

THE NORTH EASTERN SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE DURING 2000-2001

The North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) founded in late 1999, started functioning in a rented house on March 1, 2000. Our mandate is to be a centre combining serious intellectual pursuits with involvement with persons and groups active in social change in the region. In the context of the ethnic and political divide in the Northeast, it is to provide a platform for groups in conflict to meet and search for solutions. NESRC is also to be a node to encourage intellectual and activist pursuits in the region. Instead of centralising work, it is to help smaller units evolve in the Northeast. During these years we have tried to live up to this mandate. On 1st March 2000 we began with a research associate and a secretary. A second researcher joined us in August 2000. Dr Alphonsus D'Souza, Professor and Head, Department of Sociology, St Joseph's College, Jakhama and Associate Director, NESRC and his team of two lecturers do research from Nagaland.

Basic to making a contribution to the region is an understanding of the issues that are relevant to the Northeast. The second is the need to combine serious professional work with field involvement. With our small number we need to limit our involvement to issues to which we can do justice. So we selected them according to our capacity. Since we would like to join the initiatives of others and invite others to join ours, we tried to identify groups with whom we could collaborate in this work. We decided to focus on a library, research and on bringing people together.

1. Library and Documentation

In order to turn NESRC into a place where scholars, social activists and others can meet and discuss issues of relevance to the region, we gave priority to a library and documentation on the region. We began it with 1,000 books of a personal library that was transferred to the Centre. Another 200 books on the Northeast were donated by our friends. We then bought 400 more books on the region. During the next few years we hope to add around 500 books to the library every year.

The library has more than 30 journals, some of them sent free by our friends. While subscribing to them we gave priority to those that are not easily available in the region. Documentation took a little longer. We buy 3 English and 2 Assamese dailies from Assam, 2 from Kolkata and 2 from Delhi and are trying to get some from other North Eastern States. We have organised paper cuttings and other material by themes and States of the region. We hope to copy most of it on the scanner and make it available to scholars and the voluntary sector who want to access it in a floppy or CD. With that in view, during 2000 we made an investment on 3 computers, a printer and a scanner.

2. Professional Research

Research is our other priority. Much has been written on the region based on secondary data. Most primary data based studies are on the situation of conflict. We decided to go beyond it to focus on issues that could help us to understand its causes and possible solutions. The research team consists of Dr Alphonsus D'Souza and 2 lecturers of St Joseph's college, Jakhama, with Dr Walter Fernandes and 2 research associates based in Guwahati. We encourage the researchers to use the data to do their doctorate, in accordance with our effort to help build up research units and persons.

Studies Done Till Now

Dr Alphonsus D'Souza, Associate Director of NESRC has completed his study on the Forest Conservation Systems of the Angami tribe of Nagaland. It was published in 2001. Within the Northeast we are in the process of completing the following studies:

1. Social Change in the Northeast;
2. Changing Land Relations in the Northeast.
3. Changing Women's Status in the Northeast.

They are comparative studies of six tribes in four States: the Adivasi, Boro and Dimasa of Assam, Aka of Arunachal Pradesh, Angami of Nagaland and the Garo of Meghalaya. Much has changed in the Northeast during the last three decades. Some think that modernisation goes against the tribals in general and women in particular. In these studies we try to identify the major changes that have occurred during the last three decades with focus on the land issue and women's status. During 2001 we did field work on two of them. The data have been computerised and tabulated and the draft reports are getting ready. They will be revised after getting feedback and published by March 2002. We expect to complete the study on changing land relations during 2002.

The Studies on Displacement

In 2000 we started work on the study "Development-Induced Displacement in West Bengal." It is integral to an All India effort to build a database on all displacement in the country, 1951-1995. It has three phases. The first is all the notifications on land acquisition from the State Gazettes. The second is to document all the data on development projects implemented in the State, preserved in the land records and archives of the district collectorate, the project site and Ministries, studies done by other researchers or preserved in documentation centres. The third phase is to interview around 700 project displaced and deprived persons in each State for qualitative information.

The West Bengal study has been delayed because of constant strikes that made it impossible for us to keep to our schedule. We began it 3 months later than planned. Two months were lost because of the unprecedented floods in October 2000. State elections were held in May 2001. So no official could be contacted for some months before them. Field work could not be done because of tension in the villages. Moreover, the database is bigger than envisaged. So we took a deliberate decision to delay the study by a year. By now the 60,000 notifications on land acquisition 1951-1995 have been computerised, so also the 4,000 schedules filled from data from the district collectorates and other sources and the 725 schedules of primary data. The draft report is being got ready.

