

## THE NORTH EASTERN SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE: APRIL 2002-MARCH 2003

Since its inception on March 1, 2000, NESRC has been trying to live up to its mandate 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, conferences organised and attended, research and writings.

### 1. Library and Documentation

In an effort to consolidate the work of the two preceding years and make the library and documentation more user friendly, we got a few more journals that are not easily available in the Northeast. We have thus 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.

With that in view, we reorganised our documentation and library according to the needs of our users and are in the process of computerising them in order to make our material easily accessible to people. A photocopier bought in April 2002 has made it possible for our users to copy the material. To the 35 journals and periodicals available with us we have added three more that are not easily available elsewhere in this region, one of them a quarterly update on water resource management prepared by a group of social activists involved in analysing its use, particularly in major dams. It is needed in the region since some 50 major dams are being planned and in the recent past the Centre has approved 6 and 10 more are under active consideration. We need to document these processes.

### 2. Professional Research

As stated earlier, research is our priority but we had decided not to give importance to the conflicts as such but focus on issues aimed at an understanding of the causes and possible solutions. The last report has mentioned two studies completed last year namely "*Changing Women's Status in the Northeast: A Comparative Study of Six Tribes*" and "*Social Change in the Northeast*", both done in collaboration with St Joseph's College, Jakhama, Nagaland. NESRC had already completed the academic part of the first study and sent the report round for comments. We revised and published it in July 2002. Dr Alphonsus D'Souza and his team at St Joseph's College completed the second study in 2002 and in early 2003 finalised the report on women's status in the Northeast, funded by the Women and Child Division, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. We completed two more studies but our major involvement this year was on the Primary Education of Plantation Labourers' Children in Assam. The studies completed are the following:

1. Walter Fernandes and Gita Bharali. 2002. *The Socio-Economic Situation of Some Tribes in Palizi and Bishnupur*. (August 2002).
2. Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora. 2002. *The Socio-Economic Situation of Nagaon District: A Study of Its Economy, Demography and Immigration*. (December 2002).
3. Alphonsus D'Souza and Veronica Noqweno. 2002. *Social Change in North East India: A Comparative Study of Three Tribes* (September 2002).

4. Alphonsus D'Souza, Christina Kekhrieseno and Veronica Noqwen. 2002. *Status of Women in North-East India: A Comparative Study of Three Ethnic Groups in North-East India, Aka, Angami and Dimasa* (November 2002).

### **Education of Plantation Labourers' Children**

We have also mentioned that 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. The collaborative effort with St Joseph's College was integral to supporting other research units. The exposure programme that we shall discuss later is part of the first. To come back to professional research, our plan was to complete the studies at hand during the first half of 2002 and launch other projects in July 2002, beginning with the one on *Development-Induced Displacement 1951-1995* in the eight States of the Northeast including Sikkim. We had also taken steps to get involved with other groups who were planning a study on Biodiversity in the Northeast. During the year we were hoping to launch a study on Tribal Customary Laws and Land Laws and together with St Paul Institute of Education do one on *Tribal Learning Systems* and were to complete the study on *Changing Land Relations among the Tribals of the Northeast*.

As we were in the process of launching these studies, the *Axom Sarba Shikshya Abhijan Mission* (ASSAM - Total Literacy Mission) of the Government of Assam requested us to do a project on *The Primary Education of Plantation Labourers' Children* in ten districts of the State. So though we had finalised our plans for this year, we felt that we should accord it high priority. The British planters had brought their ancestors to Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from Eastern India as indentured labourers, in slavlike conditions. They continue to be the most exploited community in the region, especially Assam. Literacy is very low among them, so also the awareness of their rights.

The request from *Axom Sarba Shikshya Abhijan Mission* was to assist them in the understanding of the constraints to the plantation labourers' children's primary education from their family, society, State and the management, find ways of overcoming them, suggest an approach to it and identify agencies that can get involved in their primary education. Creating awareness about their right to education and mobilising them around it are its other components. This work was to begin in August 2002 and was to be completed in March 2003. Though the time looked short and the project too big for a group of three researchers to undertake, we decided to accord it the high priority it deserved because it concerned the most marginalised community of the region. So we decided to change our plans, postpone the other studies till after March 2003 and go ahead with it.

