

Concept Note: Seminar on History in the Northeast as a source of Conflicts and of Peace Initiatives. Guwahati, October 27-29, 2009

Northeast India is the abode of many ethnic groups ranging from the Meitei-Pangal, Naga, Kuki and Mizo in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland to the Garo and Khasi in Meghalaya, the Boro, Karbi, Assamese, Tai Ahom, Rabha and Dimasa of Assam to the Aka, Adi, Nyishi and others in Arunachal and Tripura. The Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys and the hill areas have distinct cultures, traditions and histories but have co-existed for many centuries amid peace and cordial relations combined with conflicts as well as social, economic, cultural and political dependence or inter-dependence. In the past there were conflicts around land and power. They have got intensified during the last one century.

Diversity becomes a problem when inequalities are based on cultural or racial differences or when groups perceive each other as a threat to their identity. Identity assertion is often based on contesting claims over a homeland, territory or other resources. The rise of a dominant community adds to the threat and results in an atmosphere of mistrust and fear of domination. From it grows a feeling of vengeance. The threat has heightened in the wake of land and other shortages. Amid the ensuing conflicts groups articulate their identity in linguistic, cultural and ethnic terms. Increasingly the elite turn the cultural systems, values and practices into tools of competition for political or economic power.

That explains why poverty, along with weak governments and lack of efforts to address the ethnic problems and developmental issues has resulted in a period of instability and armed struggles. Thus, apart from identity, land, economic benefits, immigration and ethnic discrimination, basic to the conflicts is the failure of the State institutions, lack of a national identity and a low level of state legitimacy. Insecurity grows among the people because of the conflicts that affect all groups but have a greater impact on the youth. Because of fear enveloping their society the democratic institutions make no sense to most people, especially the youth. A gap is thus created between the communities. The imposition of a dominant will on the remaining communities can further widen this gap.

History has been a tool in this interaction on one side in protecting the identity of the people and on the other in antagonising them from each other. Each community uses history for its own good without taking the genuine rights of the others into account. Each community has rewritten exclusive histories of itself that speak of its own rights to the exclusion of the rest. That shows the need to have a mature intellectual debate on this issue in order to make a contribution to sustainable peace. A possible alternative is a composite history that shifts the focus from conflicts to interactions between different communities, both cooperative and divisive. Today the focus is on divisive relations alone. That shows the need to take a new look at the history of the Northeast and take steps towards a possible composite history that moves away from the exclusive ethnic histories which legitimise conflicts. A composite history will not solve the problems that result in ethnic conflicts in the region but can be an important step towards a solution. This step can support the initiatives of many civil society groups that have played an important role in addressing the causes of ethnic conflicts in the region.

Thus, most ethnic conflicts emanate from ethnic consciousness and nationalist aspirations. Many of them are around land that is not only an economic commodity but also the centre of the culture and identity of most communities of the region. Since identity, land and other resources are inseparable, identity assertion is central to the effort to protect the natural resources. Ethnic movements often supported and legitimised through exclusive ethnic histories

are thus means of asserting one's right over the resources. Every community uses these ethnic histories meant to protect its livelihood to declares itself the first inhabitants of a given area. Based on it the community demands exclusive rights over its resources and benefits. Thus, what causes conflicts is not history as such but the search for an exclusive identity because of economic shortages and attacks on their culture. History only legitimises the conflicts. That shows the need to take a new look at the history of the Northeast and take steps towards a composite history that moves away from this exclusive approach and understand inter-dependence.

Search for Alternatives

With this in view the participants of the seminar on peace and conflicts organised by North Eastern Social Research Centre on October 16-17, 2007 suggested that an umbrella be provided for persons who are in a position to take steps towards a composite history of the region. They hoped that through a long process that will take many years, a few steps will be taken towards a history that unites the ethnic groups instead of dividing them and taking them towards conflicts. The participants suggested that NESRC take the initiative in bringing such persons together for initial discussion. As a first step they suggested a series of seminars in each State of the region to bring together scholars, peace activists and community leaders for a reflection on the conflicts and the role of history in them.