This is the only involvement outside the North East. Under the guidance of Dr Walter Fernandes Indian Social Institute (ISI), New Delhi has completed these studies in Orissa, Jharkhand and Goa. ISI, Bangalore has done it in Kerala and is doing it in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The Andhra Pradesh study was completed in 2001 in the joint name of NESRC and ISI. Partners have been identified for the remaining States outside the Northeast where the study has not been done. They were scheduled to meet to plan the studies in March 2001 and begin them in mid-2001. But because of the Gujarat earthquake the meeting was postponed. They hope to get the studies ready in the near future and launch them in April 2002. NESRC will do this study in the Northeast.

These studies were a collaborative effort. We did the West Bengal study with St Xavier's College, Kolkata, Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, Department of Social Work, Viswa Bharati, St Joseph's College, Darjeeling and the University Evening College, Cooch Behar. The studies in the Northeast were done with St Joseph's College, Jakhama, and field groups.

Future Plans

During the next two years, we hope to continue to work with the tribes in the Northeast with which we did the studies in 2001. The exception to it is a short term study being conducted on the socio-economic situation of the Nagaon Region in Assam to be completed by March 2002. We hope to study the following areas from April 2002:

- a. *Development-Induced Displacement in the Northeast, 1951-1995.* We hope to begin this 18 month study in April 2002 in cooperation with scholars of universities and research institutions.

- b. *Tribal Learning Systems*: Educationists adapt the teaching systems to the needs of the tribals. On the assumption that the limited success of some of these efforts may be because their learning systems are different, we plan to study this aspect in co-operation with St Paul Institute of Education, Nagaland. It can also help develop smaller units doing educational research.
- c. *A Bio-Diversity Register*: The Northeast is considered a mega-biodiversity zone in South Asia. But very little of it has been recorded. Bio-piracy is high by commercial and industrial enterprises. The tribals who have developed knowledge systems around them are the losers. We would like to join the efforts of others who have made a beginning in recording the bio-diversity of the region and the knowledge systems of the tribal communities and in working for a benefit-sharing system to counter the clauses of the WTO Agreement that go against them.
- d. *Tribal Land Laws and Customary Laws*: An important development in the last three decades is the changing land relations among the tribals of the Northeast. Land alienation is high and they are often unable to deal with the legal system around land. On the other side, their customary laws need to be analysed from the gender perspective. Hence the need to study them.

3. Going Beyond Academic Studies

Our mandate is not to remain at academic studies but combine serious professional work with involvement in the field. We want a combination of activism with academic studies. We did the above studies among tribes where voluntary agencies are active in developmental work with the hope of assisting them to better analyse the situation around them and further improve their contribution to the tribals. We hope to continue to work with them. That is also the reason why we chose tribes in transition to a new identity, in order to assist them in their search. The Aka in Arunachal Pradesh have remained isolated till recently. The Adivasi who were brought from Jharkhand as indentured labour more than a century ago have lost much of their old identity but are yet to attain a new one. The Boro were formerly rulers of much of lower Assam but today they are in conflict with others for their livelihood and protection of their identity. The Dimasa who were Hinduised in the 19th century are trying to revert to their tribal identity through cultural revival and education. The Angami of Nagaland who were in the forefront of the insurgency have invested much on education. It has given a new dimension to their identity and outlook on the struggle. The Garo of Meghalaya are less exposed than the Angami to modernity but are in struggle for their livelihood. Voluntary agencies are active among them through self-help and co-operatives.

Thus each tribe has something to learn from and to share with the others. We plan to help in this sharing through an exposure programme of their leaders to the culture and economy of each other. They can thus make a contribution to the economy and society of the others and introduce correctives to the negative elements, if any, in their own culture and economy that make it difficult for them to deal with the “mainstream” culture and economy. This mutual learning can also build up solidarity and self-confidence in their capacity to deal with the world outside their communities.

Bringing People Together

A tool we have used to bring people together and take the issues raised beyond academic circles is conferences based on our studies. In West Bengal, we hope to use the post-study conference to put people in that State in touch with others involved in issues of displacement. So we plan to invite to it persons from Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Chattisgarh who are involved in it. They will share their experiences, plan common action and support each other.

In the Northeast we have organised two national conferences during the last two years and have had smaller regional meetings. Among the latter was a meeting on the six proposed central laws that have implications for the region. The first national conference was on “Climate Change and Tribal Sustainable Living with Focus on the Northeast”, September 4-6, 2000, was organised in

collaboration with Indian Network on Ethics and Climate Change. Its first objective was to make the voluntary sector in the region aware of the issues around climate change. The second was to prepare a set of suggestions for the stand of the Indian Government at the Conference of Parties.

