVC), which has since changed its name to Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council

Garo National Front

The hand of NSCN (IM) is allegedly behind the formation of these two outfits. More than 30 insurgent groups operate in the Northeast. Among the outfits that have mushroomed in the region are:

United Tribes Defence Force (UTDF) - Tripura

Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) - Mizoram

Hmar Liberation Front/Hmar People’s Council (HLF/HPC) - Manipur

Kuki National Army (KNA) - Manipur

Kuki National Front (KNF) - Manipur

Dima Halong Daogah (DHD) - Assam

Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) - Assam

These outfits indicate the emergence of the new phenomenon of the linkage of ethnicity with militancy. Some of the tribes in turmoil are Bodo-Santhals, Bodo-Karbis in Assam, Kuki-Naga, Kuki-Paites, Tamil-Kuki in Manipur, Tribal-Non-Tribal in Tripura, Reangs and Hmars in Mizoram etc. Most of the clashes occur over territory and resource sharing.

Table 3: Some Militant Outfits in the Region and Their Reasons for Armed Struggle

Name of outfit	Cause for Struggle
1. United National Liberation Front, Manipur (UNLF)	Independence from India. Forming of Indo-Burma Front
2. National Socialist Council of Nagaland IM (Nagaland, now called ‘Nagalim’), [NSCN	Earlier: Independence from India. Now : cooperation with Government of India for a possible solution within the framework of the Indian Constitution
3. People’s Liberation Army, Manipur (PLA)]	Independence from India
4. United Liberation Front of Assam, (ULFA)	Independence from India
5. Bodo National Liberation Front, Assam (BNLF)	Autonomy within India
6. Bru National Liberation Front, Mizoram (BNLF)	Autonomy within India
7. Kuki National Front, Manipur (KNF)	Autonomy within India
8. Tripura National Liberation Front, Tripura (TNLF)	Loss of identity; fight against illegal migrants
9. Hmar People’s Council, Manipur	Autonomy within India

Conflicts and Small Arms

More armed groups result in more small arms influx in the region. Because of the existence of the outfits small arms continue to proliferate in many parts of Northeast India. According to a study done by John Sisline et al (1998), a systematic analysis of the arms acquisition pattern of ethnic groups in conflicts is lacking in the international level records. According to him: ... ‘Light Weapons’ - Small arms such as AK-47 rifle, mortars and grenade launchers are the mainstay of ethnic conflicts.

In a study the present author identified 57 types of small arms which have flooded the region over the last several years. Their

proliferation is facilitated also by the proximity of the region to the South East Asian countries. Myanmar has become the main source of the weapons for the region. And it is from such places that weapons are procured for the “Clash of Micro-civilizations”. However, Myanmar is not the only source. The origins of these weapons have been traced to countries such as China, Pakistan, Belgium, Thailand, Russia, the United States of America, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar and of late, Israel.

The effect of small arms proliferation on the Northeast Indian states has been alarming. Many young persons have taken the path of violence resulting in death, decay and destruction in the social, political and economic fields. Many parts of South Asia, and Northeast India can be termed as fragmented societies that run on guns and drugs. There is a frightening influx of small arms and narcotic drugs in the region.

The proliferation of armed groups follows. For instance, the first batch of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) that consisted of 70 boys after their training with 600 other insurgents including the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, were sent back with around 10 weapons of different makes. They included one Chinese AK-47 and some M-20s. Weapon training had included M-22, M-21, and M-20 pistols. NSCN cadres imparted the training. Later, ULFA got trained under the Kachin’s expert guidance. Training includes shooting, making bombs, and most of all, improvising the existing weaponry. Armed by China, Pakistani and Burmese rebels and other state and criminal groups based in South East Asia and outside, the inventory of the insurgent groups has gone up tremendously over the years. In Assam alone, a total of 729 weapons were seized from the ULFA between 1993 and July 1998. In the entire Northeast India, a total of 928 weapons were seized (Kartha 1999) (See Box 1).

Box 1 : Types of Arms Seized in Northeast India

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. M 14 | 9. Pistols/revolvers |
| 2. M 16 | 10. Chinese hand-grenades |
| 3. M 20 | 11. Rocket-propelled grenades |
| 4. M 22 | 12. Rocket launchers |
| 5. G-series | 13. Sten-guns |
| 6. AK-47/56/74 | 14. General purpose machine guns |
| 7. Light machine guns | 15. Self-launching rifles |
| 8. Carbines | 16. Air defence guns |

Source: Nepram 2002

Small Arm Routes in Northeast India

The following are the probable routes through which small arms penetrate into the Northeast Indian states, Myanmar and beyond. Over thirteen sources can be identified:

- Myanmarese insurgent groups/arms bazaar
- The Southeast Asian black market like Cambodia and China
- South Asian countries’ (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka) black markets.
- South Asian militant outfits like LTTE and Napalese Communist Maoist forces
- Maoist Communist Party operating in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh,
- Other parts of India like Uttar Pradesh etc and pilferage from legal gun factories
- Criminal gangs operating in India and other South Asian countries
- Indian security forces, home security guards are the most vulnerable
- Other international markets e.g. Romania, Germany, USA, Israel
- Arms obtained from fellow militant outfits
- Of late, some Northeast politicians have reportedly become suppliers of weapons
- The Intelligence agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) is known to have armed some outfits operating in the region

Conclusion

The prevention and resolution of conflicts involves knowing its causes. The whole person, the nation or identity group of the person, the political system and the physical environment cause deep-rooted conflicts. That results in problems like the influx and proliferation of small arms and narcotics. This problem has permeated all social levels and all cultures on a scale not previously experienced and that results in violence and mayhem everywhere.

The massive proliferation of small arms and narco-trafficking in the Northeast calls for greater thinking, research, intervention and change. Till date no state government has undertaken programmes in this direction. Scholars in Manipur have started writing about the issue. It is extremely important to be able to collect and collate data on small arms from various places in Northeast India. It is important to enhance cooperation and information exchange between researchers, journalists, intelligence, customs, common people, young people, police, army and other law enforcing agencies. Young boys in particular are aware of small arms and are also keen to share information. It is extremely important to constantly improve information and data on the illicit trafficking of small arms.

Apart from research, the following steps need to be looked into in the effort to curb small arms proliferation and narco-trafficking in Northeast India. These are also the steps that have been worked out internationally by bodies like the United Nations, Oxfam, Amnesty International and International Action Network Against Small Arms. And most of all, it is very important to involve women's groups in the Northeast like the Meira Paibis, Kuki Mothers' Association and the Naga Mothers' Association in the whole process of containing small arms proliferation and narcotic abuse and trafficking.

Apart from women's groups, young people and other civil society organisations, it is very important to engage in dialogue the

several armed groups that are operating in the region. To evolve strategies for containing small arms proliferation and narcotic drug abuse in a highly fractured society like that of Northeast India needs a committed effort by all concerned. In order to hunt for long-term solutions in the North East region of India, one has to work at a level which reaches down to an individual in the region to bring about long term solutions to the problem before the whole region becomes a Necropolis or the City of the Dead.

Ultimately, however, stopping small arms and armed conflicts is only one step in the direction of peace. For lasting peace, one has to deal with the causes of conflicts, the hiatus between Mainland India and the Northeast and the depleting land and other resources in the region.

8. What Makes Assam A Perpetual Conflict Zone? Going Beyond Management to Conflict Transformation

Nani Gopal Mahanta

The challenges that the State is facing in India and other parts of South Asia can be primarily attributed to the nature and formation of the Nation-State itself. The whole process negated diversity and encroached upon the autonomous spheres of social/community interaction that were fundamental to the culture of south Asian societies. In this complex mosaic of different nationalities the Indian State is facing some of its gravest challenges, with the entire process of nation-building being questioned. In response to this, various ethno-sub-nationalist movements in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal are increasingly questioning the legitimacy of the State to rule over these communities. The violent nature of these movements also precipitates a violent response by the State. This paper makes an attempt to analyse various sources of conflicts in Assam. Then it provides a critique of the State's Conflict Resolution approach and finally it urges a paradigm shift in the Conflict Resolution techniques.

Homeland Politics, Ethnicity and Identity

What seems to be a unanimous view is that ethnicity and identity conflicts will be the dominant form of violence and war in the coming years. Ethnicity itself can be enhanced and reformulated under conditions of modernisation. Most ethnic groups do have a myth of origin, a history of the group, chosen enemies, and stories of traumas. But what is it that gives these symbolic elements meaning and, in certain contexts, a possibility of actualisation? When do self-fulfilling prophecies become actualised?

It would be wrong to bring unity in the state by asking the ethnic communities to think in terms of citizenship and forget their cultural roots. This is a difficult proposition. Assam has to develop a multi-cultural policy that recognises the distinctiveness of each and every community while at the same time giving them sufficient choices to develop a sense of unity. Further splintering of Assam can be prevented only by allowing each and every community to develop culturally, socially, politically and above all economically. Going beyond the contractors, politicians and the elite, the development process must reach the common people. It does not matter whether the common person is a Bodo, immigrant Muslim or caste Hindu resident of the state. Cultural diversity is here to stay—and to grow. The state and society need to find ways of forging national unity amid this diversity. The world, ever more interdependent economically, cannot function unless people respect diversity and build unity through common bonds of humanity.

In Assam one has to respect diversity and build an inclusive society by adopting policies that explicitly recognise cultural differences. Individuals can and do have multiple identities that are complementary—ethnicity, language, religion and race as well as citizenship. Identity is not a zero sum game. There is no inevitable need to choose between state unity and recognition of cultural differences.

The main question is to how can one accommodate the burgeoning demand of the tribal groups. To achieve this objective, one has to explore a socio-political structure that can satisfy the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Tiwas, the Chutias, the Koch-Rajbangshi, the Tai-Phakes, the Matak and Moran, the Ahoms, and the minority groups like the Bengali Hindus, the Muslims, the Nepalis and the Adivasis. Unless one works out a comprehensive structure that can at least satisfy the basic socio-cultural and economic needs there will be continuous turmoil in the state. Thus how the Asomiya middle class and elite accommodate their own demands with the growing aspirations of the smaller

tribes and nationalities will be the single most important factor that can generate violent conflict in Assam.

On the other hand scholars like Prof. Apurba Barua (2005: 62) are extremely critical of the narrow, parochial, inward looking attitude of the tribal and ethnic communities of Assam. Commenting on what he considers the anti-Asomiya stand of the tribal leaders Barua argues that it is wrong to think that the Asomiya elite alone is responsible for the present inward looking politics and argues for the delimitation of the indigenous peoples of Assam. It is in this context that the demands of the various communities in Assam for constitutional protection should be discussed.

It must be kept in mind that any policy that seeks to protect the interests of the ethnic communities *per se* will lead to a proliferation of such identities and would further divide the society, because it sends the signal that ethnic identity is a useful political platform. Today there seems to be no end to this process of fragmentation. While the existing identities as of now will have to be recognized, fragmentation will have to be halted in the interest of political integration. Or we may soon be in a situation of facing demands for village republics. That need not be a healthy development.

He further argues:

The exclusive rights claimed by the ethnic identities on the basis of indigenous status are also problematic because no community can conclusively prove that they are the original inhabitants of an area. They can merely claim. The original settlements in most parts of the globe are matters of very early period of human history. The evidence about that period is rather insufficient and definitely not verifiable. It is therefore more realistic to talk in terms of permanent residents than in terms of indigenous people (ibid: 63).

Suggestions of Apurba Baruah deserve greater debate and attention than it has got. The idea of a permanent citizen of the state could be of particular value. But to say that this process of constitutional protection to the permanent citizens will get rid of the ethnic identity is an extremely difficult proposition. No ethnic group of Assam or the Northeast will ever be ready to forget its distinctive identity. One may agree with Prof. Barua that it is essential to contest the attempts of the tribal elites at undemocratic, political segregation. But without taking their identity concerns and fears into account it will be disastrous to give them the status of permanent citizens of Assam and tell them to forget all their distinctive ethnic identities.

Immigration

Sammujal Bhattacharya an undisputed student leader of Assam has highlighted the identity concerns of Assamese people in the following words

There is the instance of a long peaceful mass movement from 1979-1985 against the illegal foreignersafter which the Assam accord was signed in 1985...but till now we have not benefited from the accord...the forest lands, the towns and agricultural fields are all occupied by the illegal Bangladeshis. And this definitely poses a threat to the identity of the indigenous people of the state. Therefore how can we have a peaceful state in such a situation?

Indeed even after twenty-five years the central issue of the Assam movement remains unchanged. Rather, it has created more fissures and distrust among the ethnic communities of Assam and the Northeast. The Assam Movement (1979-1985) which was primarily launched to drive out the illegal migrants from Assam is one of the biggest mass based movements in India's post-independence history (Hussain 1993: 10) but an amicable solution to the issues it raised has not been found so far nor could

the Government expel the illegal immigrants from Assam. On the other hand the psyche of the Assamese speaking middle class elite is becoming more aggressive and ultra nationalistic.

The Assam accord had clauses on the means to devise formulas for identifying, expelling and disenfranchising the illegal migrants. The government by the regional party that emerged out of the Assam Movement could not do much as constitutionally citizenship is under central jurisdiction. Clause 6 of the accord had promised constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, promote and preserve the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. The Parliament passed *The Illegal Migration Detection Tribunal Act* (IMDT). That made the task more difficult since the accuser has to prove that the accused is a foreigner while according to the Foreigners' Act the accused has to prove his/her Indian nationality. Today major clauses of the accord remain unimplemented. Its non-implementation has remained the core issue and has hogged the limelight in the body politic of Assam for a long time.