The seminar of October 14-15, 2007 came after ten seminars held in different states of the region (Table 1). Eight seminars were held during 2008 (Table 2) in preparation for a national seminar on *The Role of History in Conflicts and as a Tool of Peace in the Northeast* being proposed in this project for the first week of October 2009. The above seminars as well as the one that is proposed are meant to be a platform for civil society groups and for scholars in history and other social sciences to come together in search of a common understanding of their society. It is hoped that this discussion will continue in the form of a search for a composite history of the Northeast as support to peace.

A composite history of the Northeast will not solve the problems that result in ethnic conflicts but can be an important step towards a solution to them. This step can support the initiatives of many civil society groups that have played an important role in addressing the causes of ethnic conflicts in the region. With this in view the participants of the seminar on peace and conflicts, held in October 2007 suggested that an umbrella be provided for persons who are in a position to take steps towards a composite history of the Northeast. It is hoped that through a long process that will take many years, a few steps will be taken towards a history that unites the different ethnic instead of dividing them. The participants suggested that North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) take the initiative in bringing such persons together for initial discussion. With that in view they suggested a series of seminars in each State of the region to bring together scholars, peace activists and community leaders for a reflection on the conflicts and the role of history in them. The present project is its follow up.

Steps Taken till Now

Ten seminars were held during 2007 in preparation for the above region level seminar on peace processes in the Northeast. We had realised by then that most states had many peace activists but they do not know each other. So the objective of these seminars was to bring them together state by state under the same roof for a day or two to share their experiences and find ways of coordinating their work. No effort was made to coordinate them. We only provided an

umbrella for them to share experiences. It was for them to decide whether and how they wanted to work together (list in Table 1).

Table 1: Seminars on Peace Initiatives Organised by NESRC in 2007

No.	Title	Place	Dates	Partner
01.	Peace Initiatives, Khasi Hills	Shillong	April 26, 2007	MLCU
02.	Peace Process in Manipur	Imphal	June 9, 2007	DSSS, Imphal
03.	Peace Process in Nagaland	Dimapur	June 30, 2007	Peace Channel
04.	Students in the Peace Process	Tura	June 16, 2007	None
05.	Students' Role in Peace	Shillong	July 14, 2007	None
06.	Land-related conflict in Tripura	Agartala	August 4-5, 2007	ASHA
07.	Land conflicts, Karbi Anglong	Diphu	August 11, 2007	Jirsong Asong
08.	Peace in the Garo Hills	Tura	August 13, 2007	None
09.	Students in Peace Initiatives	Kohima	Sept. 29, 2007	Peace Channel
10.	Migration & Conflicts	Silchar	Oct. 4, 2007	Assam University
11.	Conflicts & Peace in NE	Guwahati	Oct. 14-15, 2007	None

These meetings culminated in the seminar of October 14-15, 2007. Its participants felt that each group in conflicts wrote its own ethno-centric history to legitimise the conflict. A decision was therefore taken to follow up with seminars on history. That was done during 2008 in different states (Table 2). As a follow up two regional seminars are being planned in 2009. The first of them will be a meeting of peace activists from five states of the Northeast on May 7-8, 2009. It will be a continuation of the thirteen seminars held in 2007 and 9 in 2008.

Table 2: Seminars held January to September 2008 & Planned in 2009

Sl. No	Place	Month/Date		
01	Follow up Planning	NESRC, Guwahati	8 th January, 2008	None
02	History of Conflicts	Diphu College	9 th February, 2008	Jirsong Asong
03	Garo-Khasi Conflicts	Shillong	29 th March, 2008	MLCU
04	Conflicts in Manipur	Maram, Senapati	22-23 Apr. 2008	DBC, Maram
05	Conflicts in Nagaland	Kohima	26 th July, 2008	Nagaland Univ.
06	Conflicts in Manipur	Imphal	28 th July, 2008	CEPEM, MU
07	Conflicts in Assam	Tezpur	18 th August, 2008	Tezpur Univ.
08	Garo-Khasi Conflict	Tura	3-4 September 08	MLCU
09	History and Conflicts	Moranhat	September 7, 08	Inst of Tai Studies
10.	Peace Activists Meet	Guwahati	May 7-8, 2009	None
11.	Composite NE History	Guwahati	October 2009	Planned

The second is the region level history seminar being proposed in this project. The search for an alternative will continue at the proposed seminar which will be held around three themes each of which will be coordinated by a scholar who will prepare a concept paper on it and identify three or four scholars to write papers on it. More persons will then be invited from the possible invitee list given below. Priority will be given to persons chosen by the coordinators

even outside this list. More will be invited in consultation with them from the list to participate or present papers.