The Conference on “Changing Status of Women with Special Focus on the North East”, October 11-13, 2001 is integral to the studies being done. It was organised in collaboration with four other agencies. We invited for it two leaders from each group working in the areas where we did the study in order to facilitate follow up. Once the reports are ready we plan to summarise them and send them to the groups who will translate them into the local language and discuss them with the people. As stated above, in March 2002 we plan an exposure programme of these six tribes to the economy and culture of each other. Six persons from each of them will visit the others for five days and then meet in Guwahati to share their experience and plan future action together. Its first objective is to help them to realise that they need not always go to outsiders to learn, that they have something to contribute to and learn from the other tribes.

Involvement in Issues Relevant to the Region

Another side of the effort to combine serious research with action is involvement in issues relevant to the region. We have been intentionally slow in it. Being new, we need to first get in touch with groups that are active in these areas. Besides, we are 3 professionals and a secretary at Guwahati and 3 college teachers in Nagaland doing part time research. Demands on us are heavy and we needed time to set up the Centre. We also we need to make the issues concerning the Northeast known in the rest of India and analyse national issues in the regional context. We view it as a concrete contribution to the promotion of justice. Those of us coming from outside the region have to make an extra effort to understand the Northeast. So our involvement was limited.

The follow up of our studies and training programmes are intrinsic to it. In April-May 2000 we organised a five-week research programme on “Social Change among the Tribals” for 8 Jesuit scholastics. Its evaluation showed that it was a good effort but needed modifications in the next phase. It also functioned as a pilot study for our research. In collaboration with the North East Diocesan Social Forum in October 2001 we got involved in five days of training and social analysis for 40 animators from. We view it as the first step in what we hope will be a collaborative effort to build up a team of trainers who work in their own areas but are available for training voluntary workers in health, law, agriculture and self-help etc. within the context of the social analysis.

4. Courses and Seminars

We have also been attending seminars and conference and giving talks and presenting papers at them. The following is a list of some such workshops and seminars.

Workshops and Seminars

Sanjay Barbora

1. “Human Rights and Politics in Assam”, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, January 3, 2001.
2. “Human Rights in the University Curriculum”, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, February 16, 2001.
3. “Human Rights Defenders in Armed Conflict Situations”, organised by Amnesty International, Kolkata, March 29-31, 2001.

4. "The Indigenous Question and the Right to Self Determination in North East India", organised by NECOHR, Guwahati, May 17, 2001.
5. "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.

Walter Fernandes

1. " Tribal Rights in India," Bhopal, February 22-24, 2000.
2. "Right to Health and the Poor" Keynote Address, Annual Meeting of the North Eastern Community Health Association, Dimapur, May 5, 2000.
3. "The Adivasi and Basic Human Communities," NED Social Forum, Guwahati, May 25, 2000.
4. "Education and Tribal Identity," Keynote Address at the Annual Meeting of the North Eastern Education Council, September 16, 2000.
5. The "Socio-Economic Situation in India". *National Kristu Jayanti Assembly of the Church*, September 22, 2000.
6. "Displacement in Orissa," Vishakapatnam, September 23-24, 2000.
7. "Human Rights for the Rich and the Poor" Annual Staff-Student Seminar of Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, November 30, 2000.
8. "Development-Induced Displacement in Kerala, 1951-1995" Trivandrum, December 5, 2000.
9. "Conflicts and Peace in South Asia," New Delhi, August 26-28, 2001.
10. "Globalisation and Ethics of a Single Culture," Keynote Address, *International Conference, Inter-Cultural Philosophy in the Context of Globalisation*, Bangalore, September 17-21, 2001.
11. "Land, Water and Airas Community Livelihood: Impact of Globalisation," *Faith and Ecology Conference Land Water Air: Pelole Struggling for Life*, Bangalore: December 10-15, 2001.

Sanjay Barbora and Walter Fernandes

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.

Courses

Sanjay Barbora

1. "Basic Human Communities," NED Social Forum, October 15-20, 2001.

