

# North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati



## Annual Report, April 2023 to March 2024

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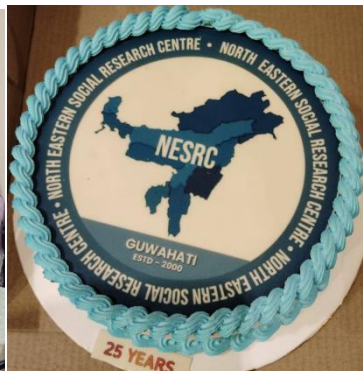
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### Introduction

North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) founded on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2000 completed 24 years of service to the people of Northeast India and began its silver jubilee year on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024. We, therefore, begin this 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the silver jubilee year of NESRC with gratitude to all those who have stood by us during this year and for a quarter of a century. The report begins with the mandate of NESRC in the form of its vision and mission statements. It is followed by the activities that indicate how as in the past, during 2023-24 too NESRC has made an effort to live up to the spirit of these statements. As the statements given below say, its mandate is to combine serious research with involvement in the field and encourage others, especially the youth, to do research on issues of relevance to the Northeast. NESRC has tried to live up to its mandate through research, the library, documentation, networking with civil society groups active among the marginalised and others involved in processes aimed at policy changes in favour of the poor. Also its publications and professional and newspaper articles of its staff try the same path.



## The Vision Statement of NESRC

North Eastern Social Research Centre is to be a centre working closely with other researchers and social activists involved with the cause of the marginalised communities in Northeast India. It will attempt to combine serious intellectual pursuits with networking with researchers taking up similar issues and with civil society groups active among the marginalised communities in the region. Through networking with researchers, people active among the marginalised and on peace issues, it will strive to support advocacy for policy changes in favour of the marginalised and of peace with justice. The focus of its research and action will be the indigenous, especially tribal communities, gender, livelihood issues, conflicts and peace and tribal culture and folklore. It is to be a meeting point for dialogue and confidence-building among the North Eastern ethnic communities in conflict.

## The Mission Statement of NESRC

*The mission of North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) is to encourage the youth of Northeast India for the service of the tribal, indigenous, Adivasi and other marginalised communities of the Northeast, particularly women among them.*

*\* NESRC will attempt to live up to this mission by itself doing research and networking with civil society groups, researchers and decision-makers for advocacy for change of policies in favour of the marginalised communities.*

*\* A tool of accomplishing it is to combine good quality professional research with concerted action to accompany these communities in their search for peace and reconciliation based on justice and equality.*

*\* Conflict and peace studies, tribal, gender, ecology and livelihood issues will get priority in the research and field action of NESRC.*

*\* In these efforts NESRC will inspire the youth of the Region to undertake research and action in favour of these and other communities on the margins of society.*

*\* These activities are undertaken in order to move towards a just society in Northeast India, based on peace and justice, equality and reconciliation.*

The pages below give information on some of our activities during 2023-24. While presenting this Annual Report we assure you and our other partners that NESRC remains committed to making a contribution to the building of an inclusive society where all are counted, included, and provided with a voice in shaping their own destiny. This spirit is maintained by our staff members some of whom left after completing their contract and others joined and continued the NESRC mandate. Three studies were completed during the year and three publications were brought out. NESRC organised a national seminar & a regional workshop and joined others in organising more of them

## STUDIES

**Research is the mainstay of NESRC. During 2023-24 we completed three important studies on food sovereignty, women & migration, child labour in the Assam tea gardens. Others like training peace activists in four states and women & ecology are ongoing.**

### STUDIES COMPLETED

#### 1. **Nipasa Dutta** *Women, Work & Community in the Context of Migration in Northeast India*

The study published as a book, *Continuities of Migration: Women, Work, and Belonging in Northeast India* was done in four districts of NE India, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Chirang in Assam and East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya. It tried to capture the experiences of women rural-to-rural, urban-urban, rural-urban & inter-state migrants for reasons such as their own or spouse's work, marriage, better lifestyle etc. The main areas studied are the nuances in women's pre-and post-migration negotiations; the interplay of women, kin and community in the lives of migrant women; what leisure means to them and how they partake in leisure activities; the process of belonging and forming an identity in an unfamiliar territory and their safety and access in new places. The study examined comprehensively the aspects of migrant women's lives concerning their sense of belonging, adaptation, and life at their destination.



