

732

PEACEMAKING IN THE NORTHEAST

a symposium on

the role of civil society

in resolving conflict

symposium participants

- 10 THE PROBLEM**
Posed by **Walter Fernandes**, Director, North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati
- 14 TOWARDS AN INDO-NAGA PEACE AGREEMENT**
Along Longkumer, Founding Editor, 'The Morung Express', Dimapur
- 18 LIVING ON THE EDGE**
K.B. Velo Pou, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi
- 22 ULFA AND PEACE NEGOTIATIONS**
Dixita Deka, PhD candidate, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus
- 26 THIRD BODO PEACE ACCORD**
Mojib Mochahari, Assistant Professor, Assam Don Bosco University and **Victor Narzary**, Assistant Professor, Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati
- 30 CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN TRIPURA**
R.K. Debbarma, Assistant Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati
- 34 TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN MANIPUR**
Raile Rocky Ziipao, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda
- 38 STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE**
Sadokpam Ranjeeta, Human Rights Alert, Manipur
- 41 POLITICS FOR PEACE AND THE PEACEFUL SILENCE**
Roluahpuia, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee
- 45 THE ANTI-DAM MOVEMENT IN ARUNACHAL**
Bitopi Dutta, freelance researcher and activist, Guwahati
- 49 UNEASY CITIZENS: CAA, NRC AND INDIGENEITY IN ASSAM**
Gaurav Rajkhowa, Research Fellow, Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Tezpur
- 55 ON THE STUDY OF CONFLICT AND PEACE**
Ankur Tamuli Phukan, PhD Student, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata
- 60 BOOKS**
Reviewed by **Aparna Uppaluri**, **Sankalp Gurjar** and **Yusuf A. Ansari**
- 67 IN MEMORIAM**
Hari Vasudevan 1952-2020
- COVER**
Designed by www.designosis.in

The problem

TO the communities that live in Northeast India, this last decade has been one of both hope and despair. In the last quarter of the 20th century, most of the region was confronted by conflicts, some of them pre-1947. The Indian state called them insurgencies and responded to them by militarizing the region and imposing the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The turn of the 21st century saw a glimmer of hope for peace across the various states of the region, beginning with the Indo-Naga Ceasefire in 1997. Many in the region viewed the spectrum of cessation of hostilities between the Indian state and various armed groups as a sign of hope. Where do we stand today?

Ironically, the decade of the ceasefire around the nationalist struggles was also a period when ethnic conflicts took the space of nationalist struggles. Various communities were drawn into conflict with one another. Peace negotiations and reconciliation became more difficult than in nationalist struggles, but they had implications for ethnic relations in the Northeast. The Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s and the Naga-Meitei tension of 2001 in Manipur are two examples. Western Assam witnessed the Bodo-Santhal, Bodo-Bengali Muslim conflicts and the East witnessed the Karbi-Kuki, Karbi-Dimasa and Naga-Dimasa conflicts. The Khasi-Garo tension grew in Meghalaya, as did the Bru-Mizo conflict in Mizoram, among conflagrations elsewhere. In the second decade of the millennium the region witnessed new challenges in the form of staunch opposition to major dams and to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The decade has ended with the Covid-19 pandemic that has brought its own challenge.

The conflicts between ethnic communities that are primarily to do with land, economic resources and around identity issues have resulted in large-scale displacement of people, loss of property, deaths, and a growing mistrust between neighbours. In all these instances, a number of civil society organizations (CSO) in the

region responded by attempting to build bridges across ethnic lines with a focus on peace and justice for all communities in Northeast India. In contradiction, the recent movements against major dams and the CAA come across as a challenge from civil society to the Indian state, to be more precise, to the development paradigm and its communal politics. Covid-19, on the contrary, brings out the stark contrast between the Northeast and the rest of India (known in the region as the mainland).

This issue of 'Seminar' attempts to map out the instances and episodes that made people come out and protest, thereby generating widespread discussion on these issues facing the region. In this context, the authors ask questions that are both profound and simple: why did a particular issue elicit strong passions among the people? What concerns emerged from that particular instance of conflict? How did civil society organizations work towards peace-building, or why was it not possible for them to do so? These questions focus on some instances of conflict and peace-building. The first is the Indo-Naga ceasefire and the role of civil society, particularly the work done by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation, and the impact of the Framework Agreement of 2015 on peace talks and on peace-building efforts.