Walter Fernandes

1. "The Social Situation in the Northeast" Oriens, Shillong, October 6-7, 2000.
2. "Research for Social Change." UGC Refresher Course for Lecturers, Vishwa Bharati University, Santiniketan, November 21, 2000.
3. "The Approach to Development," Administrative Staff College, Kolkata, May 15, 2001.
4. "The Bases of Land Laws," Refresher Course for Law Teachers, National Law School of India University, Bangalore, July 2, 2001.
5. "The Challenge of the Northeast," Diphu, October 6-8, 2001.
6. "Introduction to Sociology of Religion," Parasimoni, Santiniketan, Oct. 29-Nov. 2, 2001.
7. "The Role of the Researcher in Social Change," UGC Refresher Course for Lecturers, Vishwa Bharati, Santiniketan, November 22, 2001.
8. Was one of the three co-ordinators in the preparation of the certificate course of the Indira Gandhi National Open University "Participatory Rehabilitation of the Displaced" launched on the IGNOU website on June 30, 2001.

7. Publications

Time and financial constraints make it difficult for us to go beyond what we have done. We try to make up for it by writing about issues concerning this region in the national and regional dailies and in professional journals. NESRC published its first two books in 2001, the first based on the Associate Director's study on Angami Forest Management and the second with revised versions of the papers presented at the Conference on Climate Change. We have published the following:

Books:

Alphonsus D'Souza: *Traditional Systems of Forest Conservation North East India: The Angami Tribe of Nagaland*, 68 pages, Rs 40 (USD 4.00).

Walter Fernandes and Nafisa Goga D'Souza (eds). *Climate Change and Tribal Sustainable Living: Responses from the Northeast*, 150 pages, Rs 100.(USD 10.00)

Professional Articles:

1. Sanjay Barbora. 2000. "Planter Raj to Police Raj: An Analysis of Extra-Economic Coercion in the Plantation Sector of Assam," *Revolutionary Democracy*, September.
2. Walter Fernandes. 2000. "From Marginalisation to Sharing the Project Benefits," in Michael M. Cernea and Christopher Mc Dowell (eds). *Risks and Reconstruction: Experiences of Resettlers and Refugees*. Washington D. C.: The World Bank, pp. 205-225.
3. Walter Fernandes. 2000. "Jharkhand and Tribal Identity," *Vikalp Alternatives* 8 (n. 3 & 4), pp. 93-100.
4. Walter Fernandes. 2000. "Der Seitenblick: Partizipatorische Forschung, sozial engagierte Aktivisten und Volksbewegung im heutigen Indien" *Concordia Monographien* 5/2, pp. 327-358.

5. Walter Fernandes. 2001. "Les Tribus et L'Expropriation Fonciere en Inde," *Alternatives Sud* 7 (n. 2), pp. 147-156.
6. Walter Fernandes. 2001. "Globalisation and Inculturation," in Michael Heberling, Gerhard Rott and Horst Sing (eds). *Dokumentation des 2. Dialogforums der Partnerdiozesen Poona und Eichstatt*, Verlag, pp. 81-97.
7. Walter Fernandes. 2001. "The Tribals in the Northeast," in Christian Erni (ed). *The Indigenous World 2001*. IWGIA.
8. "President Musharraf's Visit and Prospects of Peace in South Asia," Guest Editorial, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Research*, July 2001.

Newspaper Articles

1. Sanjay Barbora. "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" *The North East Times*, May 14, 2000.
2. Sanjay Barbora. "Revisiting the Irish Question," *The North East Times*, June 18, 2000.
3. Sanjay Barbora. "Who Killed Daniel Toppo?" WWW.TEHELKA.COM
4. Walter Fernandes. "Caste as a Vested Interest," *The Hindu*, January 4, 2000.
5. Walter Fernandes. "Women as Political Fodder," *The Assam Tribune*, April 26, 2000.
6. Walter Fernandes. "Are Natural Disasters Natural?" *The North East Times*, April 28, 2000.
7. Walter Fernandes, "Unrest in the North East," *The Hindu*, June 2 & 3, 2000.
8. Walter Fernandes. "Privatising Common Knowledge," *The Assam Tribune*, June 24, 2000.
9. Walter Fernandes. "New Laws Affecting the North East," *The North East Times*, October 26 & 27, 2000.
10. Walter Fernandes. "Employment Generation as an Election Issue," *The Assam Tribune*, May 7, 2001.
11. Walter Fernandes. "General Musharraf's Visit and Prospects of Peace," *The Assam Tribune*, July 10, 2001.
12. Walter Fernandes. "Caste, Race and Reservations," *The Assam Tribune*, September 3, 2001.
13. Walter Fernandes. "Compulsory Education: Right or Duty?" *The Assam Tribune* December 2, 2001.

Before closing we would like to place on record our gratitude for the support we have received from our friends. We have been able to contribute our bit to the Northeast, because of such support.

Guwahati

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