We chose 172 out of the 683 gardens in these districts for data collection. From among them, we chose 45 gardens and 5 *bastis* (villages of former plantation labourers) for intensive study. We began by establishing contacts with organisations of the plantation labourers, particularly of students, in order to get a preliminary idea of the situation and the approach to take to this study. That helped us to choose the type of field investigators who could also go beyond data collection to mobilise the parents to send their children to school and also reflect with the community on the constraints to their children's education from their society as well as from other sources, get their opinion on the quality of the infrastructure and of the teachers and other issues related to education. So in every garden or *basti* we began with group discussion sessions meant not merely for data collection but also tools of awareness building in the community about their situation in order to motivate them to search for a solution. We had 165 such discussion sessions with groups of men, women, young men, young women and mixed. We met them separately because often women hesitate to speak in the presence of men and the youth before the elders. In such groups we interacted with over 3,000 persons.

We then interviewed 920 families from these districts. Our sample was the family, not an individual because our experience has taught us that individual interviews are not possible in a rural set up. The respondent's peers and other family members intervene and keep giving their opinion. Besides, we also wanted to use the individual interviews as tools of awareness building. So we interviewed the whole family but within it we chose a main respondent whose replies we entered in the schedule. The opinions of the remaining members were collected in the form of field notes and used in the analysis of the data. Thus we were able to interact with over 2,000 family members.

After it we interviewed 133 knowledgeable persons from these 45 gardens and surroundings on the state of their education and of the infrastructure. We interviewed another 536 persons from the remaining 130 gardens in order to get data on the number of schools and teachers, their training, the quality of the facilities and other issues. We interrupted data collection at this stage to enable the field investigators to get involved in mobilising the parents to enrol their children at school at the beginning of the academic year. Once that was completed, each investigator prepared at least three case studies on the state of education and the "venture schools" or institutions started and run by the labourers or their student organisations, since the management has neglected their primary education. Thus in the course of this project we interacted with around 5,000 persons.

Based on the data and our field notes, we wrote, summarised and translated the draft report and sent it back to the districts. We also saw the alternatives that some of their communities are attempting in the form of "venture schools" and others. The data also showed us the type of neglect. To give but one example, while 25% of the children in the 6-14 age group are out of school in Assam as a whole, among the plantation labourers they are around 43%. After it we held follow up meetings in the districts to discuss and reflect on the main issues and on the possibility of follow up together. Four main issues that emerged out of the study are the ethnic and linguistic diversity among the labourers, their almost total dependence on the tea garden system for their sustenance and the culture of dependence that they have internalised, the poor infrastructure that further intensifies their low self-image and the need for the type of education that can help them to free themselves from this culture. Their diversity brought up the issue of the medium of instruction meant to help with their integration while protecting their identity. Their dependence shows the need for vocational education to open new avenues outside the gardens and also to build up their self-confidence.

The consensus at the district level meetings held during the first two weeks of March 2003, was that the organisations that are often working at cross purposes should come together to ensure universal primary education of the tea workers' children. It may require a long process of confidence building but many are taking the steps required. After each meeting the participants chose three representatives to attend the State level workshop at Guwahati on March 27-29. It brought together representatives of the garden workers, trade unions, a few of the management and the Government.

The draft report of the study, the outcome of the district level meetings and other inputs from the Government and resource persons presented at this workshop, helped the 65 participants to reflect seriously on the situation of their children's education. Some participants criticised the failure of the State to implement past schemes seriously and wondered whether this was one more such project that will be stopped abruptly in a few years in order to launch a new one. The representatives of *Sarba Shikshya Abhijan* assured the participants that they are serious about this scheme. The participants then discussed the follow up of the district level meetings and asked the State, the Government, the management, the church groups and other voluntary agencies to come together for a common cause. The participants also suggested that NESRC evaluate the process after a few months. These meetings also gave us feedback on the draft report. We hope to revise and finalise the report based on the comments in April 2003. We are keeping an open mind on our possible involvement in the follow up.

### **3. The Exposure Programme**

Our last report mentioned an exposure programme of four tribes to one another's economy and culture and that its first phase was organised in March 2002. Since the visit to the Angami area was to learn much about their terrace cultivation and water management, they suggested that the programme in their region be held in the agricultural season. So thirteen representatives of the Aka, Dimasa and Garo went to their area in the transplantation season in June 2002 to study these issues. After field visits the follow up discussion was held at St Paul Institute of Education, Phesama. The participants also analysed Phase I. We have earlier given its positive points. At this meeting they mentioned some of its shortcomings. Firstly, only two of the four groups had briefed the participants on the exposure. The participants from the remaining groups had gone to the region of another tribe without knowing what they could learn from them or share with them. Secondly, Only these two groups had got the participants to share their experience with the rest of the tribe. Since the rest did not do it, much of its impact was lost. We advised the agencies involved in it to attend to these issues.