On the other hand, various other ethnic groups of Assam have argued that the clause that referred only to the Assamese people could provide legitimacy to the imposition of the Assamese language and culture on the Bodos and others. The insistence of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) on the issue of 100 percent job reservation for the 'indigenous people' is at the centre of the controversy. Many groups are very apprehensive of clause 6 of the Assam accord and fear that they will be left out of this definition of 'indigenous Assamese'.

Undoubtedly Assam needs some mechanism to control immigration into the state. The state can no longer afford to absorb more immigrants as in terms of population growth Assam has been one of the fastest growing states in the country. However, strict control of the border is not the most effective mechanism of bringing an end to the immigration problem. There is a need to develop some other mechanisms. South Asia is the only region

in the world without a well-documented or legalised citizenship policy. That lacuna has to be remedied.

Going Beyond the Borders

The leaders of the Assam Movement frequently talk about the immediate completion of fencing as the panacea for the foreigners' issue. But it can hardly stop the toiling manual labour. Immigrant workers easily find ways of cutting the fencing with the full knowledge of the security personnel present in the border areas. There is a vibrant illegal border trade taking place through the informal sector. That includes the cattle trade, pharmaceutical products and others. There is also a regular huge haul of drugs and illegal arms. Cattle are smuggled out to Bangladesh through many corridors. According to a report published by Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE 2001) on border trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh illegal trade takes place through 38 prominent routes. The intensity of trade is very high in routes like Chotakola-Tarun Feri, Sunamara-Komilla, Agartala-Akhaura, Baghmara-Durgapur, Dharampur-Rangamati, Rahimpur-Saldapur sector (IIE 2001: 103-104). The informal trade between India and Bangladesh is more than double the official figure, which is 1.5 billion dollars. The number of cattle smuggled across is 2 million per annum (Hazarika 2004: 84-88). Besides, the ailing patients come to Tripura for treatment and they know how to come and go back.

The total annual volume of illegal trade for the North Eastern region has been estimated to be Rs 3.31 billion annually (IIE 2001: 106-111). However the actual volume is much larger than this as the estimate of IIE is based on the basis of month wise seizures maintained by the customs officials, police and the Border Security Force. A study done by the Indian Institute of Foreign trade (IIFT) in 1998 puts the annual informal trade between the Northeast and Bangladesh at Rs 6 billion (IIE 2001: 108). Fencing or a border will not be able to stop this process. Much of the trade is by river and one cannot fence the river. The North Eastern states share 1,880

kilometres of international border with Bangladesh. Out of the 263 km that Assam shares with Bangladesh 160 km is land border and 103 km is riverine. One cannot change the physical areas of Bhogdanga, located near Chatrasal, in the Dhubri district of Assam. Bhogdanga, sarcastically referred to as Assam's Tinbigha, is a small village of about 630 *bighas* (210 acres) on the Indo-Bangladesh border near Satrasal in the Dhubri district of Assam, with about 800 inhabitants belonging to 85 families (*Frontline*: 3rd July, 1996).

Therefore, border fencing is not the solution to the problem of illegal migration. Even physical protection of the border is impossible and it cannot provide total protection. Studies show that the informal or illegal trade takes place with prior information to the enforcement and security agencies. Studies show that about 60 percent of the Bangladeshi traders paid bribes of 3 to 6 percent of their turnover while 78 percent of the Indian traders paid 1 to 3 percent of their total output (IIE 2001: 106-107).

There are many suggestions to curb immigration that go beyond the fencing model that is vociferously supported by India's ultra nationalist leaders. The most important step should probably be legalisation of border trade between the Northeast and Bangladesh and Northeast and Myanmar. Ultimately it is the government that loses from such illegal trade. Here we would like to refer to some observations made by an organisations of the Ministry of Small Scale Industry, Government of India "It has been well documented in the theory of international trade that the rationale for illegal trade is similar to that of legal trade i. e. the profit maximisation behaviour of the individuals. However, apart from economic, historical factors in the Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Myanmar cross border illegal trade flow, certain non-economic factors are observed there also." The report cites those non-economic factors –"though partition created an artificial divide among the people of both regions, friendly and ethnic bond exists between at least the population of the border districts—cultural and social bond on both the sides of the border facilitates the illegal

trade to take place quick realisation of payment, no paper work, lower transportation cost, presence of high duties in the official channel influences informal trade to take place" (IIE 2001:102).

Perhaps a long-term vision would be to increase trade between Bangladesh and India with special focus on the border areas. Increased volume of trade and business will act as a disincentive to cross border smuggling. If Bangladeshis get the basic requirements in their land they would not certainly find it useful to cross the border and be treated as second-class citizens and be looked upon with suspicion. India and Bangladesh must come closer in terms of trade relations. Globalisation and the much talked about Look East policy open up many avenues for such cooperation (Baruah 2005: 211-235). The Shukla Commission that was appointed to look into the infrastructure scenario of the Northeast said in its report submitted to the Prime minister on March 7, 1997:

First and foremost, the Northeast was uniquely disadvantaged by partition which left its external perimeter with no more than two percent contiguity with the rest of India . . . No other part of the country barring J&K has had to bear a comparable burden with severe market disruption, total isolation and loss of traditional communication infrastructure, all of which has pushed regional costs and prices well above national norms, transport subsidies notwithstanding. This rendered the normal market production processes in the region less attractive.

Human Insecurity

How the issue of Human Security or lack of it can create discontentment in a society can be seen in the manner in which the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is sustained. One cannot ignore the internal sources of political violence in Assam. We argue that it is the internal socio-economic, political, cultural and identity issues that sustain ULFA more than the external ones. This section will, therefore, take up primarily the issues of human insecurity

and try to argue that human insecurity is primarily responsible for the continuing recruitment to ULFA. Unemployment, poverty, a feeling of relative deprivation, corruption, underdevelopment, devastation caused by floods are among the factors that act as a breeding ground for ULFA.

As a part of an ongoing research project, we had the opportunity to interview 120 surrendered ULFA militants in Guwahati, Nalbari, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Tinsukia. Most of the cadres were interviewed in an uncontrolled environment in Government guesthouses, immediately after their surrender. The cadres were placed in groups of about five members but at times there were only three or even two depending on the numbers available. Each group was interviewed separately. So it was kind of participatory assessment with the surrendered cadres. The focus of this semi-structured interview was on individual cases as well as group responses on important issues. Most interviews were conducted immediately after their surrender between 1998 and 2002.

The main motivating factors for the cadres to join the group were 1) Had nothing to do (*Koriboloi eku Nasile*) or unemployment; 2) corruption of the Government machinery; 3) losing the Assamese pride mainly from the influx of illegal migration (expressed by the cadres of Nagaon) and the dominance of the Non-Assamese in the business sector and the Government (expressed by the cadres of Tinsukia district). Some other factors responsible for the cadres joining the outfit were 4) persuaded by friends in the organisation, 5) exploitation by the Centre (*Mahi aai soku* of the centre), 6) utilisation of the resources of Assam by the Centre and Assam gets nothing from her own resources; 7) Army and police atrocities during the Assam agitation and during Operation Bajrang and Rhino (army operations against the militants). The cadres wanted to take revenge for the excesses. When they got arms they felt empowered.

Thus, there is no single factor responsible for militancy in the state. A constellation of factors came together. However, unemployment ('had nothing to do') is the most important factor

for the cadres to join ULFA¹ An inference one can draw from the interviews is that the first batch of leaders at the time of launching ULFA (broadly from 1979 to 1989) were mostly influenced by the "exploitative attitude of the Centre". But later groups were more influenced by issues like corruption, unemployment and lack of opportunities. Basic human and social issues like unemployment, lack of basic services like food security, health, roads, communications, education, prevalence of corruption, insecurity caused by the security forces are equally important for the rise of ULFA. About 80 out of the above leaders were trained in Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. A few of them went to Pakistan and Afghanistan for training. It shows the role of the neighbouring countries in the sustenance of the organisation but it happened after the cadres were motivated to join ULFA.

To see how the human security issues affect the common people in the violence affected regions of Assam, one can refer to an article of Anindita Dasgupta (2004) that discusses the causes of insecurity in Nalbari, one of the most violence affected areas of Assam. In a participatory research project she selected three groups to know the cause of insecurity in their area. The three most powerful insurgent groups of Assam, namely, the ULFA, Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), operate and wield considerable influence in the district. The writer concludes that,

All communities were unanimous in saying that the root causes of insurgency, its resultant armed violence and human insecurity were "acute socio-economic problems which the state and its political elite have, for long, ignored". Listing and ranking of their major problems by different groups showed interesting trends. These figures are representative samples of the perceptions

¹ The members told us it's not just one specific factor which they believe to be the most motivating factor –However thirty six cadres told us very clearly 'had nothing to do' was the motivating factor.

of 'major' problems facing the communities. "Listing and ranking were also' with three other groups who also slotted 'insecurity/insurgency' problems as low as 6, 8 and 9 respectively. Issues like underdevelopment, unemployment and floods were unanimously declared as the 'biggest' problems by the communities. But most of the groups again stated the underdevelopment and unemployment were the two most important causes for insurgency in the state and that, ironically, it was the existence of militancy that was the excuse forwarded by the government for not carrying out development activities (ibid: 4464).

The importance of the issue of basic human needs can be gauged from the observation of a teacher: "It is beneficial for the political class because so long as the common people are caught up in the violence and live in fear of their lives, they are not likely to raise the difficult questions as to why the political elite has failed to deliver for all these past years. Why are we still so underdeveloped? Where are the roads? Where are the schools and hospitals? Where are the jobs? Asked a teacher of a local college" (ibid: 4465). An analysis of the factors shows that issues such as underdevelopment, unemployment, lack of health and communications infrastructure and access to government departments, floods, corruption are some of the basic problems that have acted as incentives for the youth to join the militants. These causes go hand in hand with a feeling of neglect.

In this context it is worthwhile to look at the human development scenario in Assam. All this eventually means that the economy fails to meet the growing aspirations of the people, particularly the younger generation. This, in turn, provides a fertile ground for militant groups to groom them for their outfits. That can also explain the recent spurt of popular uprisings. In some sense, lack of growth and the disturbed environment feed on each other. That is what is happening in most of the North Eastern

states. Thus the economy of Assam cannot generate high growth and employment for the two million educated and uneducated unemployed youth of the state. An analysis of the interviews with the surrendered militants and the field visits make it amply clear that lack of livelihood security of the youth and the frustration that followed from it contributed to the growth of insurgency in Assam. A paraphrase of the experiences of the surrendered militants shows why they had to join insurgency out of frustration—

1. The unemployed youth, especially rural have nothing to do. They pass most of their time playing caroms, cards or just loitering. Some of the young persons open small grocery shops but they have to close them down due to lack of a clientele.
2. Some of them apply for government loans but give up in frustration after spending a considerable amount of time running from one government department to another for a minor loan of Rs 20,000.
3. Many small scale sector businesses like poultry, pig rearing, dairy farming, pisciculture, power loom, wheat mill, rice mill, tractor, cycle repairing and TV mechanic had to be closed down due to lack of entrepreneurial skills, power failure, non-payment of loans, floods etc.
4. The unemployed youth were highly frustrated by corrupt officials. The peon would not pass on the application without being bribed, the dealing assistant would not forward the application without some reward, the officials would ask them to come again and again for the same work, the typist would not type their application without a good amount being given in advance. If the amount is not paid, the letter gets lost.
5. These conditions were made worse by the brutal and insensitive police and security forces. The continuous harassment of the rural people by the security forces made them flee their villages for a long time. These basic human security issues compound the insurgency issue in Assam. Accumulation of

these issues over days, months and years got the frustrated youth to search for alternatives. That was provided by ULFA that was ever ready to accept them as their cadres and fight the Indian State for a better future.

6. Having argued that, we do not want to minimise the role of 'ideology' 'colonial legacy', 'exploitation by the Centre' and a 'feeling of not being a part of India'. They too are important for the sustenance of ULFA or the present socio-economic situation in the state.

Role of the Indian State in Conflict Resolution

There is very little in the Indian State's response to ULFA that can be called engagement with the ideological challenge posed by the radical turn that Assamese sub-nationalism has taken. The political settlement that was attempted in the Assam Accord of 1985 turned out to be unenforceable. Since then there has been no fresh attempt to engage those issues. By and large, it is fair to say that the State's response to ULFA has been more militarist than political. The Indian army and paramilitary forces have been employed to deal with the challenge. In the process extreme authoritarian methods have been introduced into the fabric of everyday life, especially in those parts of Assam that are seen as ULFA strongholds (Baruah 1999: 440).

The history of resolving conflicts in India shows that the State is after a piecemeal approach. The response of the Indian State to some of the intractable ethnic insurgencies in the Northeast has so far been to divide the rebel organisations and attempt to control them with the help of the renegades, corrupt the leaders of insurgent groups in front of the public by providing them a luxurious lifestyle when they come out for talks, 'buy time' as much as possible in the name of negotiations, physically eliminate the family members of persons belonging to the rebel organisations, develop and help counter insurgency forces, use maximum State power with the help of the police and the army, appoint retired army generals, police and intelligence chiefs as Governors in the insurgency affected

regions and put all the draconian laws into practice.