#### 2. **Dr. Dixita Deka and Dr Meenal Tula**, post-doctoral Fellows were part of the project *Practicing Food Sovereignty: Indigenous Peoples and Agro-Ecological Relationships in the Eastern Himalayas* which was completed in December 2023.

This project aimed at exploring the agricultural practices and food cultures of the indigenous peoples in the Eastern Himalayas. It engaged specifically with the idea of food sovereignty as inspired by the international movement *La Via Campesina*, as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their food and agricultural system.” One of its key outputs was the book, *Seeds and Food Sovereignty: Eastern Himalayan Experiences* authored by Dixita Deka, Joel Rodrigues, Dolly Kikon, Bengt Karlsson, Sanjay Barbora, and Meenal Tula, and published by North Eastern Social Research Centre in 2023. The book upholds the rights of the indigenous peoples in shaping their agricultural journeys, unravels the stories of seed savers and indigenous food practitioners from Northeast India, introduces seed stories and indigenous knowledge from Bangladesh, focuses on heritage and new crops in the Eastern Himalayas including Bhutan, and follows the trajectories of food changes in the Everest region of Nepal. Other outputs of the project included a special issue of *Social Action* (October 2023) on *Food Sovereignty and Environmental Justice* edited by Sanjay Barbora and Meenal Tula; a documentary *Abundance: Living with a Forest* by Dolly Kikon; an edited volume *Food Journeys: Stories from the Heart* by Dolly Kikon & Joel Rodrigues; two workshops at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati and Dibrugarh University; an international conference

at Tezpur University; and the co-organised *Tokhu Emong Bird Count* in collaboration with the Wokha Forest Division and the Divisional Management Unit, Nagaland Forest Management Project, Bird Count India, powered by eBird India. Papers based on the project have also been accepted in peer reviewed journals and published in popular media forums. The ongoing work has also been shared at workshops, conferences & invited talks in Northeast India, Nepal, Canada, South Africa, USA, New Zealand, Australia.

### **3. Kallol Deka.** *Child Labour in the Tea Gardens of Assam.*

Child labour continues to be a persistent problem globally and is more pronounced in low and middle income countries like India. Its prevalence in the tea gardens of Assam has been historically documented. Even after 200 years of the Assam Tea Industry, child labour continues to persist in the plantations in various forms. The plantations have also become a source of supply of child labour as domestic helps and baby-sitters in affluent and middle-class households in the towns and cities of Assam, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh and in 'Mainland' India, because factors like poverty, lack of access to education and health, weak governance structures etc expose them to vulnerability and exploitation. Because of this desperate situation parents sometimes feel it to be the best option for their children. Using secondary data this report attempts to highlight the various rights and entitlements of children under different international and Indian provisions through which their condition can be improved. It also tries to understand the prevalence of child labour, its enabling factors, risks, vulnerabilities and the degree of exploitation children are exposed to within the plantations.

## ONGOING STUDIES

**A few studies started during 2023-24 are continuing beyond the end of the financial year**

### **1. Nipasa Dutta and Dejna Daulagupu.** *Women and Ecology in Northeast India*

The study focuses on exploring the relationship of women from the Dimasa, Karbi and Khasi communities with their ecology. By placing women at the centre of these dynamics, the study aims to unfold the relationships that they form with various ecological entities, and to understand the knowledge systems in place among the indigenous communities. Within this overarching theme the study emphasises the concept of conservation and examines how the communities practise it while also considering the involvement of other stakeholders like the government, industrialists, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

### **2. An Eco-Linguistic Documentation and Revitalisation of Songs, Mythology, Folklore and Sustainable Practices of the Hrusso Aka People of Arunachal Pradesh.**

Done in collaboration with the North Eastern Institute for Language and Culture (NEILAC) and the Aka Shotuko Kunu (the apex body), the Aka Language Academy, was planned in response to a request from the Hrusso Aka indigenous community through the Language Academy, and a team of young Hrusso speakers who documented their endangered Hrusso Aka language from 2015 to 2019. After evaluating this work, the community felt that the resources available to them should be enhanced by focusing on their ecological knowledge, with focus on their eco-centric cultural practices and worldview. The 2015-19 project, being primarily linguistic in nature, did not specifically focus on their cultural practices and worldview, hence this follow up. During preliminary meetings, the Aka Language Academy and community leaders advocated among others, village-level awareness drives, production of digital media, incorporation of cultural narratives in their textbooks. Thus, the focus of the study that began in May 2023 is on their language, culture and eco-centric worldview.



