

# **Annual Report of North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, April 2003 to March 2004**

In our earlier reports we have mentioned the mandate of North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) to provide a platform for groups in conflict to meet and search for solutions, to encourage intellectual and activist pursuits in the Northeast and help smaller units to evolve. We tried to live up to it during 2003-2004 through research, by bringing groups together at conferences, workshops and training. We ourselves organised some meetings and conferences and also joined the initiatives of other organisations. We brought out a few publications ourselves and wrote in newspapers, journals and books of others. Our library and documentation supplemented the effort.

## **1. Research Projects**

Our mandate is to go beyond academic research to combine it with support to action in the field while maintaining high professional standards. During the year we were able to complete only two studies but began two more that we hope to complete in 2004. We also made preparations for two more studies to be started in mid-2004. We have stated in our last report that in August 2002 we decided to keep all our work in abeyance in order to respond to the request of *Assam Sarba Shikshya Abhjhyan* (Total Literacy Mission) to do a study on the education of the plantation labourers' children. After completing it we launched two research projects that we had kept in abeyance.

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

By March 2003 we had prepared the draft report of the study on the *Education of the Plantation Labourers' Children in Assam* and had organised several meetings of the plantation labourers and of others involved in their education to discuss its implications. Some of their leaders had requested us to get involved in its follow up by trying to bring all the actors together into a consortium since no individual or organisation can solve the problem of their very low literacy combined with a lack of alternatives and motivation that makes them totally dependent on the plantation system. So we prepared a follow up plan together with them. In May 2003 we presented the final report to *Sarba Shikshya Abhijhyan* and discussed with them the possibilities of follow up. Its leaders were ready to support the project but the political situation went against it. Many changes were made in the organisation and funding of the project was stopped. So follow up was difficult.

Apart from shortage of funds we also faced shortage of personnel. Of the two research associates, one began his doctoral work though he continues to be associated with NESRC. The other had to initiate studies that had been kept in abeyance in order to respond to the request to do the one on the plantation labourers. Lack of co-operation from the plantation management made any follow up next to impossible. So we decided to keep in touch with the tea garden youth associations and encourage them to reflect on the process and findings of the study and take up its follow up at a later stage. As a help to reflection by them we gave priority to the publication and wide circulation of its popular report in English and Assamese. Since any action beyond it is difficult at this stage, we are trying to find ways of continuing the process in other forms and are working out its modalities.

### ***Launching New Studies***

Among the studies kept in abeyance were the ones on *Development-Induced Displacement in the Northeast 1947-2000* and on *Changing Land Relations among North Eastern Tribals*. We launched them during the year and got two more ready to launch in 2004. The study on Development Induced Displacement that we started in July 2003 is required not merely to understand the past but

also for the future. Immediately after 1947 there was massive land acquisition in the Northeast to rehabilitate the Partition refugees. After it in the 1960s began development projects followed by defence related acquisitions. A look at the future shows that some 48 major dams and other projects are being planned in the region within a decade. Many are uneasy about their impact. So we feel that we owe it to the people to go deeper into this theme and understand their implications.

The study is done in three phases. The first phase is a perusal of all the Gazette notifications on land acquisition 1947-2000. The second is a study of the data on land acquisition, displacement, rehabilitation and other aspects of the project from the land records at the district land office, supplemented by information from the project office, Central and State Ministries, research institutes, documentation centres and other knowledgeable sources. The third part is primary data collection on the impact of displacement and deprivation from those affected by a representative set of projects completed since 1947. The objective of the study is to create a quantitative and qualitative database on the extent and type of land acquired and persons displaced or deprived of their livelihood, the nature of their resettlement and the social and environmental cost of the projects.

Though we plan to do the study in eight States including Sikkim, the latest addition to the Northeast Council, we have begun it in only five of them. We have completed Phase I in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram and are doing it in Tripura. Two others i.e. Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland do not have Gazette notifications on land acquisitions. We have completed much of the work on Phase II in Assam and Mizoram but have not been able to begin it in the remaining States because of shortage of funds. This phase will be launched in all eight States if funds become available and the study will be completed in early 2005. It is being done in collaboration with departments or individual scholars in the Assam, Dibrugarh, Manipur, Mizoram, NEHU and Tripura universities.