As for Phase II, on the positive side they felt that they had learnt much on the Angami terrace cultivation system. It is new to most of them and they felt the need to understand it better. However, terrace building is men's work. Since some groups tended to send mainly men for the programme, we had insisted on an equal number of men and women being included in this group. However, women felt that from the technical point of view they could not benefit much though the very fact of going to Nagaland was of immense use to them. Secondly, the choice of persons was limited since this phase was held in the agricultural season. So many who would have liked to go were unable to go there.

The participants also decided to share the experiences of Phase II with the rest of their tribe and find ways of meeting each other. They themselves will take these initiatives but want NESRC to support them in ways such as contacting AFPRO to do a geological survey of their region in order to know the water potential. We have agreed to contact also groups involved in work such as watershed management and identify persons who can train them in self-help groups and land management. However, the request has to come from them. A request has come from the Garo of Mendipathar to the Angami to send some men to their region to teach them methods of terrace cultivation. That could not be done this year but they hope to follow up on it during the next cultivation season. A request for training and exposure has come also from two other groups in Manipur and we are attending to it.

### **4. 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.

#### ***Sanjay Barbora Presented the following papers:***

1. "The War for One's Hearth," *International Seminar on Right to Land*, Maastricht University, April 16-18, 2002.
2. "Disruptive and Constructive Approaches to Environmental Conflicts" *Frontiers Conference*, Mont Soleil, Switzerland. September 24-29, 2002.
3. "Making of Insurgents, Migrants and Peasants," *Eighth Annual International Conference on Identity and Democracy*, organised by Centre for the Study of Social Sciences, Calcutta; SEPHIS and ERECA, Dona Paula, Goa. February 16- 20, 2003.

### ***Attended or Organised***

1. *Workshop on Women in Armed Conflict*, Guwahati: Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti, May 7-9, 2002.
2. Seminar on *Right to Self-determination, Autonomy and Assam*, Guwahati, May 17, 2002.
3. *Integrated Training Workshop* organised by the National Centre for Competence and Research (NCCR), University of Berne, at Aeschiried, Switzerland. September 01-19, 2002.
4. *National Conference on Security Laws* organized by Amnesty International, New Delhi: August 18-20, 2002.
5. *National Conference on Security Laws* organized by Amnesty International, New Delhi: August 18-20, 2002.
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### ***Was Resource Person at the Session on:***

*Research Methodology* Guwahati: Centre for Humanistic Development, July 6-7, 2002.

**Gita Bharali and Anamika Deka** attended the *Conference on Co-operation Between NGOs*, organised by North East Network, Shillong, September 16, 2002.

### ***Walter Fernandes Presented the Following Papers:***

1. "Communal Harmony in the Northeast: The Role of the Civil Society," Keynote Address, *Regional Consultation on Communal Harmony*, Dimapur, April 9-11, 2002.
2. "Shortages, Ethnic Conflicts and Economic Development in North Eastern India," *ICSSR National Conference on Development of the Northeast and Neighbours*. Gangtok, May 8-9, 2002.
3. "The Issues behind Opposition to Large Dams," *East and North East India Consultation on Major Dams*. Kolkata: Indian Institute of Management, July 3, 2002.
4. "Displacement, Internal Refugees, Common Property Resources and Women," *National Workshop on Displacement and Internal Refugees*, organised by Actionaid India and IDS, Sussex, New Delhi: September 11-13, 2002.
5. "Assam Adivasis: Identity Issues and Liberation," *North Eastern Pastoral Conference*, Shillong: September 23, 2002.
6. "Globalisation and Option for the Poor," *Indo-German Conference of the Dialogforum*, Pune: September 29-October 1, 2002.
7. "Environment, Energy and Socio-Economic Development in the New Millennium," *Indo-German Conference on Energy in the New Millennium*, Mithradham, Aluwai, October 2, 2002.
8. "Religious Formation Amid Cultural Diversity: Some Stray Thoughts," *Meeting of North Eastern*

*Formators*, Shillong: October 15, 2002.