### **3. Dr N. Lalpekhlu and Timothy Khongsai.** *Socio-Economic Impacts of Commercial Plantations in Northeast India: Focus on Oil Palm Plantations*

The study builds on past research on the socio-economic impacts of commercial plantations like rubber in East Garo Hills, coffee and tea among the Karbi and Dimasa in Assam and searches for alternatives to shifting cultivation by some groups of Khasi women in Meghalaya. Like rubber in the 1980s and coffee and tea in the 1990s and the first decade of the present century, today a major thrust is given to oil palm plantations in the Northeast. Oil palms have been planted in Mizoram since 2005 and on an experimental basis in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in recent years. More are being planned in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland. The past studies can help one to understand the impacts of these plantations.

**4. Dr. Walter Fernandes & Hunti Haisa.** *Empowering Communities and Institutions for Peace Building in Northeast India.* The project combines training with research to help peace activists to develop their analytical skills, to help them facilitate a peace process among the communities in conflict. It was realised after some years of experience, that the peace activists have themselves internalised the stereotypes of their community towards others. To be effective, they need to free themselves from this bias. This project is an attempt to help the peace activists of five partner organisations to deal with this possible bias.

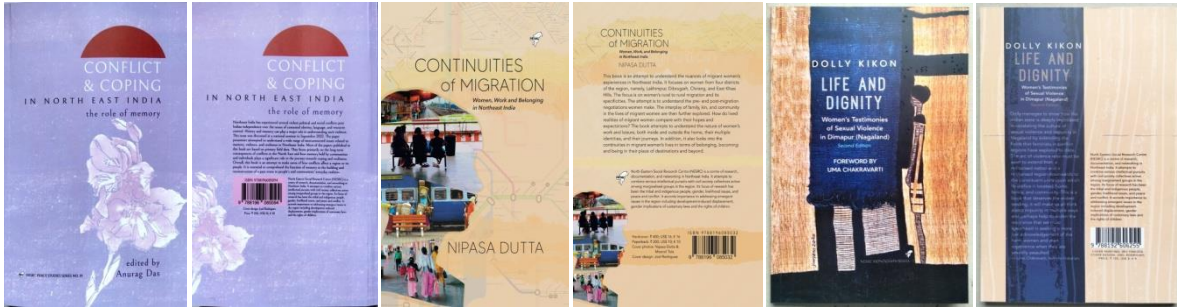
## **PUBLICATIONS: BOOKS**

**Some of our research took the form of the following publications of NESRC while some staff members wrote professional and newspaper articles that were published by others.**

**1. Anurag Das (ed) 2023.** *Conflict & Coping in Northeast India: The Role of Memory (PB).* pp. xiv+216; Price: INR 250; USD 10/-; Euro 10/- ISBN 978-81-960850-9-4

**2. Nipasa Dutta. 2023.** *Continuities of Migration: Women, Work, and Belonging in Northeast India.* Pp xii +164. Price: (HB) INR 400; USD 16; Euro 16; (PB) INR 200; USD 10; Euro 10; ISBN 978-81-960850-3-2

**3. Dolly Kikon. 2023.** *Life & Dignity: Women's Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Dimapur Nagaland 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* PB pp. 112; Price INR 125; USD 8; Euro 8; ISBN 978-81-926062-5-5



## PROFESSIONAL

**The fruits of research often find outlets in journals and edited books, as professional articles. The following articles of the staff members were published during 2023-24**

**Dr Dixita Deka.** 2023. “Rumours, Suspicions, and the Making of the Narrative: Remembering the Secret Killings in Assam.” In B. Iangngap, M.Dunai and G.Lyngdoh (ed) *Blood and Tears*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company (P) Ltd, pp. 137-148.

**Dr Dixita Deka & Dipti Tamang.** 2023. “Writing in-between: Research, Resistance, and Academic Practices” In Aliya Khalid, Georgina Holmes and Jane Parpart (ed). *Silence, Voice and the In-between: Exploring a World in Flux*, Routledge, pp.19-35.