1. Ethnic identity and the role of history in the Northeast.
2. The role of history in various conflicts in the Northeast.
3. Methodology of writing history as a tool for peace building.

Tentative list of participants:

Dr Joy L. K. Pachua, JNU, New Delhi
Dr Sanghamitra Misra, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi
Dr Sanghamitra Choudhury, New Delhi
Prof. Patrick Hoenig, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi
Dr George Thadathil, Principal, Sonada College, Darjeeling district
Dr Anungla Aier, Women's Studies Division, Nagaland University
Dr. Abraham Lotha, St Joseph's College, Jakhama, Nagaland.
Visakonu Hibo. Head, Dept. of Sociology, Japfu College, Kigwema, Nagaland
C. P. Anto, Director, Peace Channel, Dimapur, Nagaland
Dr Kedilezho Kikhi, Nagaland University
Prof. Alphonsus D'Souza (Retd) formerly of Phesama, Nagaland
Prof. David Syiemlieh, NEHU, Shillong.
Dr Glenn Christo, VC, Martin Luther Christian University.
Dr Philip Abraham, Dawagre, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya.
Dr C. J. Thomas, Director, ICSSR-NERC
Dr Anthony Kaba, Department of History, Don Bosco College, Maram, Manipur
Dr Leban Serto, CEPEM, Manipur University;
Dr Deben Sharma, Peace Studies, Manipur
B Loitongbam, Imphal
B. Nattar, Manipur Government College, Imphal
Dr Robert Tiba, Dept. of History, Diphu campus, Assam University
Dr Sajal Nag, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar
Dr Chandan Sharma, Dept of Sociology, Tezpur University.
Dr K. Kabhi, Dept. of Mass Communications, Tezpur university.
Prof. M. N. Karna, Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University
Prof. Girin Phukan, Dept. of Political Science, Dibrugarh University;
Dr Dwijen Barman, Lecturer, Putimari College, Kamrup Rural district.
Dr Jayanta Sarmah, Nowgong Girls' College, Nagaon
Dr Gorky Chakravarty, Doom Dooma College, Tinsukia, Assam.
Dr Debabrata Sarmah, Jorhat College, Jorhat;
Dr Jerry Thomas, Principal, Don Bosco College, Jorhat;
Dr Yankahao Vashum, Eastern Theological College, Jorhat.
Dr Dilip Gogoi, Cotton College, Guwahati
Dr Sanjay Barbora, Panos South Asia, Guwahati.
Dr Nani Gopal Mahanta, Dept. of Pol. Sc. Guwahati University.
Dr Priyam Goswami, Dept. of History, Guwahati University
Dr Uttam Bathari, Deputy Director, ICHR-NERC, Guwahati
Ms Elizabeth Devi, Omeo Kumar Das ISCD, Guwahati

Prof. Anuradha Dutta, Omeo Kumar Das ISCD, Guwahati
Mangneo Lhungdim, Regional Manager, IGSSS, Guwahati
Dr Thomas Menampampil, Guwahati
Dr Catherine Chopefosa, NEDSF, Guwahati
Santiago Savari, Director, NEDSF, Guwahati
Prof. (Retd) Udayon Misra, Dibrugarh University (Guwahati)
Tom Mangattathuzhe, Diphu Citizens' Forum for Peace, Karbi Anglong
Ms Meghali Senapati, TISS-NERC, Guwahati
Dr Swabera Islam, K. C. Das Commerce College, Guwahati
Dr Archana Sharma, Director, Women's Study Division, Gauhati University
Pranab Jyoti Neog, Director, Xavier Foundation, Guwahati.
Students from the Department of History, Gauhati University
Department of History, Assam University, Silchar
Department of History, Dibrugarh University
Department of Sociology, Tezpur university
Department of History, Cotton College, Gauhati
Department of History, Handique College, Guwahati
Department of History, B. Borooah College, Guwahati