The study on “Changing Land Relations in the Northeast” launched in September 2003 is based on our own experience and studies and those of others that immigration and encroachment on land are among the major causes of ethnic conflicts in the Northeast. Persons with a vested interest in a religious or ethnic divide exploit this situation by making biased propaganda around this issue. As a small contribution to peace based on justice, we consider it our duty to create a database and also understand the processes around the conflicts since the propaganda is made without much information on the issues involved. This study is done among seven ethnic groups in four States, with financial support from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. We have completed its fieldwork, have computerised and tabulated the data and hope to get the final report ready in May 2004. Then we shall return to these communities to present our findings and reflect with them on its implications.

### ***Studies Being Planned***

When we kept all our work in abeyance in August 2002, we had started preparations for a study on a biodiversity register and the other on the gender implications of the Modernisation of Tribal Customary Laws. The Northeast together with Myanmar is one of the world’s 25 mega-biodiversity zones and one of its 18 biodiversity hotspots. It is well known that the corporate sector pirates and patents much of their biodiversity and traditional knowledge but not much has been done to prepare a register on it. The communities that have preserved biodiversity and have developed the knowledge systems get no benefits though what is pirated is intrinsic to their culture, identity and economy. At times they even lose access to these resources. We, therefore, consider a biodiversity register crucial but we are in the social field and do not have the technical expertise required for it. So during the year we joined others who are planning to do this work. Walter Fernandes attended a meeting in Kathmandu on this issue, organised by ICIMOD and another at Guwahati organised by IISC, Bangalore. The modalities of implementing the decisions taken are being worked out.

The second project being prepared concerns the impact of modern inputs on the tribal customary law. Studies indicate that the interface between the community-based tribal customary laws and the individual based administrative systems by and large result in class formation in their egalitarian societies and have a negative impact on women. A preliminary study we did for ICIMOD, Kathmandu indicated that this hypothesis is in the right direction. We have, therefore, decided to go deeper into this issue through a field data based study among five tribes in four States that are at various stages of modernisation. We hope to begin it in August 2004.

The Following research projects were completed during the year or are in progress:

1. Walter Fernandes, Sanjay Barbora and Gita Bharali. 2003. *Primary Education of Plantation Labourers' Children in Assam* (May 2003).
2. Walter Fernandes and Christina Kekhrieseno. 2004. *Customary Law and Women's Property Rights in the Northeast* (a Preliminary Study – February 2004).

The Following projects are in progress:

1. Walter Fernandes, Gita Bharali and others. *Development-Induced Displacement in North Eastern India* (to be completed in early 2005).
2. Walter Fernandes, Melville Pereira and Dilip Neog. *Changing Land Relations in the Northeast: A Comparative of Seven Ethnic Communities* (to be completed in May 2004).

## **2. Library and Documentation**

The objective of the library and documentation is to supplement our professional efforts and assist the voluntary sector that needs concrete data on the situation in the region. So during this year we tried to consolidate the work done already and make our documentation and library more user-friendly. We have around 40 journals, many of them not easily available in the Northeast and a fairly good collection of books on social issues in India in general and the Northeast in particular. We are trying to make the books and paper cuttings available to students, scholars and human rights groups.

In order to achieve it during this year we have reorganised the paper cuttings, have bought 500 more books on the Northeast and have started computerising the library in order to make our material easily accessible to all. The documentation goes beyond ethnic conflicts to developments such as the interlinking of rivers, the 48 major dams being planned and other issues in the economic, cultural, political and social fields. The books as well as the rest of the documentation have been classified and organised in a user friendly manner. We hope that various groups will be able to use them as tools of reflection and in their search for solutions to some of the ethnic and other problems.