After a considerable period of time when the armed groups get tired and the people are fed up, the State imposes an accord (like the Assam Accord, the Mizo Accord, Bodo Accord, Shillong Accord—the list is endless) the provisions of which are rarely implemented. It is not that such accords resolve ethnic issues. They only give provisional respite to the State and provide a face saving exit to the leaders of the militant organisations who immediately capture power of their respective states and become a part of the state machinery. In such gambling of power, which is played in the name of the people, the real issues are always sidelined until they are taken by a new brand of leadership.

The most important objective of the Government seems to be to bring the armed groups to the negotiation table. "Once they come out we shall see how they go back to the jungles" is the most important guiding principle of the team of negotiators comprising of the bureaucrats, intelligence, army and police officials. The above strategy apart, the response of the State is myopic. There is no sign that it understands the identity issue even partially, leave alone in its totality. The state in this region follows a policy of 'tribal to tribal approach' in which attempts are to satisfy the elites of the ethnic organisations.

Conflict Transformation and Peace-Building

The State's approach to conflict can be best described as attempts of conflict management and settlement. A number of conflict theorists and practitioners, including John Paul Lederach (1997), advocate "conflict transformation," as opposed to "conflict resolution" or "conflict management". Conflict transformation is different from the other two, because it reflects a better understanding of the nature of the conflict itself. "Conflict resolution" implies that conflict is bad, and so should be ended. It also assumes that a conflict is a short-term phenomenon that can be "resolved" permanently through mediation or other intervention

processes. “Conflict management” correctly assumes that conflicts are long-term processes that often cannot be resolved quickly but the notion of “management” suggests that people can be directed or controlled as though they were physical objects. The notion of management also suggests that the goal is reduction or control of volatility more than dealing with the real source of the problem.

Conflict transformation, as described by Lederach, does not suggest that one simply eliminates or controls conflict. Rather, one recognises and works with its “dialectic nature”. By this he means that a social conflict is naturally created by humans who are involved in relationships. Yet once it occurs, it changes (i.e. transforms) those events, people, and relationships that created the initial conflict. Thus, the cause-and-effect relationship goes both ways, from the people and the relationships to the conflict and back to the people and relationships. In this sense, “conflict transformation” is a term that describes a natural occurrence. Conflicts change relationships in predictable ways, altering patterns of communication, of social organisation and images of the self and of the other.

Conflict transformation is also a prescriptive concept. It suggests that left alone, conflicts can have destructive consequences. However, the consequences can be modified or transformed so that self-images, relationships and social structures improve instead of being harmed by them. Usually this involves transforming perception of issues, actions and the image of other people or groups. Since a conflict usually transforms perceptions by accentuating the differences between people and positions, effective conflict transformation can work to improve mutual understanding. Even when people’s interests, values and needs are different, even non-reconcilable, many groups have made progress in gaining a relatively accurate understanding of the other.

Such transformation, Lederach suggests, must take place at both the personal and the systemic level. At the personal level, conflict transformation involves the pursuit of awareness, growth and commitment to change. That may occur through the

recognition of fear, anger, grief and bitterness. These emotions must be acknowledged outwardly and dealt with in order for effective conflict transformation to occur.

Peacemaking also involves systemic transformation, intrinsic to which is the process of increasing justice and equality in the social system as a whole. This may involve the elimination of oppression, improved sharing of resources and non-violent resolution of conflicts between groups of people. Each of these actions reinforces the others. In other words, transformation of personal relationships facilitates the transformation of social systems and systemic changes facilitate personal transformation. The key to both kinds of transformation is truth, justice, and mercy as well as empowerment and interdependence. These concepts are frequently seen to be in opposition to each other but they must come together for reconciliation or “peace” to occur, Lederach asserts.

It is from within this context that a variety of alternative approaches to conflict have emerged. Peace building, conflict transformation, conflict prevention, mediation, conflict mitigation and conflict resolution are all terms associated with approaches to peace that are non-violent, long-term and seek to alter the character of the conflict. As Norbert Ropers (www.b.shuttle.de/berghof/eng, Berghof Report No-1) defines, ‘peace-making’ is understood as an attempt to tackle some concrete problems in a process that generally begins with a difference of interests, proceeds in the form of negotiations and in the end—if successfully dealt with—leads to an agreement concerning the conduct of both the sides. Peace-building, on the other hand, covers a wider area and, in most cases, a longer time-scale. Its aim is a change in the social structures underlying the conflict, and a change in the attitudes of the parties to the conflict

Transformative peace building is a broad term for approaches that focus less on physical reconstruction than on the broader social relationships that exist within conflict-prone societies. It is an attempt to alter conflicts such that lasting peace may be built. That is different from the current trend of

conflict being mediated at an international level and sanctioned by governments.

Conflict resolution is conducted at the level of the elite and is generally aimed only at political concessions. Though transformative peace building differs from reconstruction, it also encompasses it. Where reconstructive peace building is the physical and political reconstruction of a society, transformative peace building involves aspects that work towards the long-term transformation of the conflict environment. They can be inter-ethnic contact, contact between professions, stereotype elimination, work collectives, school projects, conflict resolution training, justice, police and military training, cross-cultural television and radio efforts. These less tangible and long-term components of peace building work towards reconciliation rather than reconstruction.

Most of the peace-building exercises conducted in Northeast India are in the form of reconstructive peace building. These exercises attempt to address the political aspects which are by and large associated with the capturing of political power and end up in accord-centric politics. The assumption in this exercise is that once sovereignty is attained and a homeland is granted, all the issues affecting the people will be taken care of. Issues arising from the conflict situation such as the plight of women, children, the IDPs in the refugee camps, child soldiers, massive illegal arms proliferation, human development, the nexus between drugs, arms and AIDS etc. are conveniently forgotten both by the State and non-State actors. The growing gap between the communities in conflict cannot be brushed aside as the diabolical tactic of the State. Perhaps here lies an effective role of the civil society and the sustained effort of the civil society organisations for a democratic resolution of conflicts through dialogue and negotiations.

An Urge to Broaden the Peace-Building Process in Northeast

India

Thus it is imperative that the peace process be enduring and goes beyond the two voices of conflict that proceed in the form of negotiations and in the end, if successfully dealt with, lead to an agreement or what John Paul Lederach (1997) calls the 'reconstructive approach'. Such conflict resolution is conducted at an elite level and is generally aimed at political concessions without involving representatives of the civil society. Failing to identify and involve all actual or potential disputants in a conflict resolution process is one reason why such processes fail. Generally, it is desirable to ensure that all the parties that are likely to be affected by a decision are aware of the decision-making process and are given the opportunity to participate in that process in some way.

If parties to a conflict are excluded from negotiations or other decision-making processes, or their voices are overlooked and ignored, they are likely to become dissatisfied with that process. This exacerbates public mistrust, undermines the legitimacy of any agreements reached, and may well hamper implementation of those agreements. In addition, if the terms of peace are imposed on the people, this may perpetuate traditional power structures rather than bring about social change. In general, it is important that civil society representatives and non-combatant groups have some say in the design and implementation of the peacemaking and peace building agenda. This does not mean that all parties must be directly involved in the negotiations. It is impossible to have hundreds or thousands of people sit down at a negotiating table. However, all the affected groups must feel that they are being adequately represented in the negotiation process. This requires that the people at the negotiation table be accepted by their constituencies as legitimate spokespersons, and that they keep their constituencies well informed about the progress of the negotiations, collect dissenting views, and feed these views back into the negotiating process in a way that allows them to be dealt with adequately. If this is done carefully, thousands or even

hundreds of thousands of people can feel that they are actually “involved” in the decision and are likely to support the results of the decision-making process.

The Assam Movement (1979-1985) is a clear example of how an accord can create mistrust, fissures and multiplication of identities among various ethnic groups. The Assam Accord was understood to be the constitutional protection mechanism for the Asomiya speaking people. This has led to the others struggling for their own protection mechanisms. Great then was their disenchantment with the Assam Accord which sought to protect Assamese identity and culture but made no mention of tribal identities. Moreover, most of the provisions are yet to be implemented.

The Government of India is repeating the same mistake by involving a single militant outfit in Nagaland. On the one hand the NSCN (K) is being left out of the negotiations, on the other hand civil society groups who have been espousing the cause of reconciliation among various Naga tribes and has been working relentlessly for peace in the region have been left out of the peace process. The core demand of “Nagalim” (Greater Nagaland) is being attempted to be worked out between the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (I-M) and the Government of India (GOI) without involving the stakeholders who are going to be affected in this process. In fact the Naga Hoho (supreme body) attempted to build a consensus with the neighbouring states on the issue of *Nagalim* by constituting a “Reconciliation committee” headed by Niketu Iralu with Charles Chasie and others as its members. But the militant groups opposed this move and effectively took over the dialogue with the GOI.

A Similar process is being repeated again in the case of ULFA, UPDS, DHD and NDFB in Assam. At some point of time one has to involve all the contending parties along with the representatives of civil society. The State must understand that the Northeast is a region of over 225 communities and of more than 150 mother tongues. In such a heterogeneous society one particular militant

group cannot decide on behalf of the whole state. The decision or accord that is made with one group has repercussions on all the communities. That is what happened when the Bodoland territorial council (BTC) was formed in an area where the Bodos constitute about 40 percent of the population. Since it was meant to protect their interests, the majority non-Bodos including the Rabha, Koch-Rajbnagshi, Muslims, Asomiya and others, formed the *Assam Sanmilito janagustiya Mancha* (All Assam United Tribal Union). The situation is likely to explode if it is not handled properly.

To further complicate matters, in the territory where the BLT made up of former militants is the ruling party, there is another group, the NDFB who have signed a truce with the GOI. This group which began its journey by asking for sovereignty is likely to settle for an autonomous arrangement. The question is what is the GOI or the State government going to provide to NDFB especially at a time when the ruling BLT is reluctant to share power with them because politics is understood as seeing who gets what when and how. So there is a very remote possibility that the ruling elite will allow any room for the NDFB. The same logic applies to the DHD and UPDS who have been fighting with each other for an ethnic homeland in Karbi Anglong district. In fact inter-ethnic clashes allegedly instigated by these two groups had claimed more than 110 lives in October 2005.

Conclusion

Peace-building involving people’s voice or what we call ‘the third voice’, covers a wider area and, in most cases, a longer time scale. Its aim is a change in the social structure underlying the conflict, and change in the attitudes of the parties to the conflict. Such an approach to what John Paul Lederach (1997: 41) calls a ‘transformative approach’ and what Elizabeth Cousens (2001: 5) calls the ‘inductive approach’ attempts to examine the political, social and economic forces that have led to an armed conflict and invites a more holistic assessment of the situation. Thus, in protracted conflicts of Northeast India the importance of a ‘third

voice' in the volatile issues such as insurgency, development and ethnicity hardly needs to be reiterated. In most cases the 'third voice' or the 'people's voice' is missing in the conflict zone of Assam. It is either the State or the insurgent group who claim an axiomatic acceptance of their views and all of them fight on behalf of the people. But the 'people' whom they claim to represent are not taken into confidence in most decision-making processes. That has to change if one has to move towards conflict transformation.

9. The Role of Religious Leaders in Peace Initiatives

Thomas Menamparampil

Do religious leaders have a role to play in building peace in a region of conflicts? Some argue that since many conflicts today are given a religious justification, the involvement of religious leaders in peace building can be counter-productive. Others are of the view that precisely because religion is used to legitimise conflicts, religious leaders have an obligation to be involved in the peace processes. The present writer does not accept that all or most conflicts are caused by religious beliefs, but he is of the view that whether religion causes conflicts or not, religious leaders have to be awake to the social, political, cultural reality around them. That makes it imperative for them to take peace initiatives in moments of conflicts.

I. Playing an Intelligent and Responsible Role in Civil Society

To be relevant in a region of conflicts, religious leaders have to provide leadership of thought that gets the people to accept their responsibility for the welfare of their whole society and puts pressure on their elected representatives to work for the general good.

Religious Leaders in the World of Thought and Values

I think that I would be affirming something obvious when I say that religious leaders have a special responsibility to act as *perceptive and committed leaders* within the social fabric of a nation. I would emphasise that they ought to be particularly *leaders in the world of thought and of values*. In a democratic state, all citizens have a national responsibility; in the globalised

world today, a universal responsibility. There is a Russian saying, ‘*Each of us is responsible to all of us for everything*’. Religious leaders ought to cultivate this sense of universal responsibility in their own communities.

In an era gone by, one could claim to be a good citizen by merely obeying the laws and paying taxes. That is no longer the case. *By action or inaction, every citizen contributes ill or well to the well-being and destiny of his/her state/country/and the world.* If there is violence in the state, if bribery is rampant, if public works fall behind schedule, if trains run late and electricity fails, if slums multiply, if the universities do not function, if there is national waste, if children are put to hard labour, if women are exploited, if there is the problem of alcohol, drugs, AIDS, if human rights are denied to minorities, and, most of all, if elected representatives do not discharge their duties, every citizen is to be held responsible for it. It is the duty of religious leaders to promote this consciousness.

Responsibility for General Welfare

A society ultimately gets the leaders it deserves. One cannot blame the leaders alone if things are moving downhill. *We make the leaders. We can unmake them too.* We have the right to demand a sense of responsibility from them. Unfortunately, citizens in our country have not yet learned to expect a code of conduct, a style of behaviour, a manner of approach to persons and issues, and a degree of commitment from those whom they elect as their representatives. Rather, not rarely they have allowed themselves to be taken advantage of by the very persons they have chosen to serve the common good and promote national interests. Apart from it, citizens have often condoned the un-civic behaviour and partisan proclivity of their leaders in exchange for some equally partisan advantage to their own personal or sectarian interests.