Two decades of ethnic conflict around land issues has resulted in a tenuous peace in Tripura. Where does Tripura go from there? Negotiating territorial disputes through road blocks has become central to the conflict in Manipur. What is the way out of these conflicts and also the blockade of state highways? The active support of women is expected during conflicts, but are they genuinely represented in negotiations and peace talks? In the challenge of living with the 'other', the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and CAA have become focal points of a conflict around citizenship and migration. What does it mean to the national ethos, to human dignity and reconciliation? The Bodo struggle for autonomy is representative of tensions around ethnic

issues in the Northeast. What is the way forward? The 2005 ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) manifesto gave hope of a negotiated peace, but it seems to have died out. What led to it?

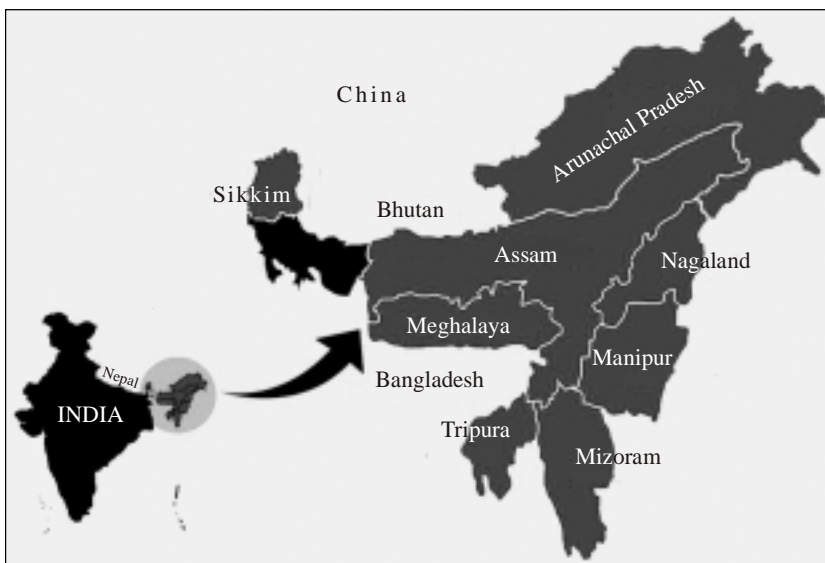
The anti-dam movement in Arunachal Pradesh, especially the role of Save Mon Region Federation, and of the monks from the Tawang monastery in engaging with religious traditions and ecology seem to show the way for a peaceful solution based on their culture and religious imperatives. Their non-violent agitation was based on the religious conviction that natural resources are a gift of God and belong to all human beings. So neither the state nor other human communities have a right to monopolize them and deprive legitimate users of their sacred right to sustenance. The monks succeeded in stopping the dam. That raises the question: Can religion be used as a tool for social change, away from its fundamentalist moorings? Do the last three decades show a direction for peace?

Leaving the reader free to comment on the issues raised by the authors on the role played by civil society

groups in peace processes in all the above cases, let us go to the questions that are not discussed in this issue of Seminar. The first is the distance between the Northeast and 'mainland' India that protests in the region against the CAA brought out so starkly. The protesters in the Northeast region agreed with the 'mainland' civil society groups that one cannot have a law that legalizes discrimination in citizenship based on religion. But their bigger fear is that most migrants from Bangladesh will ultimately settle down in the Northeast and become a threat to their land and identity. Most of them have not left Bangladesh because of religious persecution. Like immigrants from Bihar, they too are landless peasants coming in search of land and livelihoods.

The people of Assam where the protests against CAA began in December 2019, have seen the tribal proportion of Tripura decline from 59.1% of the population in 1951 to 31.1% in 2011 because of the influx of 800,000 Hindu immigrants to the state between 1951 and 1970, and even later than that from East Pakistan and Bangladesh. The tribes of the state lost to them around 40% of their land. The law was changed in 1960 in order to take land away from the tribes to rehabilitate the immigrants, though most of them were not Partition refugees but landless agricultural labourers who came post-1950 in search of land.

