

Report of the Seminar: The Role of History in Conflicts and Peace Processes in Northeast India, October 27-28. Organised by North Eastern Social Research Centre in Collaboration with Indian Council of Historical Research

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The Origin of the Seminar

This seminar is an offshoot of a series of seminars held in the Northeast in the context of ethnic conflicts. At a Northeast level seminar held on October 15-16, 2007, the participants felt that most ethnic communities of the region tried to rewrite their history to proclaim themselves the indigenous peoples of a given area as such having exclusive rights over it. This exclusive claim is at the basis of most ethnic conflicts in the region. It was, therefore, decided to make an effort to analyse the use of history in ethnic conflicts that divide people, take a look at the tradition of positive and negative interaction between the communities of the region. A look at the possibility of a composite history that shows this interaction was the objective of the process.

Based on this suggestion, North Eastern Social Research Centre joined other agencies in organising state or local level seminars on the role of history in conflicts and peace processes in the Northeast. Two such seminars were held in Manipur, two in Nagaland, one in Tripura, two in Meghalaya and one each at Assam University, Silchar, at Dibrugarh, Tezpur University and Guwahati. Most participants felt that this was a laudable exercise which has to be pursued but that the first step should be to take a new look at local histories. Accordingly, when this seminar was planned, focus was on local histories and the possibility of bringing them together.

Commitment came for 20 papers but the scholar from Nagaland could not come because of problems in the university. We have not been able to open the paper he sent. Dr Sanghamitra Misra had to cancel her trip at the last moment because of illness in the family. Prof. Sajal Nag of Assam University had sent his paper but his and Dr Robert Tiba's flight was cancelled. However Tiba's joint paper was presented by Dr Thomas Kaba of Maram, Manipur. There were last minute cancellations from Agartala, Itanagar, Imphal and Aizawl.

The Beginning of the Seminar

The seminar began with a welcome address by Dr. Walter Fernandes, Director of NESRC. In his introduction to the seminar he explained how history is more often than not the story written by the conquerors and goes against the conquered. Applying this to the ethnic conflicts of the Northeast he emphasised the importance of re-writing history not by changing facts but by giving all facts and interpreting the events based on the totality. Thus, rewriting does not involve erasing the already extant narratives but adding another dimension to them that many histories have excluded. He referred to the dominant historiography of India in general and the Northeast in particular. Different communities weave their history around their victories and thus invoke their golden past, forgetting that one group's victory is another community's defeat. So the golden era of one community becomes the dark age of another. That shows the need for a composite approach to history. Some steps in this direction was the objective of the seminar.

Dr. Thomas Menamparampil, Archbishop of Guwahati, in his chairman's remarks deliberated upon the importance of the making of objective history and its role in building peace and confidence among the people of the Northeast. He dwelt upon the role of history as a mirror to a particular community's strengths and weaknesses and added that, history is intertwined with the sensitivity of a community. As a result, there cannot be a single monolithic history. A community should always be interconnected and that can help with peace with others.

After his remarks the chairperson invited Prof. David R. Syiemlieh of North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong to deliver the keynote address. After repeating that the seminar was an offshoot of a series of seminars, Prof. Syiemlieh emphasised the need to continue such an interaction between academics and social activists. He added that the history of the region which goes back to millennia is not one of conflicts alone but also of a great amount of harmony, peace and happiness overarching the perennial intergroup conflicts. People grew in their own genius though isolated at times. Very few places in this world have such diverse peoples living in near proximity of each other as in the Northeast. The region is the melting pot of cultures from mainland India and further east. Amid this diversity conflicts existed but harmony pervaded the conflicts. He argued that history is made in the mind of the historian and it can be used for positive as well as negative effects. In making this history, one does not give all of the past. The historian selects a few strands from the past and weaves them into an account. But the manner of selecting the significant events has its inherent problems. He illustrated it by showing how World War II had its origin in the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I. But history written by the victor does not mention it. Some histories are emerging today that analyse the role of different actors. That can be a tool of better understanding among peoples.