### Book Reviews by Dr Dixita Deka

“ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn” Rajeev Bhattacharyya in *Biblio*, January-March 2024, pp. 29-30.

“A Compendium of Water Stories: North-East India, Editors: K.K.Chatradhara and S.K. Chakraborty” in *Social Action*, October-December 2023, 73(4), pp. 459-461.

### Dr Walter Fernandes

2023. “Land Laws, Development & Globalisation in Northeast India,” in Sumi Krishna (ed). *Routledge Readings in Security and Governance in Northeastern India: Resource Conflicts, Militarisation and Development Challenges*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 23-36.

2023 “Development-Induced Displacement in India: Search for Alternatives,” *The Fletcher Review of World Affairs* (Tufts University, Medford, USA). Vol. 47, Summer, pp. 77-88.

“Manipur: Challenge to Christians for Peace-Building,” *Word & Worship*, 56 (n. 4, October-December), pp. 235-292.

**Dr Meenal Tula** with Prof. Sanjay Barbora was Guest Editor of the special issue on “Economies of Care: Imagining Food Sovereign Communities in Eastern Himalayas”. *Social Action* 73 (N. 4, Oct-Dec 2023). Food Sovereignty & Environmental Justice in NE India

## NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

**Newspaper articles are one more way of sharing the findings of our research. The staff members of NESRC wrote a few such articles during the year**

**Dr Dixita Deka & Dr Dolly Kikon.** “Guerrilla Gardens: Memories and Hope in a Lemon Orchard” *The India Forum*, 21 July 2023.

## Dr Walter Fernandes

“A Land in Trouble” *The Telegraph*, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2023.

“Uniform Civil Code, Women, Class and the Tribes,” *The Arunachal Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2023  
(Also *The Shillong Times* and *The Morung Express*, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2023).

“Manipur: Ethnic Conflict Communalised,” *Pax Lumina* July 2023 (Also *JIVAN* July 2023).

“Manipur: Where do We Go from Here?” *The Citizen*, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2023.

“In the War-torn West Asia Christians should be Agents of Peace,” *JIVAN*, February 2024.

Had a 40 minute interview with Karan Thapar on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2023 on the Manipur conflict.

## SEMINARS & WORKSHOPS

Seminars are an important step in sharing our research and building alliances with civil society, researchers and policy makers for policy changes in favour of the marginalised. NESRC organised three seminars during 2022-23 and co-sponsored some others.

### Organised by North Eastern Social Research Centre during 2023-24

1. International Seminar *Food, Culture and Community: Agro-ecological Practices in Northeast India*, Organised by NESRC at Tezpur University August 4-5, 2023, in collaboration with the Department of Sociology, Nutrition & Community Action Resource Centre (NCARe), Tezpur University, the University of Melbourne, Stockholm University. The paper presenters explored connections of food practices, justice, and sovereignty in Northeast India and focused on some ongoing practices and initiatives on the ground around food. Participating in the conference were academics and researchers from 15 universities and 5 organisations. During the conference was inaugurated the publicity campaign for the *Tokhü Emong Bird Count (TEBC) 2023*, the first bird documentation event in Nagaland organised by the Wokha Forest Division and the Divisional Management Unit, Nagaland Forest Management Project, Bird Count India, powered by eBird India. This year, NESRC joined the bird count as research partners providing research, design and publicity support.



2. National Seminar *Ecological Futures: Communities, Conflicts & Contestations in Northeast India*. 2-3 November, 2023. Northeast India in the Eastern Himalayas is one of the most important mega-biodiversity zones, biodiversity hotspots and carbon sinks on earth. Ecology has for centuries been the source and centre of livelihood and identity of the more than 200 communities of the region. It facilitates the life of not only human communities but also of a wide diversity of other non-human entities. Indigenous communities have through centuries been custodians of the forests and waters, living in a cycle of interdependence with the other beings. But these resources have today become a source of conflicts so alternatives have to be



found to the type of development and resource management that lead to conflicts.

3. *Workshop on Child Labour in the Tea Gardens of Assam*, January 23-24. The workshop brought together researchers and civil society groups acting on the issue of child labour in Assam. After the presentation of the report by Kallol Deka followed a very good sharing by the participants. The workshop is intrinsic to advocacy on this issue that began with the study and will continue after it.



