

THE NORTH EASTERN SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE: APRIL 2001 TO MARCH 2002

The North Eastern Social Research Centre that began its work on March 1, 2000, was registered as a Society in February 2002. This is thus its first report after its registration. From the last report we only want to repeat that the mandate of NESRC is to provide a platform for groups in conflict to meet and search for solutions, in the context of the situation in the Northeast. We are also to be a node to encourage intellectual and activist pursuits in the region and help smaller units evolve in the Northeast. Basic to making a contribution to the region is an understanding of the issues that are relevant to the Northeast. So we need to combine serious professional work with field involvement and action. We have tried to focus on these objectives and choose those issues to which a small group of three researchers can do justice. We have done it through our library and documentation, small and big meetings organised and attended, research and writings.

1. Library and Documentation

During the last year we tried to consolidate the work of the previous year and make the library and documentation better known since many who can use it were not aware of its existence. Many who came here felt that they could put the resources at NESRC to good use and told others about us. As a result a few new persons come to us every month to read our books and documentation and to discuss issues. We have built up a fairly good library of books and documentation on the Northeast from paper cuttings from dailies in Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Delhi and Kolkata. We also have a fairly good collection of material of general interest on social issues.

We would like to continue this involvement with students, scholars and human rights groups. To make this interaction more effective we reorganised our documentation and library according to the needs of our users and hope to computerise them in order to make our material easily accessible to people and added a few more that are not easily available elsewhere in this region. We still have problems with photocopies since we do not have a place close by where material can be copied. We are looking at the possibility of getting someone to gift us a photocopier.

2. Professional Research

As stated in our last report, research is our priority. Instead of giving much importance to the situation of conflict, we focus on issues that can help us to understand its causes and possible solutions. During the year we completed two studies for which fieldwork was done in January-March 2001. During this year we computerised and tabulated their data, prepared draft reports which we sent round for feedback and finalised in March 2002, about three months behind schedule since our target was December 2000. The studies completed during the financial year are:

1. Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora. *The Changing Women's Status in the Northeast: A Comparative Study of Six Tribes.*
2. Alphonsus D'Souza and Veronica Noqweno. *Social Change in the Northeast*

NESRC did most of the work on the former and St Joseph's College, Jakhama, Nagaland on the latter. We did the fieldwork jointly. The first is being got ready for publication. The second, though final, is being revised for presentation to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, that funded it. The study on Development-Induced Displacement in West Bengal is being completed

In December 2001 we decided that we would not undertake any new major study till we completed the work at hand during the first half of 2002. We, therefore, took up only a short-term

study on the socio-economic study of the Nagaon district of Assam. This religious and cultural centre of the State has experienced much immigration from the Gangeti Plains, of Nepalis and from Bangladesh. However, most persons dealing with immigration focus only on the last. It can cause communal tension since persons with a vested interest in discord can turn it into an religious issue. So this study was meant to help us to understand the issues around immigration and tension and identify ways of countering the destructive potential. It will be completed by the end of 2002.

3. Going Beyond Academic Studies

Besides, our mandate is to go beyond academic research to combine serious intellectual pursuits with support to action in the field and also encourage others to do serious professional research. So in the study on *Modernisation and Women's Status in the Northeast* we attempted three steps. The first was to choose for the study areas where voluntary agencies are active, discuss its contents with them and as far as possible get their animators to do the fieldwork in order to develop their human resources. Secondly, the conference based on the study "Changing Status of Women with Special Focus on the North East" held in Guwahati, October 11-13, 2001 and organised in collaboration with four other organisations, was an integral part of the studies.

We invited two persons from each tribe studied for the Conference and also planned the follow up together with them and the collaborating organisations. We also summarised the reports into about 20 pages and sent them to these tribes. The agencies active among them will translate them into the local language and discuss them in their area in order to study the relevance of our findings to them. That is the first step in helping them to come in contact with each other. We were hoping to use the Conference as a forum for a serious debate on gender issues and development in the region. There was a serious debate during the Conference but the follow up was not along the lines envisaged. We hope to go beyond it only to the extent of publishing its papers in July 2002.

We used the break of December 2001 also to evaluate our approach to the studies that have been completed. It showed that though we did them after much preparation, we need to involve more persons in them in order to combine research with serious field involvement. As a step towards it in December 2001 we organised a one-day meeting to conceptualise our future studies. Since we were planning to begin the study on Development-Induced Displacement in the Northeast during 2002, we focused on it during this meeting. We also joined a coalition on major dams being planned for the Northeast and were one of the co-sponsors of the *Consultation on Wildlife and People* at Bongaigaon in February 2002. Several possible studies were among the themes discussed at it. Though the studies have been delayed, a group was formed to mediate on a conflict in a wildlife sanctuary in the area.