He explained why history is re-written constantly. After making a distinction between the past, history and historiography he showed how in a conflict, the innocent people suffer the most. He referred to ethnicity in the Northeast and gave examples from world history to explain the danger of exclusivist claims. He added that the Northeast must not be allowed to go the way of the Balkans or Africa. Explaining the complex interaction between folklore history and identity assertion in the region Prof Syiemlieh laid stress on the role of the historian in constructing histories from oral traditions and suggested an approach for combining the local-micro with the composite. That can be a tool in developing respect of the "other" which is part of a process of peace. The inaugural session ended with a vote of thanks by Ankur Tamuli Phukan of NESRC.

History and Conflicts

During the first technical session chaired by Dr. Rena Laisram, Dr. Suryasikha Pathak reflected on the Bodo Movement, the upheaval it caused and on its causes. Most writers situate the movement in post-independence developments like the failure of successive governments to address the problems of the Bodo, the rise of PTCA and non-accommodation of Bodo aspirations by the AGP government formed after the Assam Accord. These causes definitely added to the problem but through that it was a fallacy to make the Bodo identity movement co-terminus with ABSU movement as many writers do. The appropriation and rejection of a certain history played a major role in Bodo identity assertion. One such tool is colonial historiography which became a double-edged sword appropriated both by the state and the burgeoning Bodo middle class.

In his paper “Federalism and Identity in Northeast India: A Tale of Woes and Courage” Dr. Patrick Hoenig gave a short history of federalism in India and added that the adoption of the liberal economy in the place of a mixed economy has opened a new phase of federalism. The Tata Nano plant successfully won by Gujarat is a pointer in this direction. Various experiments in the Northeast to accommodate the aspirations of different communities such as creation of new states has far from solving its problems, has multiplied them. He provided a hypothetical model of the region as one unit restructured into different federal units to reduce conflicts.

Mr Uttam Bathari, Assistant Director, ICHR presented a paper “History and Memory: Identity Movement and Political Aspirations of the Dimasas.” He felt that though political marginalisation and economic underdevelopment are the main reasons of Dimasa identity movements, they draw inspiration also from the past. As there is a tension between people’s memory and the academic discipline of history which is almost silent on the past of communities like the Dimasa, a political assertion of it is both against the state and against history. Narrating different phases of the Dimasa identity movement he explained why their leaders decided not to join Meghalaya and later form ASDC in which the Karbi and Dimasa fought side by side for an autonomous state. Giving an account of the beginning and various phases of the insurgency in the N. C. Hills, he emphasised the need to understand that the identity movement is based on the claim of the past and disjuncture caused by the near absence of a written history. Amid this silence, texts produced by the colonial ethnographers become sources of written history and are sometimes appropriated by the movement leaders. He then presented a possible new paradigm of writing history that takes the vast genre of ballads, folksongs, *murithai*, folktales, hymns and riddles into account as historical sources through which the past has been transmitted from generation to generation. Such sources can be analysed in order to move towards another history.

Complexities of History

In the second technical session chaired by Dr. Patrick Hoenig, Dr. Leban Serto spoke on the complexities of interaction between education, history, perception of identity and conflicts. Education is an important component of governance and its long term effects can be felt in different identity movements. He situated his narrative on Manipur in its educational system and the assertion of identity around the historical event of the burning of the old Meitei holy books, the Puyas. This perceived anniversary is observed as a black day in an effort to revive the old script. Violence is associated with this effort. He then described the role of different student bodies which are divided on ethnic and ideological lines, the politics they play and their link with the larger politics of the ethnic groups. Then he took a critical look at the revivalist movements like Operation New Kangleipak that often use means like economic blockade. He also discussed the causes and effects of the growing divide between the Hills and the Valley in Manipur.

Ms Vunghauniang Tungum, lecturer, MLCU, Shillong presented “Knowledge and Attitudes of one’s tribe and others in the Northeast: A Survey of MSW Students, MLCU.” This study sought to assess students’ knowledge of their own tribe, what they have learnt about other tribes at school and college, their capacity to identify the evaluation of their own tribe and their relationship with other tribes. She made a comparative analysis of tribes like Naga vs Kuki, Khasi vs Garo on their attitude towards each other. She pointed out that this understanding can help one to analyse the past incidents that have caused tension between the tribes. Based on her

findings she concluded that for better inter-group relations one has to use means such as preserving the diversity of the region through the tribal council and others, good school and college syllabi and cultural functions where people from diverse backgrounds meet.