### **Meetings and Interaction with Young Researchers and Students**

1. *Book Fair and Discussion*. NESRC had a successful participation in the *Assam Book Fair* at the Assam Engineering College, Guwahati, December 29, 2023 to January 9, 2024. On January 2, NESRC organised a session for young researchers at the Fair grounds on *Roots and Resilience: A Discussion on Doing Research in Northeast India*. Most of its more than 70 participants were young researchers. After presenting the overall research scenario of NESRC three recent publications were presented and the approach to their research analysed. Good discussion followed.





2. On January 4, 2024 Some students and three faculty of Center for Peacemaking, Marquette University, Milwaukee spent time with the NESRC staff listening to the type of research they do, with special focus on the peace project and the role of research and social analysis in peacemaking which NESRC is attempting. Interesting discussion followed that the students seem to have appreciated.



3. On 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 fourteen students and a faculty member of NEISSR, Chumukedima, Nagaland spent two hours with NESRC as part of their academic tour. NESRC staff presented their work. Good discussion followed on research objectives and methodology.



### **Seminars Organised by Other Organisations and Co-sponsored by NESRC**

1. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2023. JUST, Agartala organised a workshop on *Peace Initiatives for the youth and community leaders*, in collaboration with NESRC.

2. On 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2023. Jirsong Asong, Diphu organised a Seminar on *Leadership in Ethnic Communities amid Challenges*, in collaboration with NESRC.

3. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February DSSS, Imphal brought together some civil society groups to discuss the possibility of initiating a dialogue for peace in conflict-ridden Manipur.

## Participation in Seminars

**Apart from organising seminars, the staff members of NESRC attended seminars, presented the following papers at seminars or gave lectures or were resource persons**

**Dejna Daulagupu.** “Phadaing-Jhum among the Dimasa of Dima Hasao,” at the *International Seminar on Food, Culture and Community: Agro-ecological Practices in Northeast India*, jointly organised by NESRC with the Department of Sociology & Community Action Resource (NCARe) Centre, Department of Social Work, Tezpur University & others, August 4-5, 2023.

**Dr Dixita Deka.** “Cropping the Camps: Insurgency, Rehabilitation, and Food Sovereignty in Northeast India” at the *25th New Zealand Asian Studies International Conference*, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 29 November-1 December 2023.

**Nipasa Dutta.** ‘Adversities, Resilience and the Everyday: Informal Migrant Women Workers in Northeast India,’ *XVII National Conference of Indian Association of Women’s Studies*. Organised by Indian Association of Women’s Studies (IAWS) in collaboration with Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, 7-10 September, 2023.

### Dr Walter Fernandes

“Assam Budgets 2020-2023 and the Girl Child’s Education,” *Multi-Stake Holder Consultation on Child Trafficking* organised by Caritas Northeast, Guwahati: 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2023.

“Where do Tribal Politics Stand in Northeast India,” Keynote address (online), Seminar *Tribal Politics in Northeast India: Navigating Identity, Autonomy and Development*, Organised by the Department of Political Science, St Joseph University, Chumukedima, Nagaland, February 22, 2024.

“Peacemaking in Ethnic Conflicts,” *International Conference on Peace and Reconciliation: A Journey towards the Reign of God*. Delhi: Vidyajyoti, February 27-29, 2024.

### Dr Meenal Tula

“Planting Hope: Rebuilding Upland Agriculture through Heritage Crops” (co-authored with Prof. Bengt G. Karlsson) at POLLEN 2023, at Howard College, University of Kwala-Zulu Natal, Durban, South Africa, June 27-29, 2023.

“Seeds of Resistance: Indigenous Women’s ‘Acts of Care’ as Everyday Strategies” (co-authored with Dr. Pallavi Raonka, University of Missouri) at *Dimensions of Political Ecology Conference (Hybrid mode)*, University of Kentucky, February 23, 2024.

## RESOURCE PERSONS

### Dr Dixita Deka

‘Converting Field Observations into Academic Writing’ at *Academic Paper Writing Workshop* Guwahati: Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, 12-14 September 2023.

‘Conflict, Social Development, and Research’ Guest Lecture at the course *Project Management in Development Sector* Guwahati: Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, 28 December 2023.