And alas, going even further at times, citizens have closed an eye to the corrupt, discriminatory and unprincipled conduct of political leaders and civil servants whenever they could draw

some undue benefit in compensation. Ignoring all moral norms and ethical behaviour, people seem to tell their representatives occasionally, “Stand with us in our injustice, and we will stand with you in your injustice”, “Defend us in our dishonesty, and we will defend you in your dishonesty”. If citizens have this conviction, their contribution to civil society is bound to be negative. In this area of personal convictions, religious leaders can exert a corrective pressure and a salutary influence.

Exerting an Educative Pressure on Elected Leaders

If citizens abdicate their responsibility for the general welfare of their society soon after elections, the nation takes a downward plunge. Being conscientious about casting one’s vote to keep the wrong people out of power, to exclude unwanted ideologies and interests is only one side of the question. Quite another is to place conscientious people in positions of responsibility, and follow them up diligently with an educative pressure.

It is impossible to make this type of intelligent and high-principled contribution to a society’s welfare if citizens do not remain knowledgeable. That is why it has become imperative even for *religious leaders to keep informed* of events, social processes, political and economic trends, prevalent ideologies, differing views and their respective merits. The news-hour (TV) should not be a brief interval for entertainment, but a moment for self-education and reflection. The daily reading of newspapers and journals should give religious leaders a deeper insight into current realities.

If abortion and euthanasia find encouragement, the environment is being ravaged, globalisation injures the local economy, and violence raises its ugly head in society, every citizen with religious convictions ought to make a positive contribution to resolving the problem. For religious convictions have a meaning not when they lead believers towards various forms of fanaticism like the formation of suicide squads, but when they provide a convincing motivation for a radical commitment to the common good. Such

a commitment finally expresses itself in a variety of ways: in the religious field, through prayers, reflection on current issues inspired by religious principles, classes and courses offering *value-based teachings* in the context of pressing human problems; in the social field, articles in local journals, letters to the editor, discussion with discerning leaders; and if the problem is serious and the issues are clear, direct involvement with prophetic gestures like signature campaigns, protest marches on the streets, activities through citizens' associations and other similar activities.

No one should underestimate the impact conscientious citizens can make on society through intelligent interventions, by getting their friends and collaborators, even their opponents and 'enemies', involved. I say 'enemies', for, if upright citizens know how to take a balanced view, stay fair and objective, and remain firm and consistent, even the so-called 'enemy' may be compelled to make a quick-turnaround and support their good idea.

We are Part of a Bigger Universe

There is a danger of religious leaders and welfare groups carrying on their committed activities with no reference to others in the same field. If they do that, they run the risk of scattering their energies and duplicating work, and even wasting scarce resources in competition. On the contrary, if groups doing similar work interact frequently with each other and *coordinate their efforts*, helping and encouraging each other, much more will be achieved. If the leaders of each movement scout around for talent, good will and commitment, and happily share responsibilities with them, they will be able to attain unbelievably great things. They should be ready to welcome part-time assistance, even one-time help.

There are always people with great ability, spiritual motivation and deep religious convictions, also among persons in Churches and faiths other than one's own, with whom religious leaders can work to build a more human world. Going further, one may notice even among people who criticise religious authorities and

missionary initiatives some persons of great ability, who believe in human values and are committed to the betterment of society, and who place their energies at the service of great human causes like justice, equality, and fairness to deprived groups. In fact, anyone who is capable of looking beyond one's own ego interests and think of the good of the larger society is a potential collaborator of religious leaders in their efforts to build a more just society.

In this context, I would like to emphasise the importance of one more category of people: those who influence public thinking and take the rising generations towards new horizons. In this category I would put *thinkers, writers, poets, artists, educators* and speakers of special ability who provide the living philosophy for the social movements of the day. Religiously motivated people need to be close to such persons, learn from the positive contribution they make to society and initiate a dialogue with them, offering correctives where they are required. Even if the interlocutors seem indifferent in the immediate context, a day may come when the seeds they have planted bear fruit in abundance and the dreams that they have fostered come to reality.

Avoid Exaggeration, Fanaticism

A religious leader is happy to do a hundred things among which some may work. Each one meets and helps hundreds of persons, sows many productive ideas that help one to grow and may get actively involved in public causes. But in all of them the religious leader keeps to moderation and leads people by planting ideas in their minds, placing ideals before the masses, stirring their zeal for true religious faith and genuine values, and drawing communities to a committed lifestyle. Each leader ought to take care to avoid all forms of exaggeration and fanaticism. I say this because many self-proclaimed prophets and justice-fighters, in their over-enthusiasm, are tempted to exaggerate, even to the point of creating another form of injustice. Violence leads to violence. Individual or collective vested interests can take such exaggeration

even further. *Building on emotions*, especially on smothered anger and unexpressed resentment of people, justice-fighters can take matters to such a head that there seems to be no other solution but violence.

It is only after they have caused much harm to people that the public begins to realise that the course of action adopted will not yield any beneficial results, that the apparent idealism of those activists was inane romanticism and utopian self-deception, that eloquence in presenting their case was mere empty rhetoric, and that there was some imbalance either in the analysis of the situation or the planning of remedial measures. If, in addition, representatives of a community or political alliance arm themselves with *ideologies of violence*, greater disasters lie ahead.

But, on the contrary, when one seeks consistently to be *objective, balanced*, measured in words, sincere in purpose, eager to take every aspect of the issue into consideration, and seriously committed to the benefit of all persons and communities concerned, one is bound to win a hearing and exert a healthy influence all around.

The Importance of Interpreting Events and Movements Correctly

Interpreting events and processes is more important than we often think. Politically motivated people tend to embellish and interpret the event according to their own political allegiance. Reporters are tempted to serve particular political or commercial interests. A wrong interpretation or presentation of a case of violence spreads anger and anxiety and can lead to further violence. Such things keep happening continuously. *Religious leaders who rush in and take public stands before issues and events are clear may be taking the risk of finding themselves on the wrong side or emphasising a less important aspect.* They make the mistake that the over-ardent justice-fighters mentioned above make. That is why time and energy spent on study, reflection, analysis (I am

referring to realistic analysis, not merely ideological analysis in which facts are forced to fit in with theories) and interpretation are never wasted. A good cause has a sturdiness of its own even before any battle is waged.

Mao thought that political power flowed from the barrel of the gun. Mahatma Gandhi's political power flowed from the strength of his ideas and the rightness of his cause. This intelligent, righteous and balanced approach won him both admirers and followers on every continent.

Religious Leaders' Special Mission: Inviting People to Think

The greatest contribution of religious leaders in times of crises is to help people to discern the right manner of handling the problem that they are facing. Though many social activists today would consider denunciation of evil the right manner of exercising their prophetic mission and the main contribution of religious leaders, I would consider *inviting people to think* and helping them to make intelligent and value-based decisions as the more important responsibility and the more useful assistance.

Eliciting thought, guiding reflection, being involved in taking the analysis forward, being prepared to revise one's understanding of a situation as it keeps changing, watching out for opportunities for goal-oriented action, strengthening the religious, cultural and human resources for intelligent reflection and purposeful action, bringing together beneficent forces in the community, linking up scattered energies, helping people to put together scattered resources, leading persons and movements to realistic solutions. . . . with a human touch and a human heart. . . .this, in my view, is the central task of religious leaders when they are engaged in public issues. Any public stand they take can only be an external expression of this service.

It is not a question of telling people what to do or what to think. No one should deal with adult members of society like minors. But perceptive leaders can draw people to reflect on an issue under the

light of their confession's religious principles. The leader becomes adept at dealing with meanings, insights, purposes, motivations, commitments, and does not develop merely into a political mobiliser or a manipulator of a community. *The leader persuades others.* It is only when religious leaders have personalised their own religious principles that they can change their own lives and then the life and value-systems of others. Change of heart, *change of life, the transformation of society*: that is their real goal.

Religious leaders bring their own intelligence to bear on every aspect of related issues along with the rest of their community, *bringing theology to life.* The leader invites an adequate response from the community, and takes initiatives with other leaders in civil society according to the nature of the matter in hand, always retaining a relationship with the thinking element in the community.

Issues to Reflect on in the North Eastern Context

Let us ask a few questions to invite reflection on the issues related to the one we have in hand. How should communities emerging from ethnic isolation relate with other communities that may be stronger or weaker, friendly or competitive, dependent or dominant, similar or different, and with those belonging to other cultural or religious traditions? How should they handle problems that have arisen from a situation in which people that lived on subsistence farming move on to a money-economy, an investment-economy and a globalized economy, all in one generation or two? How should they handle problems that come from *change of power-patterns* from traditional village and community authority to those linked with political parties, legislatures and district and state administration? How should they help young people who are *torn away from their cultural roots* and brought to urban centres and are thrown between opportunities for modern education and remunerative employment on the one hand, and failure, unemployment, alcoholism, drugs, HIV/AIDS, violence, on the other? What do they have to say when resources destined

for development escape into the hands of private individuals and groups with vested interests? What are they to say when they see dependence grow among communities that valued their autonomy and self-reliance: financial and political dependence on political bosses, higher-ups, patrons, money-wizards and leaders at the Centre?

I say this, because all peace initiatives in our region have something to do with answers to these questions. People, especially young people, are asking these questions, sometimes in unformulated ways. Do the religious leaders have an answer? Are they exercising their minds along with their communities? Do they refer back to their religious sources? When interpretations of human realities that are not in keeping with religious teachings and principles keep arising in their communities, are they able to take note and say "*Let us look at things carefully and re-think them. We do not accept violence and corruption as normal in life. We have to look for better solutions to our problems?*"

2. Resources and Strengths

To be able to work for peace, one has first to identify one's resources and strengths. Among them one may include history, culture, religion and authenticity.

a) A Lesson from History: Victory is Often Followed by Defeat

While trying to interpret an event or a series of events, religious leaders should not close their eyes to history. History is full of instructions. It tells us, for example, that in most bitter conflicts, one side is defeated first, then the other. Arnold Toynbee in his "A Study of History" analyses this phenomenon at length, showing how the loser is only stirred to life by the rude shock of defeat and humiliation. The loser gathers up all energies and becomes doubly determined to regain what has been lost, and even tries to outdo the winner. Toynbee takes the example of the *Greco-Persian conflict*. Persia's reckless intrusion into Greece under Darius was a shocking experience for the Greeks. Their

defeat persuaded the competing Greek states to forget their internal differences. Their collective determination to pay back Persia in her own coin found its final expression in Alexander's bold venture deep into Persian territories, which took him even beyond Persia's eastern borders into India.

After Alexander's meteoric empire-building career, Greece, and later its successor state in the West, Rome, became the dominant power in the West. Rome held that position for centuries. But this humiliation of the East helped only to stir up a determination against the West that found its ultimate expression in the *Arab thrust into Europe*. There emerged from the Arabian peninsula a great people who brought together the remnants of the many earlier Asiatic empires, built up energy and carried war to the gates of Vienna on the eastern side of Europe and beyond the Spanish borders in the west. This Arab thrust, after it had overrun all the earlier Roman territories in West Asia, North Africa and Spain was halted only at Poitiers in Southern France by Charles Martel in 732.

This tide flowed back; for, there was stiff European resistance to this venture. It brought into existence the powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire in Eastern Europe to halt the Arab thrust on the eastern front. It also united the two mighty nations on the Iberian Peninsula, Spain and Portugal, to throw back the Arab forces on the west. The energies that these last two nations built up to throw out the Arab intrusion into Western Europe made of them the strongest powers in Europe at that particular period of history and the first colonial nations in modern times. They inaugurated the western *colonial adventure* which placed the destiny of much of the world in western hands for half a millennium.

That is Arnold Toynbee's argument in brief. A curious question one may ask at this point is, 'will the drama repeat itself with the awakening of China and other Asian giants?' We pray for greater wisdom in all persons concerned!

A similar pattern can be noticed in the *power-struggle between France and Germany* during the last two centuries. The

revolutionary fervour of France took Napoleon and his conquering armies in all directions in Europe, and pitted the French forces against many German principalities and kingdoms, including Prussia. Germany was defeated and Prussia humiliated. It was the humiliation that Prussia suffered at French hands that stirred that country into action. She brought together several principalities and kingdoms into a German Empire and inflicted a crushing defeat on France at Sedan. Did France learn a lesson? Not a bit. On the contrary, France set about rebuilding its own energies and resources to bring Germany low with a vengeance during World War I, seeking the support of the Allied Forces. Did Germany learn a lesson? Far from it. Under Hitler, it invaded France and sought to convince her that all her earlier victories were of no use. At least now, France could have grown wiser and restrained herself from further violence. But she did not. She went through the same cruel ritual of bringing Germany down and dismembering it during World War II together with her Allies. Fortunately at this stage wisdom dawned on European nations. De Gaulle, Adenauer and De Gasperi forged a bond among the European powers that laid the foundation of the present European Union.

Also, in our region, in times of ethnic tensions it is good to bring to the attention of the contestants the fact that those who boast triumphantly of having won a series of local battles may have only provoked their enemy for a determined round of destructive response, and violence may recoil on the present winners.