Dr. Anthony Kaba, Lecturer, Don Bosco College, Maram in his paper “The Naga-Kuki Conflict in Manipur and Suggested Steps for Peace Initiative” described the Naga-Kuki conflict as century old. It began with the invasion of the land of the Nagas. He used British sources to substantiate his assertions. He referred to the Zeliangrong movement under Rani Gaidenlieu that spoke of the need for a new religion to overthrow the British administration. He connected the conflict also to the desire of the Nagas to avenge the loss of their land and to reclaim what they had lost to the Kukis. That movement was strengthened by the formation of Nagaland. He dwelt on the role of the Kuki, various militant groups, the role of the Indian Army and the demand for a homeland. He considered the 1992-97 Naga-Kuki conflict a culmination of these processes.

Use of History

In the third technical session chaired by Dr. Jayanta Sarma Dr. Abraham Lotha dwelt on “The Role of History in Conflicts and Peace in Nagaland.” He stated that history is not merely a sequence of past events but is rather the construction of the present with a representation of the past. That also makes it the site of conflict, violence and war but it can also be a tool of resolving conflicts and creating cooperation. A history of oppression and mistrust makes co-operation difficult. He then described the unique Naga history as different from Indian history. That was not recognised for a long time in the post-colonial period due to the Indo-Naga conflict. In this context he situated his own experience of peace building and measures taken up by Naga villages based on historical memories. He felt that it can be a model for using history to build peace.

Dr Deben Sharma in “The Role of History in Conflicts and Peace Processes in the North Eastern Region” said that the perception of history has ranged from a useless act to a cranial exercise for refinement and greater understanding of human society. He discussed the concepts like ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ in history as playing a role in thwarting or aggravating conflicts. Taking Manipur as an example he showed how collective memories of violence and wrong committed by the “other” had acted as fodder in fuelling inter-ethnic conflicts. That is seen in the Meitei-Naga, Kuki-Naga, Kuki-Paitei, Maring-Koibu and other conflicts. All of them have their roots in the history of hegemonization of one group by the other. He also described Meira Houchonga, a revivalist festival that provides a space for togetherness, cultural exchange and peace. In the past this feast was the annual day for the hill tribes to pay tribute to Meitei Kings.

Writing a New History

The fourth technical session chaired by Dr. Meeta Deka continued the search for a solution. Chandan Sarmah thought that the politics of identity and recognition is shaped by a particular version of the past which sometimes survives as social memory. A particular memory is then constructed and used as an instrument of social mobilisation or identity building. Historians with a reflective mind must realise the impact of the politics of recognition on the historical practice both on popular and professional history. With the emerging politics of recognition on the part of the ethnic communities, the earlier history texts written in the period of

ascendancy of the regional and linguistic elite who wanted a nationalist reconstruction of the events to prove the antiquity of the dominant linguistic identities has given way to multiple narratives of the past enriched by pluralistic perspectives. The hitherto unrepresented and marginalised groups who remained silent without a state and written records as a point of reference for writing history want to be incorporated in the historical life of the nation. Hence, new alternative narratives are emerging. The way of constituting historical knowledge has to become sensitive to their aspirations for their own histories and has to change in response to them. The present politics of ethno-nationalism with demands of exclusive homelands and autonomy in the Northeast has led to a vicious cycle of violent ethnic clashes that have also impacted the way the past of the ethnic groups is constructed. Instead of the history of a shared past, a brand of highly ethnicised and exclusive perception of the past is being disseminated. For a peaceful future and common existence of the inhabitants of the region a composite history of sharing and cultural exchange must be on the agenda for writing the history of North East India.

Ms. Elizabeth Devi dwelt on different aspects of the turmoil in the Northeast, described some community-based conflicts in the region and asked whether history repeats itself and whether many ethnic conflicts have their roots in old enmities. Wars were frequent among the communities in the past but in case of too much bloodshed they had also evolved mechanisms of peace negotiations and conflict resolution. These mechanisms got embedded in their cultures and were effective in the past. She described some such traditions prevalent among the Kuki, Karbi and Tangkhul and concluded that colonialism and modernity have changed them. She, therefore, felt the need to write a new history based on the tradition of the Northeast and of modernising it.