9. "Justice Issues in the Northeast," *Meeting of the North Eastern Justice and Peace Commission*, Guwahati: October 17, 2002.
10. "Globalisation, Impoverishment and Fundamentalism in India Today: Search for Another Globalisation," *Peace Conference of Intersol*, Salzburg: October 22-26, 2002.
11. "Biodiversity, Climate Change and Indian Tribals," *Alternative Conference on Climate Change During COP-8*, New Delhi: October 29-30, 2002.
12. "Forests, Tribals and Globalisation," Session on Ecology, *Asian Social Forum*, Hyderabad: January 2-6, 2003.
13. "Tribals and Development-Induced Displacement: Main Issues," *National Conference on Displacement. Developing Countries' Research Centre*, Delhi University. February 14-25, 2003.

***Gave the following courses***

1. *The Situation in the Northeast: Challenges to the New Priest*. Pastoral Course for Deacons, Oriens Regional Theological Seminary, October 16-17, 2002.
2. *Women's Status in the Northeast*, FMA Sisters, Guwahati Province, July 5, 2002.
3. "Displacement, Impoverishment and Environmental Laws," *Sensitisation Course for Senior Officers of State Pollution Control Boards and Environment Bodies*, Bangalore: National Law School of India University, July 9, 2002.
4. "Preparation of Schedules and Choice of the Sample," *ICSSR Course on Research Methodology for College Lecturers*, Shillong: September 17, 2002.

***Was a Resource Person or Participated in:***

1. *National Conference of Swa-shakti, Women and Self-help Groups on Networking of Self-help Groups*. Bangalore: June 5-7, 2002.
2. *Conference on the World Bank Forest Policy for South Asia*, New Delhi: September 3, 2002.

**5. Publications**

We bring out a few of our own books but our focus is on professional and newspaper articles in other publications. During the year we published material based on our research completed during the preceding year and the conferences held earlier. We also wrote in other journals and newspapers.

***I. Books and Booklets:***

1. Ravi Sagar. 2002. *Plantation Labourers, Know Your Rights*. Pp. 14, price Rs 10 (3<sup>rd</sup> reprint of Assamese edition and the first in Hindi).
2. Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora. 2002. *Modernisation and Women's Status in North Eastern India: A Comparative Study of Six Tribes*. Pp. 236, Price Rs 300, US\$ 20 paperback, Rs

350, USD 30, hard cover.

3. Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora. (eds). 2002. *Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast*. Pp. 219 Price Rs 180, US\$ 18 paperback, Rs 300, US\$ 25, hard cover.
4. Gita Bharali and Manasjyoti Bordoloi. 2003. *Ain Sajagata Dharabahik: Cha Sramik aru Teolokar Lara Chowalir Prathamik Siksha*.

## **II. Professional Articles**

1. Sanjay Barbora. 2002. "The Morning After: 2001 and the Seven Sisters' Region" *Revolutionary Democracy*, 8 (n. 1, April), pp. 38-52.
2. Walter Fernandes, 2002. "Women's Status and Constraints in the Development of Nagaland," in C. Joshua Thomas and Gurudas Das (eds). *Dimensions of Development in Nagaland*. New Delhi: Regency Publications, pp. 200-236.
3. Walter Fernandes. 2002. "The Pattern of Development and Globalisation in India," *Vikalp Alternatives*, 11 (n. 1), pp. 51-56.
4. Walter Fernandes. 2003. "Church of the Poor or Church for the Poor?" in Kuruvilla Pandikattu and Rosario Rocha (eds). *Bend Without Fear: Essays in Honour of Professor Kurien Kunnumpuram*. Pune: Jananadeepa Vidyapeetha, pp. 108-126.
5. Walter Fernandes, 2003. "Development-Displaced and the Right to Life: Implications for the Northeast,;" in Tanmoy Bhattacharjee (ed). *Problems of Internally Displaced Persons in Assam with Special Reference to Barak Valley*. Silchar: Assam University, pp. 3-27.

## **III. Newspaper Articles: Walter Fernandes**

1. "Land of Darkness and Misery," *The Telegraph*, May 21, 2002.
2. "Evictions and the Soft State," *The Assam Tribune*, June 2, 2002.
3. "Double Standards as Policy" *The Assam Tribune*, July 20, 2002.
5. "Is Privatisation the Answer?" *The Assam Tribune*, December 2, 2002.
6. Communalism and Civil Society: Lessons from Gujarat," *The Assam Tribune* February 22, 2003

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