4. The Exposure Programme

However, we consider its third step of an exposure programme successful. We had done this study among six tribes in four States. We organised an exposure programme of four of them to one another's economy and culture. Many look down on tribal culture and economy. Some think that the tribals should be exposed to and copy non-tribal cultures and economies alone. At times the tribal communities themselves look down on their own culture. An exposure to one another's culture was meant to help them to gain respect for their own culture and traditions. They need such healthy respect in order to deal with the threats to their livelihood. The exposure was also meant to give them the message that much has to change in their culture and economy, that it has to be supplemented, not replaced, by elements from other cultures, and that they can do it by learning from each other. This exposure to the economy and culture of each other was based on the assumption that they have something to contribute to each other. In its first phase held in early March 2002, six persons each from the Aka tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, the Dimasa of Assam, the Angami of Nagaland and the

Garo of Meghalaya went to other tribes for five days. Two each went to Balipara, Sonitpur district of Assam, to be exposed to the self-help groups and get some insights into the Boro-Adivasi conflict.

The group that went to Gunjung tried to understand the Dimasa search for a new identity and the livelihood problems they face such as water shortage and its effects on their economy. Those who went to Mendal and Mendipathar in the Garo Hills tried to understand the matrilineal society, the impact of modern inputs on them, the effort of men to gain more power at the cost of women and the role of co-operation among women in this situation. Apart from self-help groups, the Mendipathar Co-operative Society has been active in the effort to deal with the economic and social problems they face. The other tribes passing through a similar process felt that they could learn much from them.

After the first phase in March 2002, the participants met for two days at the Social Forum, Guwahati, to share their experiences. Three resource persons facilitated this sharing. At first each group that was together for five days made a presentation of what they were hoping to see and what they saw in practice, what they got out of it and how they could work on this experience. They then went into groups of their own tribe (Angami, Aka, Garo, Dimasa) to discuss among themselves what benefit their tribe as a whole had got out of these days, how they could share this experience with the rest of the tribe, what they would like to receive from the others and what they could give them.

They felt that the most positive point was the very fact of going out of their region to other tribal areas. Many had interacted with non-tribal merchants but very few had visited other tribes. So it was an opportunity for them to build up solidarity among themselves. The search for an identity amid change was another common concern. The consensus was that such interaction can make it possible for them to deal with it in a creative manner and learn from each other. From the Mendipathar Co-operative Society and the self-help groups they identified modes of building up solidarity it requires.

The Aka found many similarities with the Dimasa since both have preserved their tradition to a great extent but in two different ways. They also felt that they could help the Dimasa to solve a part of their water use problem and suggested that a few Dimasa leaders visit their region to look at their technology. An area the Angamis wanted to study was tea growing. However, persons with experience in doing it told them that they should go beyond learning the method of growing tea and combine it with the Mendipathar type of co-operative in order to ensure control also over its marketing. The same advice was given to those who wanted to learn methods of growing rubber.

We call it the first phase because the other tribes were unable to visit the Angami area of Nagaland in March. Since the objective of the visit to the Angami area in Nagaland was to study their terrace cultivation and water management system, it would have been useless for the others to go there in March when the fields are dry. So the Angami leaders advised the others to come to their region later. So the second phase of the exposure programme will be organised in June 2002.

5. Courses and Seminars

We have also been attending seminars and conferences and giving talks and presenting papers at them. The following is a list of some such workshops and seminars. We organised a workshop based on the study on Modernisation and Changing Women's Status in the Northeast.

Workshop Organised

Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast. Guwahati, October 11-13, 2001.

Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora:

1. Participated in the Conference “Peace in Assam: Problems and Prospects”, organised by ICSSR (North Eastern Regional Centre), Guwahati, August 29-30, 2001.
2. Wrote a paper “Development Displaced as Internal Refugees,” for the Conference on *Internal Refugees*, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, November 28-29, 2001.
3. Co-sponsored and attended the 6th National Consultation on *Protected Areas and People’s Livelihoods*, Bongaigaon: February 22-24, 2002.
4. Presented a Paper “Status of Women in the Northeast,” at the *National Seminar on Changing Status of Women: Role of Civil Society*, Gauhati University, March 1-3, 2002

Sanjay Barbora

Presented the following papers

1. “The Indigenous Question and the Right to Self Determination in North East India”, organised by NECOHR, Guwahati, May 17, 2001.
2. “The Changing Status of Tribal Women’s Status in the Northeast,” National Conference on *Changing Women’s Status with Focus on the Northeast*, Guwahati, October 11-13, 2001.

Was a Resource Person at the Session on:

1. Adivasi Leaders and *Basic Human Communities*, NED Social Forum, October 15-20, 2001.
2. *Capacity Building among the Adivasis*, NED Social Forum, January 17-19, 2002.