## **3. Publications**

We share our studies with others through our own publications and through professional and newspaper articles. During 2003-2004 we took a conscious decision not to bring out any professional publication of our own because we needed to begin studies that we had kept in abeyance in order to do the one on the education of plantation labourers' children. Secondly, we decided to invest much of our time and energy on facilitating the coming together of a big group to attend the World Social Forum since the Northeast tends to get left out of most such events. That left us with very little time to get our studies ready for publication. So we have kept our professional publications pending till next year and have brought out only the popular report on the plantation labourers for distribution

among them for awareness building about their own situation. Besides, jointly with Aranyak, an environmental group based at Guwahati, we published a profile of the Seven Sisters of the Northeast for distribution during the World Social Forum. We considered it important because there is much ignorance about this region outside the Northeast and it was important to make it known in the rest of India and among other peoples. The following are the publications brought out during 2003-2004. Two books are by NESRC, one in collaboration with others and one by a group in Kolkata.

### ***Books Published***

1. Walter Fernandes, Sanjay Barbora and Gita Bharali. 2003. *Children of Plantation Labourers and Their Right to Education*. Pp. 38, Rs 20.
2. Sanjay Barbora and Gita Bharali. 2003. *Chah Sramikar Sisu aru Sikhyar Adhikar*. Pp. 40, Rs 20.
3. Sanjay Barbora (ed). 2003. *Experiences of Autonomy in the East and Northeast: Third Civil Society Dialogue on human Rights and Peace*. Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group. Pp. 58. No Price Given.
4. NESRC and Aranyak. 2004. *The Seven Sisters of North East India: A Profile*. Pp. 64. NPG.

### ***Professional Articles***

1. Walter Fernandes. 2003. "Research to Support People's Organisation," *The Vishwabharati Quarterly*, New Series 11 (n. 2, July-Sept), pp. 35-45.
2. Walter Fernandes. 2003. "Dalits and Recent Attacks on the Minorities," in A. K. Lal (ed). *Social Exclusion*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 42-54.
3. Walter Fernandes. 2004. "The Assam Adivasis: Identity Issues and Liberation," *Vidyajyoti JTR*, 68 (n. 2, February), pp. 110-122.
4. Walter Fernandes. 2004. "Rehabilitation Policy for the Displaced," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (n. 12, March 20-26), pp. 1191-1193.

### ***Newspaper Articles***

1. Gita Bharali. "Asamar Chah Janajati ak Adhayan," *Dainik Janambhumi*, September 23, 2003.
2. Walter Fernandes, "Education of Plantation Labourers," *The Assam Tribune*, April 18, 2003.
3. Walter Fernandes. "Damming the North East," *The Statesman*, July 5, 2003.
4. Walter Fernandes. "Troops to Iraq: Are Indian Lives Cheap?" *The Sentinel*, July 11, 2003.
5. Walter Fernandes. "Women as Symbols," *The Assam Tribune*, July 20, 2003.
6. Walter Fernandes. "Why is Assam Burning?" *The Hindu*, 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2003.

7. Walter Fernandes. "From Conflict to Development," *The Statesman*, 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2003.
8. Walter Fernandes. "A Bigger Escape Route," *The Telegraph*, March 11, 2004.
9. Walter Fernandes. "Draft Tribal Policy: Where is the Northeast?" *The Statesman*, March 27, 2004.

#### **4. Courses and Seminars**

We consider organising and attending workshops and seminars an important part of our work. During the year we organised two seminars. Besides, we spent much of our time facilitating the coming together of people for the World Social Forum. The following are the seminars we organised, courses and conferences we attended, at many of which we presented papers.

##### ***The World Social Forum 2004***

The most important conference in which we were involved is the World Social Forum held at Mumbai, January 16-21, 2004. We were not its organisers. Our main work was to facilitate the coming together of as many groups in the Northeast as possible to attend it and take an active part in it because this region tends to get left out or leave itself out of most major national and international initiatives. So we provided space and facilities for people to come together for meetings and supported their organisation in other forms. A meeting was held at NESRC every month beginning from July 7, 2003. However, each State did its own coordination. A North Eastern organising committee comprising one person from each State coordinated it at the regional level.