### **Dr Walter Fernandes**

“Forests in the Northeast,” Public lecture organised by School of Environmental Studies, *Tata Institute of Social Sciences*, Guwahati Campus, 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2023

“Development-Induced Displacement and Tribes,” Online lecture, *Tata Institute of Social Sciences*, Mumbai, 28 December, 2023.

**Dr Meenal Tula.** “Integrating Climate Change into NEP Curriculum” *Capacity Building Program for College Teachers*.Guwahati: Cotton University, February 7, 2024.

**Dr Walter Fernandes** Participated in a meeting organised by Vikasamvesh Foundation on *Interaction between the Governments & Civil Society Groups in Assam*, 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2024.

With Mr Anurag Das, participated in the Consultation *on the Child Budget and Girls’ Education* organised by HAQ – Centre for Child Rights, New Delhi, 27<sup>th</sup> April. 2023.

### **Timothy Khongsai**

Inland Waterways in the Northeastern Region organised by Manthan and Northeast Water Talk. Guwahati: March 16, 2024.

Young Scholars’ Seminar Series 2023-24, organised by Foundation of Agrarian Studies

*Ashpriya Rohman.* “*India’s Decade: Apna Time Aa Gaya.*” a talk by Radhika Gupta, organised by Sarawgi Finserves, Guwahati: 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

## **LIBRARY**



As NESRC completes 24 glorious years and enters its 25<sup>th</sup> year in March 2024, we are happy to report that the library has been growing in its holdings of books and journals, and that the resources are being used by an increasing number of students, scholars and researchers. The library has an extensive collection of books on specialised topics in social sciences in general and on Northeast India, in particular. With 525 new books purchased during April 2023-March 2024, the number of volumes in the library has gone beyond 11,000. A number of titles related to food practices and indigenous food culture were added this year, so were studies related to the pandemic and its effects on society. Other topics added include women and ecology, internet studies, media studies and data analysis. The library subscribes to more than 30 journals and periodicals. Some of them are preserved as bound volumes for future reference. Five newspapers are being scanned and catalogued by the Documentation Centre. More than

13,000 newspaper articles were scanned, catalogued and uploaded during the year and we expect to speed it up during the next year. The library being managed by the librarian Ms Rita Xess, was used, apart from our own staff, by scholars from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati and Mumbai, NEF Law College, Gauhati University, Assam Don Bosco University, Assam University, Silchar, JNU, IIT (Guwahati, Mumbai and Delhi), Delhi University, Jamia Milia Islamia, Royal Global University, Tezpur University, Cotton University, IGNOU and others like some scholars from foreign universities like Stanford University, as well as journalists and social activists. We make the library facility available to students and scholars free of charge, to read the books in the reference room. Photocopying facilities too are provided. The website of NESRC has been updated and we hope to soon upload the library catalogue on it in order to make it easy for the users to locate the material they need. The library has gained popular recognition in academic circles because of the collections acquired through careful selection. It has been possible because the support received from various funding agencies all these years.



Most of what NESRC has achieved during the year and during the last quarter of a century has been possible because of the commitment of its staff. They did the fieldwork for the studies, got the reports and books ready for publication, organised seminars, wrote papers, kept in touch with the friends and associates of NESRC. More than fifty of them have passed through the portals of NESRC during this quarter of a century. Given here is the photo of the staff members who worked during 2023-24.

Front Row: Dr Meenal Tula, Ashpriya Rohman, Rita Xess, Dr Walter Fernandes, Hunti Haisa, Dr Dixita Deka. 2<sup>nd</sup> Row: Joel Rodrigues, Dejna Daulagupu, Timothy Khongsai, Nipasa Dutta, Mrinmoy Kalita, Mary Nomita Devi, Kallol Deka, Nirab Bora, Dr. N. Lalpekhlu

As we end this report we place on record our gratitude to those who have given us financial and professional support. We would not have been able to work without it. We thank NED Social Forum, Guwahati, TISS, Guwahati, Misereor, Aachen, Germany, Jesuiten Mission, Nurnberg, Germany, KFB-DKA, Wien, Austria, Stiftung Jesuit Welweit, Zurich, Switzerland, Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, IWGIA Copenhagen, UMI Province, USA, BGSS, Bongaigaon, Jirsong Asong, Diphu, Peace Channel, Chumukedima, DSSS, Imphal, JUST Agartala and others who have been partners of NESRC since its inception on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2000.