Walter Fernandes Gave the following keynote addresses

1. “Globalisation and Ethics of a Single Culture,” Keynote Address, *International Conference, Inter-Cultural Philosophy in the Context of Globalisation*, Bangalore, September 17-21, 2001.
2. “Land, Water and Air as Community Livelihood: Impact of Globalisation,” *Faith and Ecology Conference Land Water Air: Pelole Struggling for Life*, Bangalore: December 10-15, 2001.
3. “The Role of the Church in the Development of the Northeast,” *North Eastern Regional Assembly*, North East Diocesan Social Forum, Guwahati, March 11, 2002.
4. “Peace and the Role of the Social Activist,” *Indienhilfe North Eastern Partners’ Meeting*, March 20, 2002.
5. “Development-Induced Displacement and Livelihood Issues in the Northeast,” *Regional Seminar on Internal Refugees*, Assam University, Silchar, March 27, 2002.

Presented the following papers at seminars:

1. "The Indigenous Issue and Women's Status in North Eastern India," *National Conference on the Indigenous Issue*. New Delhi: March 12-13, 2002.
2. "Women's Status as a Constraint to Development," ICSSR Organised *Conference on Constraints to the Development of Nagaland*. March 15, 2002.

Gave sessions at the following training programmes

1. "The Approach to Development," *Refresher Course*, Administrative Staff College, Kolkata, May 15, 2001.
2. "The Social Bases of Land Laws," *Refresher Course for Law Teachers*, National Law School of India University, Bangalore, July 2, 2001.
3. *The Challenge of the Northeast*, Diphu, October 6-8, 2001.
4. *Introduction to Sociology of Religion*, Parasimoni, Santiniketan, Oct. 29-Nov. 2, 2001.
5. "The Role of the Researcher in Social Change," *UGC Refresher Course for Lecturers*, Vishwa Bharati, Santiniketan, November 22, 2001.
6. *Capacity Building among the Adivasis*, NED Social Forum, January 17-19, 2002.
7. *The Situation in the Northeast: Challenges to the New Priest*. Pastoral Course for Deacons, Oriens Regional Theological Seminary, March 4-5.

Attended the conference on:

Conflicts and Peace in South Asia, New Delhi, August 23-25, 2001.

Was a resource person at:

Exposure Programme for German Church Leaders, Semiliguda, Orissa, February 3-5, 2002.

6. Publications

We bring out a few of our own publications but our focus is on publishing professional and newspaper articles in other publications. We brought out one book and a booklet this year. The book contained revised versions of the papers presented at the conference on Climate Change, held in September 2000. The booklet was on the Plantation Labour Act 1951 and the Assam Plantation Labour Rules 1956, as support to the plantation labourers who are the most exploited group in Assam.

Books and Booklets:

1. Walter Fernandes and Nafisa Goga D'Souza (eds). *Climate Change and Tribal Sustainable Living: Responses from the Northeast.*, pp. 150 Price Rs 100 USD 10.
2. Ravi Sagar. 2002. *Plantation Labourers, Know Your Rights*. Pp. 14, price Rs 10.

Professional Articles

1. Sanjay Barbora. 2002. "Ethnic Politics and land Use: Genesis of Conflicts in India's Northeast," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (n. 13, March 30), pp. 1285-1292.
2. Walter Fernandes. 2001. "Development-Induced Displacement and Sustainable Development," *Social Change*, 1(n. 1-2, March- June), pp. 87-103.
3. "President Musharraf's Visit and Prospects of Peace in South Asia," Guest Editorial, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Research*, July 2001.
4. Walter Fernandes. 2001. "Reservations as a Tool for Social Change," in A. K. Lal (ed), *Protective Discrimination: Ideology and Praxis*. Allahabad: G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, pp. 19-31.
5. Walter Fernandes. 2002. "Land, Water, Air as Community Livelihood: Impact of Globalisation," *National Council of Churches Review* 122 (n. 1, Jan-Feb), pp. 9-39.

III. Newspaper Articles: Walter Fernandes

1. Walter Fernandes. "Employment Generation as an Election Issue," *The Assam Tribune*, May 7, 2001.
2. Walter Fernandes. "General Musharraf's Visit and Prospects of Peace," *The Assam Tribune*, July 10, 2001.
3. Walter Fernandes. "Caste, Race and Reservations," *The Assam Tribune*, September 3, 2001.
4. Walter Fernandes. "Compulsory Education: Right or Duty?" *The Assam Tribune* December 2, 2001.

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Address: North Eastern Social Research Centre
C/O Dr G. C. Sarma (1st floor)
Kharguli Road, Guwahati 781004
India

Dr Walter Fernandes
Director
Tel. (+91-361) 2602819
Email: nesrc1@sancharnet.in
Fax: 2602713 (Attn NESRC)