The wheel of violence keeps turning. Winners and losers change places. But violence does not come to an end. It will never cease, until there are enough people to stand aside from the fateful wheel, and centred in compassion, try hard to break the cycle of violence. But they will first need to reject the win-lose game of power and violence.

b) Another Lesson from History: Sowing Seeds of Peace and Giving a New Direction to the Course of History

There are many examples of persons who have achieved great

things for humanity only by following a path of peace. It was after the termination of a hundred thousand lives in 261 B.C, that *Asoka gave up his aggressive plans* for conquering new territories and adopted the ways of gentle persuasion. And the world changed with him. Under his aegis, Buddhism, which was a local sect, became a world religion. Asoka's message still echoes in the hearts of millions of people.¹

Another example closer home in the Northeast is Sukapha, the Ahom conqueror, who moved into Upper Assam from Thailand in 1228 A.D. He was a great military genius, but also a conciliatory figure. Though he was able to put down strongly the local tribes and ethnic groups that resisted his invasion, he reconciled them and made them his allies. He befriended the Morans, the Borahis, Chutiyas and other communities that lived in Upper Assam, and laid the foundation of a kingdom, which grew gradually into a mighty empire covering the entire Brahmaputra Valley. It was able to resist the Mughal army at the height of its power.

If we look carefully into the lives of great conquerors we find that it was not the sword that won them a stable kingdom or state, but the *conciliatory attitude* that accompanied them when following up victories. Wherever this was missing, the newly built empire broke up in a very short period of time.

¹ It was into a society that had experienced the brutal realities associated with the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* wars, Alexander's invasion, the Nanda and Maurya military harshness, and sacrifice of countless animals following Brahminic (*Vedic*) rituals that Asoka introduced a new culture: a culture of respect for persons of diverse religious persuasions, compassion for all living beings, concern for life itself. Asoka sent out missionaries from the banks of the Ganga to the snows of the Himalayas, the deserts of central Asia, and the bazaars of Alexandria, to the Greek king Antiochos. In this manner, Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, the Cholas, Pandyas, Yonas, Kambojas, Nabhapamtis, Bhojas, Pitinkas, Andhras, Pulindas, Keralaputras; to Java, Myanmar, Thailand, China and Japan.

The conquests that religious and cultural leaders make in the hearts of people leave behind far more beneficial results in the history of humankind than any other kind of conquests. Those religious leaders who learn from history and offer their teaching using culture and religion as their resources, get their insights widely accepted.

Culture as a Resource

People have debated whether culture is a resource or a restraint. It is in fact both. Every community falls back on its culture (its belief and value-systems, traditions, practices, guiding norms, priorities) as an abiding resource to build on. They can address their problems only within the context of the *worldview* they have always held, *insights* that have arisen within their cultural world, and the inspiration that has guided their people in their earlier history. Even a break from tradition can be made only within the framework of their culture. Tribal values like a communitarian sense, honesty, industriousness, resolution of problems through dialogue, and respect for traditions are great assets in a community.

Perceptive religious leaders seek to strengthen the positive resources in their culture and to liberate their society from the negative restraints it imposes. In times of rapid change, they seek to strengthen existing values, concepts and commitments and take them to new levels by challenging their community and opening out new visions and possibilities to their people. That is what Jesus did when he affirmed, 'You have heard it said—do not kill—but *I tell you...*'. In fact, the period of rapid transition is a time for the re-evaluation of existing traditions and prevailing concepts; it is a time for their rejection or re-acceptance, an occasion for further deepening of ideas, widening of horizons, and redefining of roles. That is why fresh, relevant, insightful *re-interpretations* of cultural elements in context are necessary from time to time.

The cultural resources of a community are too often underutilised by its members. If their leaders go to the point of

forgetting them altogether or marginalising them excessively, it is the *community* that is going to suffer and become like a *rootless plant*. In a globalized world, that is what is happening to many cultures. But those leaders who develop the skill of using cultural resources and symbols effectively can move the masses. See how the VHP stirred millions of people to visible fervour merely by using the symbolism related to a temple-construction programme at Ayodhya or that of the *Ratha Yathra*. We wish they had done it for a peaceful purpose. Mahatma Gandhi's use of symbols made an impact on India's millions, like those of the *ashram*, fast, prayer meetings, spinning wheel, homespun and others. Religious leaders who make effective use of cultural symbols can shake the world. It is more powerful than any political manoeuvring. Mother Teresa's *sari-clad* image had become an 'icon of peace'.

Religion as a Resource

Many people in our times look at religion as a divisive force. If they were to accept it as a *spiritually motivating force* and *ethically inspiring energy*, it would speedily turn into a mighty resource for human growth and social well being. For only religion can plant into human hearts those profound convictions on which the values that humankind needs most today can take roots. "Religion and religious sensitivity are the factories that manufacture morality that society and business both need to function (Dalla Costa 1998: 125). Faith is authoritative, unconditionally normative. Religion, which is called the depth memory of humankind, gives depth, meaning, unconditional values, norms, motivation, ideals. It is the spiritual home of security, trust and hope (Kung 1997: 142-143).

Kurt Biedenkopf, a member of West German Parliament once said, "We will have to rely on the strength of religion...to make the kind of sacrifices and exercise the self-discipline that will be needed" (quoted in Runyon 1989: x) for human growth. It is religion alone that can impose *inwardly binding laws* from within. F. W. de Clerk of South Africa was asked whether it was

international sanctions that brought apartheid to an end. His quick reply was, "It was not sanctions, but a deep analysis on our knees before God." Religion is an unfailing resource for human growth, and for peace.

A religious leader's moral authority comes from inner authenticity. Allowing for human weaknesses, the leader sincerely seeks to be what he professes to be. Words, deeds, and lifestyle match and are in keeping with belief. Commitment to the larger good of society is proven. Sincerity in wanting to reconcile communities in conflict is evident. An individual's religious earnestness does not promote sectarianism, but provides a way to open more and more doors to others and build bridges even to opponents. That is the religious leader's strength.

3. Lessons Learnt from Peacemaking Efforts in Northeast India

It may be good at this stage to share with you a few lessons that I have gathered over the years from working for peace in Northeast India. I am adopting a style of reflection, even though my sharing may contain certain points useful for working out practical strategies for peace.

1. Let me begin with a general statement valid in any part of the world today. We have been fed for over a century on *philosophies of struggle* (Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, propagators of Fascist, Nazi and Communist ideologies and their milder versions, and various forms of nationalism) and are so inspired by the ideals of fighting and struggling for justice and rights, that *our combating spirit has grown*, and our reconciling skills have sagged. *The fighter is the hero today*, and the peacemaker is at most a 'useful botheration' who may be granted a minimum space grudgingly in our consciousness. Activities of such a harmless do-gooder do not strike the headlines or attract attention. We have forgotten that

there are certain human skills of immense value like paying respectful attention to the other person's (tribe's, community's) point of view, trying to understand them, showing sympathy for the opponent's goals, dialoguing, arguing amicably, negotiating, *avoiding aggressive language*, making an extra effort to convince, yielding, conceding, tolerating, coaxing, eliciting compliance, drawing persons into accepting one's own point of view, evoking collaboration, insisting on friendly solutions, inviting compromise. So the first learning is that anyone who desires to be a peacemaker needs to unlearn some the earlier mentioned skills and *develop the skills needed for reconciliation*.

2. If in a conflict, we take for granted that one side is definitely right and the other is wrong, that one is a demon and the other a helpless victim, and that we have to take sides and fight to the finish; we will not succeed as mediators between the two. Most contenders in the fray are convinced that they are fighting for a good cause. The task of the mediator is to listen first to one side that makes loud claims of struggling for justice for their own people. When the mediator turns to the other side, that side too is waging a war on behalf of fairness to their community or their own set of interests. Both are fighting for justice. Thus, perceptions of justice clash. When justice clashes with justice, the peacemaker is helpless. An important learning, therefore, from experience is that the *peacemaker should be prepared to fail but is determined never to give up*.
3. Another learning is this: you will not be in a position to initiate a reconciliation-dialogue with contending groups, unless you have a measure of *sympathy for their cause* in your heart. Excessive preaching and repetition of pacifist platitudes in the early stages of the dialogue when matters are still hot will sound provocative and humiliating to them. Hasty condemnations will enrage them. Even if you believe that their claims are exaggerated, unless you can empathise

with them at depth and are touched by the passion they have for their goals and the sense of justice that motivates them, or their approach to the problem, or at least some aspect of their cause, they will not open up to you.

But if you are struck profoundly by the magnitude of their grievances and are able to understand (though not necessarily approve) the excesses to which their 'legitimate anger' has driven them, they will gradually, with caution, begin to respond. The same will be true of the other party as well. Neither group is asking you to condone their immoderation. They are asking you to understand how they felt compelled to go to such lengths. They are not asking you to say much, but to *feel much*. They are not asking you to appropriate their anger, but to *experience their pain* in the inhuman situation in which they have imprisoned themselves at the moment (which, of course, they themselves had a share in creating).

4. There is a fourth learning I would like to share with you: that *there is a profound longing for peace* even in the heart of the sternest combatant. But peace on what terms? On whose terms? Not, certainly, at the cost of their central interests. Not, certainly, at the price of having to compromise their honour or damage their image. If the peacemaker wants to retain credibility, it must be clear to the contestants that the mediator is not going to sell out the gains they have made during a lengthy struggle, or compromise their future. The mediator understands that they were compelled to resort to violence only because they wanted to convey a message most powerfully, especially to their opponents.

Carl Jung once said that the strongman must be weak somewhere, and the clever man must be stupid somewhere... otherwise it would not be true to reality. In the same way, the *violent man must be peaceable somewhere*. Even the fiercest fighters are looking forward to an era of peace. That is why they keep a little door open for the peacemaker, which they can

snap shut any time they feel threatened. It is this hidden entry point that the peacemaker tries to target. But often, sadly, that secret door remains bolted and barred for reasons of security. And a truly religious peacemaker has often to fall back on religious faith to persevere in efforts and inspire confidence in the combatants and their leaders.

5. The most important thing for the peacemaker is to make an *acceptable presence* in the subconscious of the warring groups. If I or the organisation I represent is well-known for their beneficent services and non-controversial activities among the groups in collision, the belligerents may turn to me as a peacemaker, or welcome me when I take initiatives. My ability to *build up confidence-generating relationships* with the parties concerned is the key to success. Even those who have ‘fought’ hard for ‘justice’ need not consider themselves excluded from the privileged position of becoming peacemakers, if they have always taught non-violence, sought to be fair to all parties concerned, consistently avoided exaggerated ego-claims, have special skills for establishing *warm-hearted* relationships with people, and their *universal outlook* on public issues is respected.
6. The peacemaker begins by interacting with the two groups in hostile relationships. If I present myself as a self-appointed mediator and arbitrator, I will be rejected. Criticising one party to the other is not the best way of proving neutrality. A *commitment to humanity* that comes through in one’s words, deeds and relationships is far more convincing. This quality is far more important than some techniques that have been picked up in a recent conflict-management seminar. A universal outlook, a *sensitivity to human pain* no matter who suffers, a keen desire to come to the assistance of people in anxiety... these are some of the qualities that a religious peacemaker needs to cultivate.
7. As the battle rages, bringing the right people together for

negotiations is itself an achievement. Now, who are the right people? It is not likely that the frontline fighters will come for peace-talks; their skills lie in another direction. It is not likely, either, that the war-hawks will deign to sit for a dialogue. They have a vested interest in keeping the fires burning. I would describe the people who matter in a peace-dialogue as “*socially important people*”: people who are respected in society; groups whose opinions have wide acceptability among both radicals and moderates. Such would be thinkers, writers, professors, speakers and people who stir society with their charismatic leadership or prophetic utterances.

8. Always search for the ‘effective person(s)’. During conflicts such persons may not necessarily figure in the list of much talked-about leaders like politicians or bureaucrats. They are those who think, provide a philosophy for action, keep teams together, develop strategies, keep public contacts, build image for the group, and control publicity. A leader of this definition may be an unimpressive figure, mild-looking, soft-spoken; but it will be a perceptive person who has the confidence of the militant ‘boss’ and his confederates. For, the *doer is not always the thinker*. The “doer” acts fast, but does not always reflect, so, after organising a few agitations, is exhausted; or after killing a few persons and inflicting severe injuries on the other party, runs short of ideas, and the entire movement fizzles out. It is the thinker that interprets history, constructs a theory, and visualises a future in order to sustain the movement. I am not referring necessarily to just one person. There may be many such people at different levels of the hierarchy scattered in various units.

It is not likely that you will easily get the key-thinkers of a militant organisation to come to the negotiating-table. The next best thing to do is to draw those who are close to them; and the next best thing again is to get those who are close to those who are close to them. In other words, we may have to

work through mediators, or at least such people as we think have some influence on the guiding group in the organisation. Though we have such ambitious plans, those who really come for dialogue may be persons who are remote from the frontlines and the controlling machinery. But at least they should be *respected persons in their own society*. For as long as they have the confidence of their own societies, the message will ultimately reach the intended circles. In order to draw such persons to the dialogue-table, it is very important to make direct contacts and not limit oneself to sending out letters.