In the post-lunch session of the second day chaired by Dr. Suryasikha Pathak, Dr. Jayanta Sarma spoke on the ecological approaches of reinterpreting history. He showed with examples the ecological reasons behind different identity movements and inter-communal clashes. He explained the Naga-Kuki conflict in terms of different cultivation methods. He also explained how climate change would have long term effects in the ethnic compositions of the region and gave examples of peaceful co-existence through a sharing of common resources. One of the examples was Dong a traditional water harvesting system used extensively in the Darrang and Sonitpur districts. He showed how consensus was reached and thought of it as a positive view of ethnicity in the region. Dr. Rena Laisram emphasised the need for objective history and Dr. Anthony Kaba narrated the Naga history of struggle against the Indian state.

Reaction and Conclusions

Time was allotted in every session for questions and reactions from the participants. Many too an active part in it and appreciated the search for a new history. But there was also a feeling that some papers gave a one-sided history of conflicts, not of the role played by history in them. For example, when persons belonging to a tribe in conflict discussed the conflict, they presented the type of history that blamed the other tribe alone. Similarly, in the presentation of nationalist struggles, the history as perceived by one of the parties in conflict was presented rather than the role that such a history had played in perpetuating or causing the conflict. A few persons also too an exclusive view of these struggles as anti-national or secessionist alone without understanding the situations that led to them. These are precisely the type of histories that legitimise ethnic conflicts in the region. The overall opinion was that, one should understand

the situations that led to these conflicts and the role such histories have played in legitimising the conflicts. One needs an understanding of their role, not repetition of exclusive histories.

Such presentations were exceptions rather than the rule. Beginning from the keynote address, most writers kept to the norm of a search for a composite history. Most of them agreed with the keynote speaker that one should begin with local histories and see how each community had interacted with its neighbours in the past and how this relationship has changed over the last one century. One would, then, find a history of mixed interaction, conflicts with harmony, not any exclusive relationship. One would also find traditional conflict resolution mechanisms as well as exclusive claims. Some felt that most ethnic communities have modernised the exclusive claims and applied them to the present situation but have not updated the traditional conflict resolution and peace building mechanisms. That history should be written at the local level at first. After it this history should be extended step by step to the whole region.

In the concluding session, Dr. Surjyasikha Pathak gave a brief summary of the proceedings of the sessions and initiated a discussion on how to take the findings to the real field and to the professional world. The chairperson Dr Walter Fernandes invited a few persons to react to this summary and to the seminar as a whole. Most agreed with the summary. Some felt the absence of persons from states like Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The chairperson too felt that these states should have been represented. In fact, persons were invited but many had to drop out at the last minute because of the political situation in the state (Manipur), problems in the university (Nagaland) and other engagements in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Tripura.

It was decided that persons who had agreed to come but could not be present should be requested to write papers for the publication to be brought out within a year. Dr Walter Fernandes accepted this suggestion willingly and requested all the paper writers to revise their papers according to the objective of the seminar and the feedback coming from the participants. They need to keep a clear distinction between unique and exclusive histories and analyse the role of history in conflicts and peace processes and not give the history of the conflict. Some others suggested that the participants should carry the project forward through research and other methods. The consensus was that it is for each individual university or institution to take up these projects. But they can keep in touch with each other in order to do it in a coordinated manner. NESRC cannot coordinate them but would be prepared to provide one opportunity every year for the scholars and peace activists from the region to come together to share their findings. Other universities too can take similar initiatives at the local or regional level.

Since some of the persons like Prof. Sajal Nag who had sent their paper and were scheduled to present them could not attend it because of cancellation of flights and some others had to drop out because of ill health or other reasons, the number of papers was reduced to 14 from the original 20. So the participants decided to continue the valedictory session till late in the evening of the second day and close the seminar after it. The seminar ended with a vote of thanks by Dr. Walter Fernandes, Director, North Eastern Social Research Centre.