In Assam, the CAA has excluded the seven districts that are under the Sixth Schedule. But the immigrants have also occupied much land in its remaining 17 districts. Census data indicate that Assam had 19,44,444 direct immigrants between 1951 and 2001. That is the difference between the state's decadal population growth and what it would have



been if it had kept to the national average. Because of natural growth, their number has gone up to more than 4,000,000. The Census indicates that around 40% of them are Bengali speaking Muslims, the rest being Bengali, Hindi and Nepali speaking Hindus. Over and above them are the 500,000 pre-1950 Partition refugees who were resettled in Assam, and 200,000 in Tripura. The remaining states received smaller numbers. That explains the strong reaction to the CAA in the Northeast. Its people want to protect the secular nature of the Constitution, no doubt, but their greater concern is about protecting their lands from immigrants, irrespective of their origin. In Assam, the Assamese speakers who are slightly over 50% of the population, fear that they will be reduced to a minority. The protesters fear that the CAA will only encourage more migrants to come to the region under the guise of being persecuted minorities. This makes them believe that their land and identity are a greater priority than being a secular state, which is the focus of protests in the rest of India.

The people are aware that most immigrants, whether from Bangladesh or Bihar, are poor landless agricultural labourers in a feudal system where land reforms have not been implemented. They come in search of the fertile land of the Brahmaputra valley where legal ambiguity enables them to encroach on common lands and obtain *pattas* by bribing officials. Immigration can also be viewed from the perspective of density. In 2011 the per square kilometre population density was 398 in Assam, 350 in Tripura and lower in the remaining states of the region. But in Bihar it was 737 against the all-India density of 382. The density of Bangladesh was 1,240 in 2018 and 20% of its land is expected to be submerged due to climate change within the next couple of decades. It will push more people out of Bangladesh.

Migration can therefore also be viewed as a process of demographic balance. The people of the region do understand their right to a life with dignity, the implications of denial of citizenship to the immigrants, and the injustice of sending them to detention camps. But they disagree with 'mainland' human rights activists, who rush to the region to help those who are excluded from the NRC, demanding their inclusion in the list, but expect the Northeast to accommodate all of them. The people of the Northeast expect the rest of India to accept the rehabilitation of most of them, but do not see the rights activists doing so. This attitude has increased the distance and alienation between the Northeast and 'mainland' India.

The 45 million plus people of Northeast India have always found themselves at a disadvantage because of the distance between their region and the 'mainland'. This distance and their relative isolation is not merely physical, but also psychological and political. The people of the region feel that 'mainstream India', centred on the Gangetic valley Hindu dominant caste male culture, does not understand them. The India of the 'mainstream' stops at Kolkata, and most of its people only have a vague knowledge of the Northeast. For example, at the inauguration of the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January 2004, I sat next to a young man from Kerala who asked me where I was from. 'From Guwahati,' I said. 'So you are Bangladeshi,' was the response of the young man who had just boasted about his global knowledge. When I said that Assam was in India, another man sitting to my right said, 'yes, Biharis were attacked there last year.'

This is but one of dozens of instances about the commonly held view of the Northeast, as that faraway region beyond Bangladesh, a land of conflict. Add to this in the last two years: 'the land of injustice to lakhs of immigrants who are excluded from the NRC.' The region does not enter mainstream Indian thinking. Even the national anthem stops at 'Vindhya, Himachala, Yamuna, Ganga' but ignores the Brahmaputra, which is longer than the Ganga, and is the fifth largest river in the world that confers an identity on the Northeast, but is not an all-India sacred river. The present government is trying to impose some sacredness to it but only by connecting it to the Ganga, and not in its own right. The India of the national anthem is made up of 'Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravida, Utkala, Vanga.' The Mongoloids of the Northeast do not exist in this Aryan-Dravidian concept of India. When people from this region go to the 'mainland', they are referred to as 'chinki', a pejorative racist term for the Chinese.