9. There are times when negotiators representing conflicting interests will feel unprepared to meet each other. Even if they are already at the venue, they feel emotionally and mentally not ready for direct discussion. It would be best that they spend some period of time in separate meetings to thrash out their own two different points of view and get themselves ready for actual negotiations. Religious peacemakers can play an important role making a *passionate appeal for peace*, basing themselves on arguments from human experience, philosophical reflection, wisdom of the ancients in their own respective societies, and the teaching from the scriptures of their own religions. Depending on the charisma and the moral authority of the religious animators, a great measure of mental transformation takes place during such an exercise.
10. If ultimately the two groups agree to come together, I would suggest that the religious peacemaker remain a *confidence-builder, a facilitator*, creator of a serene atmosphere...an atmosphere in which interactions become easy. The mediator may suggest the next step, invite further reflection, whisper a solution, allowing the contestants to thrash out their own differences. By remaining inconspicuous and keeping a low profile, the long-term contribution can be greater. The less one interferes in the practical side of the issues and the natural

processes of discussion, the better. But the temptation to win recognition is so great, that if the peacemaker happens to be successful at the first stage, there is a great temptation to rush into the role of a mediator, arbitrator and judge. Even if the contestants agree to such an idea, it would be unwise to assume such roles. Winning headlines may be flattering, but the fruits from there may not last very long. Premature publicity can be fatal. Those who oppose peace may track down the peacemaker at any stage and make efforts to trip him over. *Doing things as though not doing*—that is the role of the peacemaker in complex situations. One should feel free from having to play to the gallery.

11. A few final thoughts about *making compromises*. Living together always means being prepared for compromises. This is true of a family, a village, a nation and the international community. The most valuable contribution the peacemaking team can make is to lead opposing partners towards a gradual awareness of this great truth. Self-evident as it is, if you rush to conclusions urging compromises and quoting scriptures and adages when the anger is still high, the pedagogic process you have started may be disturbed. It is far more profitable to draw their attention to the disastrous consequences of on-going conflict. You have to walk a long distance with them sharing the pain of their people. Only when they are mentally prepared to look for alternative solutions, is it pedagogically sound to propose compromises. However, it is unwise for the peacemaker to prompt specific issues on which a compromise may be made. It is best they emerge from the participants' lived-experience and their own agonising search for a way out of the deadlock they are caught up in. Prodding compromises in the area of their central concerns may appear insensitive to them. What they themselves are willing to concede is their gift to God, to the future of their community, and to humanity.
12. Often the negotiators themselves have no authority to

decide on issues on behalf of the contending parties. But they can make recommendations. And if these are *phrased carefully, balanced* and corresponding to the reality, they usually evoke a good reaction. The participants in the first trend-setting meeting we have described above can make an effort to organise similar meetings at the local level, try to reproduce the same atmosphere and goodwill, and discuss the recommendations with others. If there is wide acceptance of the proposals, the communities may move on to the final round of negotiations in the presence of civil authorities, in which the religious peacemaker need not necessarily take part at all. If in the process you are forgotten completely or are marginalised, you should rejoice, for it is divine intervention that ultimately brings peace to a situation no matter who served the cause.

13. Having come thus far with the argument, one may ask whether religious leaders should get directly involved in public issues. My answer to the question would be qualified. Certainly 'yes' in the cause of justice and truth, in defence of the poor and the deprived, and in the cause of human rights. But one should avoid certain mistakes such as making public statements without having studied the issues from different points of view, taking sides too fast and condemning in haste, *alienating persons and communities* to whom also one has a responsibility no matter how wrong they are. It is not the humiliation of the wrong-doer that the religious leaders aim at, but the change of heart and the transformation of society. And though, as citizens, religious leaders have the right to get involved in any social issue in whatever manner that is open to citizens in a democracy, their role is not precisely that of the social activist. *Excessive clerical presence* of one religious group in the political sphere is not appreciated by persons of other religious groups, and is often resented even by the members of their own community or church.

In our own context in Northeast India, while it has been easy for religious leaders to play an active role in all areas of humanitarian interest like *education, health, development, research, peace*, promotion of *ethical values*, it has not been easy or helpful to enter into issues that are politically complex. For example, it is not very clear whether any stand that religious leaders may take on issues like claims of greater political autonomy by particular tribes and communities or demands for sovereignty by means of statehood, autonomous district, some other form of political unit, or by attaining tribal status will be free of severe criticism. It can be counter-productive. One has to be extremely sensitive in dealing with political problems of this nature. Of this we may be sure, that religious leaders should make of their faith a spiritual resource for human betterment and a guide towards humanity's Ultimate Future. It is for the leader to discern and decide before God in what manner he may come out directly into the public sphere with prophetic utterances, gestures or actions. The religious leader's own church or religious body guides in difficult situations.

14. Here is another thing learnt. Violence is not broken by superior violence, but by another power, a *great capacity for suffering*. If you wish to save the lives of others, be prepared for death. This is a teaching of which Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were convinced. Some persons in groups that are in conflict may be seriously opposed to peace negotiations. Government authorities may be suspicious of religious leaders' motives. Petty-minded officers may be jealous. Groups opposed to the activities of a particular religious community may be critical. There may be *negative interpretations in the press*. There may be repeated failures in the peace-promoting work itself. The peacemaker must be ready to go through any suffering.
15. Experience tells us that difficulties for the peacemaker will be

many. The representatives of the warring groups may refuse to turn up. Their ears may be poisoned against the initiatives of those religious leaders. Follow-up efforts may never take off. People may get discouraged from the recurrence of violence. Collective anger may be rekindled if their community is hit again unexpectedly. Malicious *rumours* may be spread deliberately. The press may inflate the number of victims, interpret issues wrongly, or ignore the peacemaker's initiatives and successes. They may feel left alone to struggle. But even in the midst of troubles, they should hold their heads high. They need not refute every charge and counter every opposition they face. They could respond to those *accusations* with a simple explanation or even allowing things to be said and events to take place. They could let people speak just as they wish for a while. But they should be honest and upright in their intent and ego-less in their service. They should *never give up*. Their very non-resistance may prove a turning point for the current to reverse the flow. And finally the truth will reveal itself.

16. There are times when discussion cannot make headway because the contestants have their own style of using words such as justice, peace, democracy, their own way of interpreting history and the immediate context, their own manner of defending their vested interests, their own strategies of making allegations, their own fashion of creating myths. For example, people who claim to be fighting to save their ethnic identity and cultural heritage may, in fact, be striving to keep the routes of their drug-trade open. Even so, deep down there is some measure of goodwill. The religious peacemaker keeps seeking to tap that goodwill. An effective mediator does not turn cynical, but tries to *ransom people from their own inconsistencies*.
17. Often *memories of historical injuries* remain alive in people's hearts and *negative stereotypes* of each other develop. In such cases, every peace-agreement is a truce. Hostilities may

be renewed at any time. But the religious peacemaker finds renewed strength and motivation in faith, and is ready to begin all over again. The peace-maker then gets busy with the healing of historic memories and the demolition of stereotypes. For you must believe that God is with you.

18. One last thing: The religious peacemaker firmly believes in what I have chosen to call the '*mysticism of the brief moment*'...in the power of prayer. This is the source of strength in moments of tension, opposition, discouragement, failure, and humiliation. It is based on this strength that one builds bridges across communities and cultures, sorts out differences, persuades people to forgive and join hands together and strive on to create a better world. Remember that peacemakers did not always succeed, that some lost their lives, and that their accounts often read like a tragic waste. But be sure that nothing can be lost in God, that peace comes in its own good time, that there are many ways in which God makes people 'beat their swords into ploughshares'. Be immensely happy if you play a very humble part in it.

4. Inspiring Examples of Religious Leaders

At this stage it may be good to turn our attention to the inspiring examples of certain prophetic persons who contributed a great deal to the cause of peace. In the 1980s Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew his forces from Eastern Europe, and told the West the he had deprived them of an enemy (Glover 2001: 232). Vajpayee's bus trip to Lahore thrilled millions of Indians and Pakistanis. Everyone remembers Mahatma Gandhi's message of non-violence, and the skill he manifested in struggling for justice for his people in the most peaceful manner. Following his example, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela adopted a peaceful style of dealing with complex social and political problems. Names like Vinoba Bhave and Baba Amte are much remembered for their contribution to peaceful relationship between communities. The Dalai Lama's

unfailing smile and peaceful approach continue to inspire us.

After having looked at all these wonderful examples in civil society, I would like to conclude my reflections with certain prophetic utterances of religious leaders who have made a great contribution to the cause of peace in our times. I may have to limit myself to a few Christian leaders who were perfectly convinced that the Gospel was all about peace. For the Gospel does not speak of peace occasionally. Peace is not one of the themes among many others, but the central articulation and dynamic of the entire Gospel. On nothing else does the Gospel speak more explicitly and more frequently than on peace. The religious leaders I am going to refer to were convinced that being Christian was identical with being a peacemaker, that they had to untrain themselves from war and violence. They remembered the words of Jesus, "Peace I give you, my peace I leave with you" (Jn 14:2), and the words of Isaiah, "Nation shall not lift sword against nation nor ever again be trained for war" (Is 2:4).

Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest, a prophet of peace in the US, inspired thousands of people of faith and conscience to pursue the Christian vision of a world free of violence. Beginning with his opposition to the Vietnam War in 1968, he continued over a quarter of a century to challenge the conscience of his contemporaries on issues of War and Violence. He would cry passionately, "We are not allowed to kill innocent people. We are not allowed to be complicit in murder... It is terrible for me to live in a time where I have nothing to say to human beings except 'Stop killing'... We are where we started. Thou shalt not kill; we are not allowed to kill. Everything today comes down to that ... everything."

Fr. Elias Chacour, who had lived through decades of violence in the state of Israel used to tell his fellow Arabs, "We have tried violence. We have tried wars. We are sure that wars will bring wars...I am sure. It's a vicious circle. It is the logic of violence. We know where violence leads. Even if we are not certain where we are going with non-violence, let us try it".

It is unbelievable that so many of us can be passive and indifferent before the enormous human tragedy of ongoing violence in our world today. Someone has said that the indifference of good people is more shocking than the malice of evil-doers. We cannot remain uncommitted until we ourselves are direct victims. *Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran pastor,* thus described his failure during the agonising days of Hitler, "When the Nazis came to get the Communists, I was silent. When they came to get the Socialists, I was silent. When they came to get the Catholics, I was silent. When they came to get the Jews, I was silent. And when they came to get me, there was no one left to speak." A powerful witness in humility. Non-involvement in peace efforts is complicity is violence.

The longer violence rages, the deeper the injury it inflicts on our collective psyche. *Mac McCrackin, a Presbyterian minister,* says, "The more the war goes on, the more vindictive it becomes. The means we use determine the ends we reach, and nothing has proven that so much as war. If you are defending human rights and life, then you should not get into a situation where you will destroy life. Not only will you fail to destroy the enemy of life, you will yourself become life's enemy." So many peace talks have taken place. So many peace rallies have been held. But things have not got any better. We can be tempted to give up. *Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, too, used to feel the weight of his mission during the peaceful crusade against apartheid. He would say, "...sometimes there are moments when you are in the depths, or you have to say to God 'God, I am tired'. At those times I throw myself into the strain of faith, and I am carried in the prayers, and not just of those on earth". How inspiring!*

"We are tired of weapons and bullets", a peasant wrote to the *Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador.* "Our hunger is for justice, for food, medicine, education, and effective programmes of fair development". Archbishop Romero, himself an ardent champion of justice for the poor, was never tired of repeating, "Violence resolves nothing, violence is not Christian,

not human.” However, once violence takes roots in a society, peacemaking truly becomes an uphill task. The path seems to lengthen the more you walk on it. You are more likely to see failure at every step than success. We have little choice. “The choice is between non-violence and non-existence”, as Martin Luther King once said. If we do not listen to the voice of wisdom and the cry of our conscience, our worst fears will come true.

As things are today, peacemakers are few. But we continue to hold on to hope. As the *Catholic Archbishop Dom Helder Camara* of Recife and Olinda (Brazil) used to say, “Today, as always, humanity is led by minorities who hope against all hope, as Abraham did.”

Perhaps that is what the Joint Peace Team of Church leaders in the Northeast has done. It has made a useful contribution to the cause of peace in times of tension during the ethnic conflicts at Kokrajhar in 1996, at Churachandpur in 1997, and at Haflong and Diphu in 2003. It may be good to note that instances of direct ethnic conflicts have come down. But the task is not over. Many tensions still remain. We need to trust in the strength of ideas, the persuasive power of that inner voice that speaks to us, the help that comes from God. The mission of religious leaders is precisely this: *give public utterance to that inner voice* that speaks to everyone.

Conclusion

I end with an inspiring teaching from the well-known psychologist Sigmund Freud, “The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing. Ultimately, after endlessly repeated rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points in which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind.” May the soft inner voice that prompts peace to us be announced on the housetops, and may joy and serenity return to our hills and valleys!

10. The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building

Rita Manchanda

“Peace is always in the making. It is not an event. There is no success in peace making. It is always in the making” *Neidonuo Angami*

In the conflict-scarred region of the Northeast of India, efforts are being made to facilitate a dialogue between the State and militant outfits. However, there is a strong feeling that civil society groups that could play a critical role in assisting the dialogue are being ignored. This paper is an attempt to understand the meaning of civil society and its role in peace building. It will critically focus on three aspects of ‘Civil Society and Peace Building’: i) Conceptualising the Role of Civil Society in Peace-building, ii) Narratives of Civil Society Initiatives in Peace-building, and iii) Interrogating ‘competing notions’ of civil society in Peace building.