As a result of these initiatives, 141 persons from six out of the seven States of the Northeast were able to attend WSF2004. It was an active presence because apart from participating in the initiatives of others, the delegation from the Northeast organised four seminars. On the first day it was on *Militarisation and Human Rights in the Northeast*. On the second day we had a seminar on *Gender Issues in the Northeast*. We joined South Asian People's Initiates (SAPI) in organising a seminar on the *Indigenous Issue* and on the final day organised a seminar on *Water Resource Management in the Northeast*. In arranging our stay in Mumbai we received much help from SAPI and Seva Niketan.

For most participants, it was their first exposure to a mega-event of this type. Being mostly young, some of them could not grasp its importance but the exposure to an event that brought together around 100,000 persons from all over the world was an experience in itself. Many of them felt supported by people from the rest of India and from around the world in their search for a new Northeast. They were thus confirmed in their belief that "Another Northeast is Possible." Participants from some States are trying to apply it to their own States in its follow up.

##### ***Other Conferences Organised***

Also the remaining conferences we organised were within our perspective of livelihood regeneration amid threats to it from globalisation and other inputs that destroy the sustenance of the poor. The first of them was on *WTO and Food Security in the Northeast*, August 1-2, 2003, sponsored by Oxfam India Trust, New Delhi and PAIRVI, Jaipur. Scholars and social activists studied the implications of the present policies on the Northeast. Many of them felt that only now this region is beginning to feel the full impact of these policies and that it is being felt not merely in staple food but also in sectors such as the tea industry. If precautions are not taken, these processes can become major

threats to food security in the region and can result in a decline in employment and in the production of staple food. So the 40 participants of this conference reflected on their implications. Their reflection was based both on theoretical inputs and sharing of experiences.

On February 24-25 in collaboration with Laya, Vishakapatnam we organised a seminar on *Women's Leadership in the Northeast, with Focus on the Panchayati Raj*. About 30 women leaders from four States reflected on the implications of the panchayati raj on one side and their customary law on the other. According to the law, 30% of the representatives in the panchayat (local government bodies) have to be women. There are indications that in practice women have not been able to achieve much through it but that the panchayats provide a base for them to begin the process of acquiring their right to be equal humans. Most participants being from tribal communities are governed by their customary law and do not have panchayats. So we reflected also on the impact of the customary law since its interface with modern inputs more often than not results in class formation in their egalitarian societies and deterioration of the woman's status. The participants, therefore, reflected on these issues and possible common action that can build on their past without absolutising tradition.

We also had other smaller meetings, for example the one on March 14 to reflect on the draft tribal policy of the Government of India and the National Rehabilitation Policy for Project Displaced Persons that was promulgated by the Government of India in February 2004. The policies have serious implications for the people of the Northeast. So NESRC will be continuing its involvement in the processes around these issues. We will take some initiatives and also join others in their work.

### ***Joining Other Processes***

While we organise or facilitate some processes ourselves, our major involvement is in initiatives taken by others. We gave some courses, took part in conferences as resource persons or active participants and presented papers at some of them. The following is a short list:

### ***Sanjay Barbora participated in***

The JACS South Asia Assessment Meeting of Ph. D Scholars, Kathmandu, March 23-29, 2004.

### ***Presented the following papers:***

“Autonomy or Death: Identity and Political Impasse over Issues of Ethnic Autonomy in Boroland, Assam,” *International Symposium on Regional and Ethnic Autonomy*. Uppsala, June 14-17, 2003.

“Forms of Autonomy: Assessing the Sixth Schedule in Northeast India,” *Working Groups Meeting on Forms of Autonomy*, Turku Abo, Finland, November 14-18, 2003.

“Conflict and Displacement in Assam: Ancient Geographies and Modern Tragedies,” Conference on Internal Displacement and Security. Kolkata: December 7-10, 2003.

“Quiet History, Unquiet people: The Tribal Question in Assam,” *Conference on Historiography of Assam*. Guwahati: Cotton College and Centre for Northeast India and South East Asia Studies, February 27, 2004.

### ***Gita Bharali and Walter Fernandes participated in:***

*Workshop on Women's Empowerment*, Guwahati: National Commission for Women and Assam Women's Welfare Commission, November 13, 2003.

*Development Intervention in Northeast India*, Guwahati: Omeo Kumar Das Institute for Social Change and Development, November 18, 2003.