What this means is that by being located in the extreme Northeast of India, this region of eight states has always found itself at a disadvantage because of poor communication with the centres of power. Moreover, the region with only 22 members in the Lok Sabha, has very little negotiating power in the country's political life. It is treated as a sub-stream without an identity of its own, and as such, has to merge with 'mainstream India'. Many nationalist struggles have to be understood in this context—a search for an identity. Instead of trying to understand this dilemma, the Indian state has interpreted the problem as a law and order issue, militarizing the region to protect the territory from its people.

In the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the relative isolation of the Northeast turned out to be a blessing in disguise because the virus took a long time to reach the region. Nearly a week into the national lockdown, the Northeast had only two confirmed positive cases – a woman who had returned to Manipur from the UK after completing her doctoral studies, and a Baptist pastor who returned to Mizoram from the Netherlands. That advantage disappeared and it has increased the gap with the ‘mainland’. After two weeks of the lockdown, on 10 April, the region had 32 positive cases, including one dead and one cured. Almost half was a result of the Jamat congregation in Nizamuddin and the rest came from other parts of the ‘mainland’. Because of high unemployment in the Northeast, a large number of its youth migrate to cities across India in search of unskilled or semi-skilled work. Prior to the testing, around 100,000 had come back from cities where the pandemic had spread, and operations had been suspended.

Testing incoming railway passengers began only after the lockdown. Two weeks into it, 75,000 had tested negative and were released from quarantine. One does not know whether the early returnees had carried Covid-19 with them. Till they returned to the region testing was by and large limited to air travel and extended to train travel after the lockdown. But the returnee migrants had reached their villages earlier, without having been tested. As a result, one may not know the extent of its spread. Testing is non-existent and health services are poor in the villages. Lockdown and social distancing can prevent the spread of the disease, but most returnee migrants live in small houses where social distance cannot be enforced. If they are infected, they may spread the virus to others, and then attribute it to the ‘mainland’, thus increasing the psychological distance between the ‘mainland’ and the Northeast.

Side by side, the economic pandemic may be a bigger danger than the virus. Even if the returnee migrants have not brought the disease with them, they and their families face an economic disaster. Like migrants in the rest of India they too were holding low paid jobs and do not have adequate savings to tide over a crisis of this magnitude and may even face starvation. This pandemic goes beyond them, to lakhs of migrants to the Northeast from other states like Bihar and from Bangladesh, who sustain themselves through daily wage unskilled work. With the lockdown they too are left without work.

The much bigger pandemic of racism adds to this danger. President Trump is not the only person

talking of the Chinese virus. A relatively large number of migrants from the Northeast have Mongoloid features. Because of this, the cities to which they migrate have taunted them as chinkis. Today the term chinki is symbolic of ‘carriers of Covid-19’. For example, according to a news item, three Naga students were denied entry to a mall in Mysuru because of their ‘Chinese’ features. Two students from Manipur were not allowed to enter a mall in Hyderabad for the same reason. A nurse in Bengaluru reports how a small child ran away from her screaming ‘corona virus’. Obviously the child was not born a racist, but was influenced by the parents.

Dr Alana Golmei from Manipur, General Secretary of the Northeast Support Group, living in Delhi, recounts how on three different occasions the staff of NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) taunted her and her companion from Meghalaya as ‘corona virus’ when they entered the campus. The staff members apologized when confronted by Golmei. Many landlords have asked Northeasterners to vacate their premises. Thus, they have been subjected to a racist pandemic. Ironically, one also has to see whether the villages to which they returned discriminated against them as possible carriers of the virus. Covid-19 has enormously increased the mainland-Northeast distance.

The CSOs in the region have to face these challenges. Like the civil society groups that are involved in peace processes, many provide health facilities through rural dispensaries in this region where health infrastructure is extremely poor. Government health services exist only on paper. The pandemic can spread if a proper infrastructure is not built very soon. The CSOs can do it because their infrastructure consists of rural dispensaries that render yeoman service without receiving any funds from the state. This rural infrastructure needs to be activated on a permanent basis. They could put pressure on the state-run health services to function properly. They must demand that the state fund their dispensaries in order to ensure that a good public health infrastructure is created. The CSOs across India must build bridges with their counterparts in the region where many are working for peace between ethnic communities. The ‘mainland’ CSOs can be bridge builders between peninsular and Northeastern India through partnership and dialogue with their counterparts in the region.