Civil Society: Multiple Meanings

In the most diverse of contexts, especially in the global south, political theorists, national and international policy makers as well as serious social activists all lay claim to the idea of ‘civil society’.¹ It is often the justification for governance and peace-

¹ Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities,

building and, above all, it is the terrain for the assertion of radical democratic aspirations. Despite the lack of consensus on ‘what is civil society’, its return and resilience transcends its many ambiguities and multiple meanings. Theoretical difficulties have led academics like Sudipto Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (2002) to explore the connections between the western traditions of thinking about civil society, its historical entry into non-western theoretical discourses, and its transformed emergence in negotiating the complex realities of conflicts.

More pragmatic concerns prompted activist–researchers in India to examine “(whether) our understanding of peace initiatives and the role of civil society will be deepened or impoverished because of the competing notions of civil society” as discussed in a seminar exploring the role of NGO and Civil Society in Peace Work (NFI 2006: 25-36). Here, the competing notions of the civil society discourse as articulated on the topic “*How can civil society and NGOs intervene in peace building and conflict prevention*” found Tapan Bose (ibid: 32-33) drawing upon his deep involvement in the peace politics of the Northeast to map the crucial significance of the role of the relatively young Naga civil society organisations, especially women’s groups, in strengthening the current peace process. Meanwhile, the sceptics hit back, dredging up the histories of militant groups, which began as civil society organisations (CSOs) such as the Naga Club, the Kuki Literature Society and the Naga National Council. Bhagat Oinam (2008), at Jamia’s inaugural Northeast Studies Centre Seminar, was more forthright, questioning the structural capacity of CSOs in a militarised environment to strengthen democracy by expanding the non-militarised middle ground. He cited examples of the Naga social organisations being appropriated either by the (armed) state or non-state actors.

Conceptualising the Role of Civil Society in Peace Building

Let us begin with the assumptions that underlie our focus on the role of the civil society in the plural processes of peace

building. The normative referent is our advocacy of ‘peace as value’. It refers to a maximalist peace that goes beyond absence of armed conflict to a just society and to dealing with the causes of the conflict, as against a minimalist one that focuses on merely stopping violence. Human Rights and Democracy are integrally linked to realising substantive Peace and Security. It can be argued that the international discourse of human security approximates this multi-dimensional vision of peace. If the traditional security or national security has to do with protecting the state against aggression or internal disturbances, the catch-all phrase ‘human security’ places the individual and the community as the subject and the measure of security discourses. As a corollary, individuals and social groups define and identify security threats and are empowered to develop strategies for their own protection.

Its natural consequence is the expectation that civil society groups will play a key role in security and conflict resolution. Moreover, as the civil society deals with largely internal conflicts, for example, that focus public dissent against the state or pit one collectivity against another, often state-backed one, one would expect that peace-building strategies would draw peace-building resources from within society itself.

In South Asia there is a long history of the praxis of peace making via division based ‘peace accords,’ as in the Northeast. The metaphor of a ‘peace table’ encapsulates the structure of a peace process that seats only the armed protagonists (with perhaps a third party facilitator) and centres around discussion involving expansion and realignments of power sharing. It is territorially focused and enables a degree of self-rule, but rarely entails any democratisation of the politics in control. By bringing in civil society, the peace table becomes more democratically inclusive both in process and content and reflects the multi-level and multi-aspect nature of peace and peace building.

Here, I want to draw upon the four Peace Audit exercises of the South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR), on the politics

of peace in the Naga, Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT), Sri Lanka and Baluchistan conflicts, and in particular the ‘Review of the Peace Audits’ (See Interrogating Partitions, Annexure I, SAFHR website www.safhr.org). From these exercises at establishing public accountability of the praxis of peace making via ‘peace accords’, SAFHR has attempted to distil a conceptual understanding of the role of civil society. Indeed, it was the Sri Lanka Peace audit process that highlighted the critical significance of the role of the civil society in the asymmetric ‘ethnic’ conflict pitted against the Sinhala majoritarian Sri Lankan state.

The lessons derived from the Sri Lanka peace audit prompted highly-reputed national level peace activists to encourage Naga social organisations to play a leading role, and as a corollary to this effort, to persuade the National Socialist Council of Nagalim Isaac-Muivah (NSCN-IM) leadership to appreciate its significance. In the two earlier rounds of flawed peace making of the Naga conflict, there was minimal involvement of ‘civil society’, especially as compared to the high profile of civil society groups in the peace process ushered in by the 1997 ceasefire. The several rounds of People’s Consultations between the NSCN (I-M) and Naga social organisations, churches and influential individuals were of critical importance in the process of providing strategic depth to the peace process.

The experience gained through the Peace Audit exercises taught that the democratisation of peace politics hinges upon structures and processes of peace building that enable the participation of ‘civil society’. The experience of the audit posited peace building as a continuous process that reaches back to the pre-conflict phase, conflict, peace building and post-conflict phase. Civil society’s role, especially that of women’s groups, encompassed **a)** mitigating the impact of violent conflicts on society, holding aloft the human rights agenda, and managing the survival of the community; **b)** expanding the middle ground shrunk during the peak of the conflict, enabling space for dialogue across conflict

fault lines, and mobilising support for the ceasefire, **c)** legitimising the ‘official’ peace process which is marked by an asymmetry of power between state and non-state actors, and **d)** bringing in the agenda of accountability, social justice, and notions of people’s entitlements to food, shelter, health and education.

In these conflict-peace processes, there is no parity of status between state and non-state actors. It is the state that determines when peace is to be made, and if, when and what demands are to be acquiesced to. That shows the importance of the middle ground and therefore the crucial role of civil society in legitimising peace politics and providing strategic depth in the asymmetric workings of power in the peace accord process. Indeed, as the peace process expands, both the state and non-state actors compete to appropriate the middle ground of civil society.

The historical and contingent context determines the nature of the very diverse civil society groups overturning the western normative prescription of voluntary, interest-based, non-ascriptive based associations (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2002: 1-7). These include the modern incarnations of traditional social institutions of the tribal communities, churches, human rights groups, bar associations and intellectuals, women’s, student and youth groups.

Women’s groups should find an important seat at the table, reflecting the growing understanding of the need to specifically pay attention to gender perspectives on conflict and peace, and to enable women’s voices to be heard. Otherwise gender differentiated needs in conflict prevention, in peace building and post-conflict relief and rehabilitation are likely to be ignored or subordinated. Feminist scholarly engagements with situations of conflict and peace building in Asia, Latin America, Africa and post Yugoslavia –Europe, have revealed the significance of women as a powerful constituency for peace building and reconciliation.

The state tends to limit civil society peace activism to relief and rehabilitation work, whereas the task of peace activists and of civil society is to steadfastly push the agenda of democracy. The

experience of the peace audits highlighted the political nature of the task of peace activists, i.e. to challenge the state strategy of conflict management and enable it to become an opportunity for democratic transformation.

Select Narratives of Civil Society Initiatives in Peace Building

Scholar-activists and, in particular, feminist scholars have built an impressive documentation of civil society initiatives in peace building. The documentation includes the present writer's field study on women in the Naga peace process (Manchanda 2004). As my primary concern in this paper is to critically reflect on the emerging challenges to the role of civil society, I will draw attention briefly and selectively to the contribution of the role of Naga social organisations, in particular women's groups, in building a broad based peace constituency.

Indeed, in 1997 when the ceasefire was announced, there was limited support for pursuing peace negotiations before unity among the four splintered Naga factions was established. However, within a few years civil society mobilisation in support of peace produced a groundswell of popular support so much so that till a few years ago the two armed protagonists at the table, the Government of India (GoI) and NSCN I-M, were under popular pressure not to walk away from the table, but rather to be accountable to a people that have the historical memory of being betrayed by backroom deals.

At that time, Naga social organisations were able to mediate on behalf of NSCN (I-M) since they had popular acceptance and legitimacy cutting across tribes to negotiate on behalf of all Nagas. The Naga Ho Ho and the United Naga Council, (apex Naga tribal bodies in Nagaland and Manipur), Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Naga Students' Federation (NSF), the Naga Mothers' Association of Nagaland (NMA), and Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) have propagated an inclusive politics, transcending factional and tribal partisanship.

Naga social organisations and the churches have been in the forefront of building a politics of ending factional violence and fostering reconciliation.

Before the ceasefire, at the height of the factional violence, in 1994 Naga social organisations and the churches culled from within their cultural traditions, a ritualistic 'Day of Atonement' and 'Days of Mourning'. At a time when the morning would bring an outcrop of bodies strewn around the bazaar, with people either too terrorised or brutalised to care, the women stepped forward and with the support of the church sought to provide a dignified burial in the ceremonial tribal shawl. These rituals helped people to recognise the dignity of the human being and affirmed the need to respect all human life. This thinking is at the core for building peace and reconciliation. Once the ceasefire was in place, and as the middle ground for civil society activism expanded, the church, social organisations, women's groups and student bodies launched programmes of reconciliation.

As evidence of the influence of Naga social organisations on redefining a more people centric peace process, the 22-member People's Action Committee on the Ceasefire was able to persuade the official Ceasefire Group to review the Ground Rules of the Ceasefire Agreement drafted in 1997 and to include concerns about civilian security, which had been overlooked (Kumar and Murthy 2002: 135-137). In addition, the GoI and the NSCN (I-M) leadership nominated representatives of Naga social groups on the Ceasefire Monitoring Committee. However, the Naga civil society groups insisted on independence in appointing their representatives. Though this was agreed to in principle, no progress has been made to include their representatives. This has not impeded the Naga social organisations from undertaking fact-finding missions to expose gross violations of the ceasefire, and to emphasise accountability and transparency. Moreover, in an effort to awaken the conscience of 'Indian' civil society and build a common solidarity, the Naga social organisations undertook a Gandhian

style Journey of Conscience in 2000, eventually congregating at the Mahatma's Samadhi at Rajghat, Delhi.

Women's Mobilisation for Peace

The peace-building role of women's groups in the Northeast is truly an exceptional one and is a largely unwritten chapter in the history of peace making. Our focus here is primarily on the Naga women's organisations. The NMA, NWUM, and myriad other Naga tribal women's groups have played a key role in mitigating the impact of the violence, negotiating with the security forces to remove army camps from their villages lest they get caught in the crossfire, rushing forward at huge risk to themselves as human shields to protect their 'sons' from being taken away, and standing surety and protesting against human rights violations. Through 'kitchen politics' they appealed to the militant groups not to invite reprisals on their village, "for who after all were they fighting for, if not for them?" Above all, the NMA through the campaign 'Shed No More Blood', steadfastly tried to quell inter-factional violence and open up channels of communication and reconciliation based on a politics of inclusion.

As the women in Jyotsoma village, Nagaland, repeatedly said, "our women's role is to reach across divides, to stop the violence and create the space to enable the growth of understanding and consensus" (ibid: 21). After the ceasefire in 1997, NMA and NWUM reached out to the leaders of the rival factions and provided with some success the safe space for a dialogue, even though the meeting between the leaders of the Khaphlang and Isak-Muivah groups eventually failed to materialise. The women's team had taken the lead in reaching out to Khaphlang in Burma to persuade him to support or at least not disrupt the ceasefire.

In 2003, the NMA re-pledged themselves to *Shed No More Blood*, a testimony to the continuing internecine violence and the determination of the women not to give up. Nearly ten years before it, in 1994, NMA had launched the *Shed No More Blood*

Campaign when bodies were appearing on the streets or the bazaars as a consequence of bitter factional violence and no one dared speak up. NMA sent forth Peace Teams to try and create space for dialogue and reconciliation.

Among the Naga peoples, as well as in the Northeast as a whole, there is social sanction for women's peace building activism rooted in the historical tradition, for example the *demi* (mediators) of the Zelianrong tribe and *pukrelia* of the Tangkul tribe (a woman married to a man from a different village or tribe as such acceptable to all). While these social roots have resulted in some acceptance of women's role as the 'last resort' in stopping the violence, it has been difficult to translate this into authority in the public sphere. Nonetheless, the Naga peace process is unique in that the top leaders of the militant movements recognise the value of women as stakeholders in the peace process and involve them in the structured consultations with the representatives of Naga social organisations, the church and other civil groups.

However, though singular in their iconic status as Women of Peace, they are by no means unique in the Northeast. This region has a long history of women of various ethnic groups being in the forefront of the struggles for peace and justice, acting as shields, negotiating with the security forces and the militants for the safety of their communities, mediating inter-factional violence and emerging as the front line against human rights violations. In Manipur Irom Sharmila Chanu, a latter day Gandhian icon, has been on hunger strike since 2000 though force fed via tubes, in protest against living under a state of violence and, in particular, demanding the repeal of the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958* (AFSPA). For the then young poet, the catalyst was the killing of 10 civilians who were waiting at a bus-stand in Malom near Imphal. They were gunned down by the security forces on suspicion of being insurgents. It was a routine manifestation of the abuse and misuse of the power under the AFSPA to kill any person on mere suspicion of being implicated in the militancy in any form, and to kill with impunity.

Sharmila's grandmother as a young woman was involved in the legendary *Nupi Lan* struggle of the *IMA-KEITHEL* (women market traders) against British regulations on the rice trade. Their children became active as the *Meira Paibis*, the torchbearers who patrolled the streets at night guarding their sons from being picked up at random by the security forces as Manipur splintered into multiple insurgencies. It was one such group of *Meira Paibis* that on July 15, 2004 staged a nude protest outside the camp of the 17th Assam Rifle Battalion against the killing of the 32-year old Thangjam Manorama. Manorama was picked up by the Assam Rifles on an allegation of being an 'explosives expert', was raped and killed. Anger and desperation at the failure to get justice led 12 women to strip naked before the Assam Rifles cantonment, holding aloft the banner, "Indian Army Rape Us".