***Gita Bharali presented the following papers***

“The Question of Livelihood and the Pagladia Dam Project in North East India,” Rasi Salai, Thailand: *Second International Meeting of Dam Affected People*. Nov. 28 to December 4, 2003.

“The Pagladia Dam and Water Resource Management in Assam,” *Seminar on Water Resource Management in the Northeast*. Mumbai: World Social Forum, January 16-21, 2004. Seminar organised by North East Indian Coordination Committee for the World Social Forum, January 20.

“Labour Unrest and Social Insecurity of Plantation Labourers: A Case Study,” *Seminar on Labour and Employment Relations in Plantations in a Globalising Economy*. Guwahati: V. V. Giri National Labour Institute and OKDISC, March 9-10, 2004.

***Walter Fernandes Participated in:***

*Workshop on Development Initiatives in Northeast India*, Guwahati: OKDISC, July 17-18, 2003.

World Social Forum Preparatory Meeting, Mumbai: South Asia People’s Initiative, July 26-27, 2003.

*Workshop on Regional Programme to Strengthen Equity and Livelihood Security through Sustainable Management of Biodiversity Resources for the Indigenous Peoples of the Eastern Himalayas*. Kathmandu: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, November 5-7, 2003.

***Was a Resource Person at:***

*Consultation “Stop Exploitation of Adivasi Women and Children”* Nagpur: Labour Commission CBCI and Caritas India, June 3-5.

*Consultation on Participatory Evaluation of ODAF*. Berhampur: Orissa Development Action Forum, December 12-15.

*International Policy Dialogue: Enabling Tribals and other Ethnic Groups to Manage Their Natural Resources*. Coimbatore: Karl Kubel Institute for Development Education.

Was one of the consultants assisting in the Evaluation for the Country Paper of Actionaid India.

Is one of the supervisors of the Peace Fellowship of CRS.

***Gave Sessions on:***

*Challenges of the Northeast*. Agartala: Holy Cross Institute, January 2-4, 2004.

*Human Rights in the Northeast*. Shillong: Nirmali, January 29-31, 2004.

***Presented the following papers:***

“The Impact of Globalisation on the Northeast,” Workshop on *Challenges of the Northeast*,

Guwahati: Women's Unit, NCCI, April 5-7, 2003.

"Equity, Poverty and the Natural Resources in the Northeast," *Consultation on Mainstreaming Equity in Common Property Resource Management in the Hindu-Kush Himalayas*. Kathmandu: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, August 5-7, 2003.

"The Social Role of the Diocesan Priest," *Convention of Diocesan Fraternity of the Northeast*. Tezpur: September 21-23, 2003.

"Globalisation, Culture, Fundamentalism and the Role of the Formator in the Northeast," Guwahati: *Convention of Formators*, November 21-23, 2003.

"Community Resources, Tribals and Carbon Sinks," *Seminar on Climate Change*. Mumbai: World Social Forum Jan. 16-21, Indian Network on Climate Change and Ethics, January 19, 2004.

"Community Resource Alienation and Tribals," *Seminar on Common Property: Community vs. Corporates*. Mumbai: World Social Forum, January 16-21, 2004, Organised by Orissa Development Action Forum, January 20.

"Water Resources, Displacement and Dams in the Northeast," *Seminar on Water Resource Management in the Northeast*. Mumbai, World Social Forum, January 16-21, 2004. Seminar organised by North East Indian Coordination Committee for the World Social Forum, January 20.

"Environment, Society, Biodiversity and Impact on Development," *Green Productivity Day* organised by National Productivity Council and Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra, February 19.

"Forest Issues, Forest Dwellers and Emerging Situations," *National Seminar on Human Origins, Genome and People of India*. New Delhi: Anthropological Survey of India March 22-24, 2004.

"Human Rights in the Northeast," *Training Programme of Activists on Rights Based Entitlements*, Guwahati: IIMC and the Danish Embassy, March 30, 2004.

***Melville Pereira presented a paper on:***

"Modernisation of Customary Laws as Constraint to Development in the Northeast" *National Conference on Institutional Barriers to Development in the Northeast*, Kohima: Nagaland University and Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, March 29-30, 2004.

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