However, while recognising the potential capabilities of women as a constituency for peace building, it is necessary to be realistic about the limitations. For example, in a romanticisation of "some mother's son", motherhood based peace politics is presented as transcending conflict divides. The Naga women assert boldly "we have no factions!" How true is this? The resurgence in inter-factional conflict and the widening of inter-tribal social fissures in recent months, is a reminder of the many faceted roles of women in conflict, including internalising the social fault lines and even abetting the conflict. For example in the case of bitter ethnic divides between Naga-Kuki and Naga-Meteis, have the women been able to transcend the divide? There have been sporadic initiatives by NMA as well as the NWUM in opening a dialogue. At the local level, for example in Chandel district, Naga, Meitei and Kuki women work together in protesting against hostage taking and providing humanitarian aid to those displaced by the conflict. But there remains the legacy of a bitter trust deficit, reinforced by conflict entrepreneurs or persons with a vested interest in conflicts, who have pitted Nagas against Meteis and Kukis, especially on the contentious issue of the demand for political unification of

the hill territory of the Naga peoples. The populous Meitei of the Manipur Valley are bitterly opposed to any division of their territory. Already, a foretaste of their vulnerability is the Naga imposed economic blockade of the main arterial highway.

The failure to forge a common front for the repeal of the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act* catalysed by the killing of Manorama and the women's protest is a testimony to deep divisions among the ethnic groups. It could have been an opportunity to re-open a channel of communication among the student groups, women's organisations and the human rights bodies of the region. That golden opportunity was lost because of histories of mistrust and the failure to work towards recovering a culture of living together and recognising their mutual interest in working together *vis a vis* the Centre.

North East Student Bodies

Civil bodies are aware of the need to forge a common front against the Indian state to counter their disadvantage and marginalisation. Indeed, apex student bodies of the region such as the North East Students' Organisation (NESO) are well aware that there can be no peace for the Naga peoples unless their neighbours are also at peace. N. S. N. Lotha (2007), speaking for NESO at a Northeast Regional Seminar, emphasised that there was not a single peace initiative in the Northeast which did not have ramifications for another community. A non-violent accommodation had to be found by the people of the region.

Indeed, the student bodies, on occasion, have demonstrated a capacity to recognise the value of a transcendent politics, if not to realise it. For example, during the protracted economic blockade of Manipur's arterial highway by Naga groups, including Naga student bodies, the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) Vice President Imcha Imchen, acknowledged the hardships experienced by the Meteis. However, he defended the blockade as necessary to draw attention to the violation of the human rights of the Nagas.

Eventually, NESO took the initiative to hold a meeting, following which several student bodies of Tripura, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh sent appeals. As a result, the economic blockade was relaxed temporarily after 52 days (NE Peace Initiatives 2005).

Enabling Civil Society Participation: State and Non-State

The role of civil society in the peace process hinges on the acceptance of that role by the state and non-state actors. In a sense, the civil society groups have to have recognition by the armed protagonists to include them, if not at the main ‘peace table’ then at a secondary peace table, i.e. speaking euphemistically about the negotiations in reaching a peace settlement. The Naga peace process has space for the recognition of civil society, particularly from the perspective of one of the main negotiating parties, the NSCN (I-M). There have been a series of structured consultations with civil society representatives. Within the culture of the Nagas there is social legitimacy for indigenous ‘peace activism’ by social organisations, especially women’s groups.

However, it has been difficult to carry this social legitimacy outside the cultural context of the North Eastern communities. The Government of India and the institutions of the state have not given any recognition to the peace-building capacities of these groups, particularly those of women. In 2003, when I interviewed General Kulkarni, then head of the Ceasefire Monitoring Cell for the Naga peace process, he categorically stated that there was no need to consult with the NPMHR, NMA and NSF for the simple reason that, as he said “They are only the mouthpieces of the militants”. This is all the more ironic as General Kulkarni, when he served as army commander in Mokokchung, worked with the local women’s groups to mitigate the impact of violence, diffuse tensions and create a more peaceful atmosphere for elections.

In contrast, Padmanabhaiah, former Home Secretary and later the Central Government’s special representative at the Naga Peace talks, acknowledged the important role of Naga civil society in

injecting realism into the demands of the NSCN (I-M). Also, civil society pressure kept the talks from being derailed.² In the last couple of years, Naga civil society backing for the peace process has taken a severe battering. In the face of the deadlock in the talks and the disillusionment that followed, the NSCN (I-M) leadership is increasingly distancing itself from engaging with civil society groups and is becoming less and less transparent. Indeed, the implications of the failure to structurally integrate civil society participation in the peace process is becoming evident in the latest phase of the official peace talks.

Meanwhile, the government has demonstrated its lack of political will to deliver on the 11-year-old peace process. Instead, it has concentrated its energies on using the tried and tested policy of dividing the Nagas and manipulating their vulnerability to violent tribal factionalism. The return to the state policy of ‘divide and rule’ is accompanied by the shrinking space of tolerance for dissenting civil society voices as evidenced in the arrest of Lachit Bordoloi, an Assamese journalist, adviser of the human rights organisation *Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti* (MASS), and member of the

² Taking a different tack, Radha Kumar (2008) of the Nelson Mandela Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace, argued that in India, people (civil society) engaged in peace processes had a greater impact on formal negotiations, as compared to ‘people’ in Israel and Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo or even Ireland. She cited the example, of the improvement in relations between India and Pakistan, and in particular the thaw on Jammu and Kashmir. Two factors were responsible, one, the nuclear tests and the international pressure on both governments as well as dissident groups in J&K. The other was the sustained efforts of Pakistani civil society over the last ten years, to the present phase of the composite ‘official’ dialogue. Symbolic of the changed environment was the establishment of the Srinagar-Muzzafrabad bus service. “It was an old idea that was revived

People's Consultative Group. If there was any persisting ambiguity, the *Mail Today*, Feb 13, 2008, quotes an anonymous Home Ministry source (likely to be Madhukar Gupta, the Home Secretary) as saying, "We do not want the civil society representatives to be involved in the peace process. We want to dialogue directly with the armed groups."

Clearly we need to recognise and strategise against what may be a new policy turn. However, these developments also call upon us to reflect on whether civil society groups in the Northeast actually do represent the 'space in the middle' or, are they as General Kulkarni described them, 'mouthpieces' of the militants?

Interrogating 'Competing Notions' of Civil Society in Peace building.

Historically speaking, in peace processes, the protagonists, state and non-state actors, are focused on working out a realignment of power. It is civil society that has been known to bring in a rights and accountability agenda, i.e. pushing for the establishment of substantive not only procedural democracy, asserting the rights of the socially discriminated and economically disempowered and calling for an end to impunity and demanding justice. It is civil society that provides strategic depth to the peace question and makes it something more than a closure on violent conflict, and makes it forward looking in terms of what should be built in its place. However, in the Northeast, in an environment structured around violent polarised politics and murky dealings, can civil society groups resist being appropriated by either state or non-state actors?

The Naga ceasefire and peace process had held out the promise of the 'middle space' expanding and civil society playing a significant role in strengthening and democratising that process. Today, that promise is being vitiated daily by the discrediting of the peace process and the subversion of the ceasefire by the surge of inter-factional violence, and by state agencies propping up splinter political groups in the old game of dividing and co-opting factions.

In Assam, the promising demarche of the PCG which included not only Lachit Bordoloi but also the highly respected and sincere Assamese *littérateur*, Indira Goswami, has been discredited by state agencies. More worrisome is the strong suspicion that in Assamese public discourse, the PCG is viewed with ambiguity. The question raised is "Who or what civil society do these people represent?" In Manipur, the mobilisation around the AFSPA catalysed by the killing of Manorama Devi and the 'nude' women's protest is in danger of becoming only an NGO activity. The spontaneous mobilisation of the Meira Paibis and Apunba Lup around the issue has got mired in the skullduggery of the politics of the agencies and myriad militant groups. The civil society groups in the Northeast have failed to transcend their parochial politics to forge a common platform against the AFSPA, a symbol of State military oppression of the rights of the peoples of the region.

The 'competing notions' of civil society groups raised at the Seminar on "Situating NGOs & Civil Society in Conflict Prevention and Peace Building"³ strikes at the very heart of some disquieting questions raised then and at other public forums, as for example, raised by this author in the Panel on Women and Peace Building at the National Conference of Women's Organisations, in Kolkata in July 2007. They centre around the issue of the 'autonomy' of civil society actors from the state and non-state actors. The paradox of the situation rests in the fact that in these internal conflicts, 'Civil Society' is an integral part of the dissenting front against the state, both regarding the grievances at the heart of the conflict and opposition to the abuse of state power. For civil society to play an effective role it needs to maintain that middle ground which expands during the ceasefire and the peace process, since both state and non-state protagonists seek political legitimacy by controlling that space.

It is important to remind ourselves that the civil society has

³ " *Seminar Report: Situating NGOs & Civil Society in Conflict Prevention and Peace Building Work*, " National Foundation of

a key role to play in legitimising the ‘peace process’. However, it is equally important to bear in mind that as middle space for politics begins to widen, in the wake of ceasefire and the opening up of a political dialogue, both state and non-state actors will seek to appropriate that space. As Bhagat Oinam (2008) a scholar of the NE, expressing his scepticism about the capacity of the Civil Society Organisations (CSO) to strengthen democracy argued, in the Northeast civil society organisations were at risk of being appropriated by one or the other non-state actor. He cited the example of one of the stronger civil society organisations, the Naga Ho Ho. In 2001–02 many members of the Naga Hoho were obliged to resign because of tactical differences with the NSCN (IM) relating to the prioritisation of issues of ‘political settlement’ rather than ‘ethnic reconciliation’. The resignation led to NSCN (IM) taking complete control of a body belonging to civil society.

However, on other occasions the Naga civil society organisations have resisted and asserted their independence from the NSCN (IM). In 2002 the civil society ‘Action Committee on Monitoring the Ceasefire’ rejected the proposal of the parties of the official Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, GoI and NSCN (I-M) to decide which civil society representatives would find a place at the table (NPMHR 2002; Manchanda 2004: 54-55). Interestingly, this is in contrast to the Sri Lanka peace process, where civil society acquiesced in the decision of the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) nominating members to the Gender sub-committee.

More insidious has been the effort of state agencies and non-state groups to de-legitimise ‘independent’ or troublesome civil society voices or undermine civil society mobilisation by casting aspersions on the personal integrity of the individual or individuals involved, or on the authenticity of the claims by members of civil organisations of gross human rights violation. One of the most notorious incidents in the annals of India human rights advocacy and documentation is the mass rape of Kashmiri women in

Kunan Poshpara, which the Indian army went to great lengths to discredit as fiction by facilitating a highly controversial Press Council fact-finding report.⁴ More recently, in the Northeast, state agencies sought to discredit the civil society campaign catalysed by the custodial torture, rape and killing of Manorma Devi.⁵ The state insisted that Thangjam Manorama was a hardcore People’s Liberation Army militant who had tried to flee from custody. Civil society bodies protesting the illegal custodial killing were accused of ‘supporting’ the insurgent movement. Moreover, the nude protest of 12 elderly Manipuri women in front of Kangla Fort in Imphal, shouting at the Assam Rifles “Indian Army, Rape us”, was sought to be discredited by the state, with the national media blindly following, decrying the protest as engineered by the insurgents who had paid the women to disrobe. Paradoxically, the de-legitimation campaign found some supporters among women activists in the Northeast who criticised the sensationalism of the nude protests.

In the murky environs of manipulative politics by multiple agencies of the state and non-state actors, ‘authentic voices’ are at a great risk of being de-legitimised and physically ‘eliminated’ as evident in the history of the conflicts in the Northeast, Kashmir and Sri Lanka. The autonomy and integrity of civil society interventions in support of democracy and rights, has to be asserted in a brutalised and highly intolerant environment.

Further complicating the field of civil society, is the proliferation of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) involved in peace building. Akum Lonchari, editor *The Morung Express*, at the Seminar on “Situating NGOs & Civil Society” (NFI 2006) drew attention to the more than 700 NGOs that had come into

⁴ The press Council sent a fact finding team that included the highly respected journalist B G Verghese to investigate the incident. See “crisis and Credibility”, New Delhi 2001. For a critical analysis see my chapter on India in Article 19 study “War of Words: Conflict & Freedom of Expression” .pp 214-216 <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publication/asia-war-of-words.pdf>

⁵ I am indebted to Bhagat Oinam for this analysis of the Manorma Devi incident.

existence since the 1997 ceasefire agreement between the GoI and NSCN (I-M). “Who do they represent?” he asked. Lonchari emphasised the need to distinguish between CSOs and NGOs. Indeed, analysts like Arjuna Parakrama argue that the Sri Lanka peace process 2002-2006, saw a serious de-legitimisation of civil society groups, which were regarded as part of an ‘alienated’ NGO-civil society community.

Conclusion

Civil society groups have a crucial role to play in democratic peace building and in the healing of their societies in conflict zones. But if they are to effectively play that role, there is need for urgent self-introspection, to engage with the issue of autonomy. This is notwithstanding the extremely difficult and challenging environments in which they must work and live. What makes it even more difficult is that the autonomy argument is also used by state agencies to discredit civil society organisations and prevent them from doing their vital work.

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