

CORE Project
Review of Literature on the Northeast

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Whenever we talk about peace and governance in the post-colonial societies, like India, the contemporary geopolitical and ethno-political contexts become crucial. (Samaddar 2004) In fact, these contexts very often indicate how the initiatives of peace, conflict management and governance will be shaped in India and many other post-colonial societies. In countries like India where constitution-making and legal rationality were not matters of philosophy, but direct acts of moderation and prevention of conflicts, dialogue is both an object as well a subject. It is an object in the form of a demand, an issue or theme of quarrel, and it is a subject as an act, a procedure, and a process that constitutes into a self. (Samaddar 2004) In other words, law makes us citizens and subjects, so that we can deliberate in our polity. Constitution defines our political subjectivity and the power to dialogue. (Samaddar 2004)

India's Northeast has been considered as one of the most conflict-ridden regions of India and South Asia. This is the easternmost region of India consisting of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. This area is ethnically distinct from the other parts of India. The region is distinguished by a preponderance of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Strong ethnic cultures that had escaped Sanskritization effects permeate the region. In short, these states form a special category. The North Eastern Council (NEC) was constituted as the nodal agency for the economic and social development of these states (Samaddar 2004).

In 1947, the de-colonization of the Indian subcontinent and partition made this region entirely landlocked, intensifying the isolation. With 98% of its borders with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, India's Northeast is home to many ethnic groups, which are engaged in self-preservation and movements for autonomy in many cases. Sometimes, these struggles have turned violent, leading to proliferation of armed insurgent groups, like the ULFA, NLFT, NDFB, NSCN (I-M), NSCN (K) and many such outfits. Soon after the Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962 and in view of the growing insurgencies in the region, the security discourse has become predominant (Das 2007; Das 2005).

While the emergence of India's Northeast as a separate region has been comparatively recent, many of today's conflicts have their origins in the way the subcontinent was partitioned, international borders were reorganized and the region consequently became landlocked. Since its formation, the region has been a standing witness to almost all varieties of conflict - including interethnic conflicts, conflict over

natural resources, the native-migrant conflicts and border conflicts between the states of the region so and so forth - substantially overlapping into each other. Although a hotbed of conflict, it is ironic that studies in conflicts specifically focused on the region really took off only since the late 1980s. It was during this period that we could see the growing convergence between Northeast Studies and Conflict Studies. Literature on peace and conflict resolution consists predominantly of (a) memoirs, biographies and autobiographies of the ex-army generals, police officers, activists, ex-insurgents etc; (b) journalistic writings with detailed chronicling of the events, incidents and organizations involved in insurgencies and movements; (c) scholarly and policy-oriented writings by researchers, advisors and consultants; (d) reports, vision documents etc of the government, the voluntary organizations and other multilateral agencies and last but not the least (e) the literary works mostly in the regional languages.

Early writings on ethnicity and identity-based conflicts by such scholars as Apurba Baruah, Manorama Sharma, Gail Omvedt, Udayon Mishra, Tilottama Mishra and others reflected broadly on how communities of the Northeast remain far less internally differentiated than their counterparts in the rest of India thanks to the skewed and backward nature of economic and political development here and how the middle class formed within these communities had had their organic linkages with them. Communities were posited as organic wholes albeit in a relative sense and these, according to this line of argument, played a threefold role in (a) taking cudgels against 'internal colonialism' that the region has been subjected to since the colonial times; (b) furthering the democratic process by forcing formation of smaller states against the hegemony of then-undivided Assam state between 1963 and 1986; and (c) contributing to ethnic consolidation and articulation.

Even as late as in 2005, a book looks upon transformation of 'structural conditions' as the essential first step towards 'coming out of violence'. The Naga and Assam insurgencies are thus viewed as violent responses to increasing peripheralization. In Mishra's famous words, it is now the 'periphery that strikes back'. Similarly, reorganization of states and formation of Autonomous District Councils as per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India in the region have generated some kind of a rich literature. While this literature has primarily – though not exclusively – dwelt on legal and technical niceties involved in the process, its contribution to conflict resolution and peace has never been properly assessed. Of course there were exceptions. Das (1996), for instance, has shown how reorganization in the region has opened up the Pandora's Box and encouraged ever-smaller communities and their middle class elites to make demands for further reorganization. The literature on ethnic consolidation at least till the late-1990s continued to be plagued by what in Social Science is known as 'primordialist fallacy'. It was, for instance, argued that the mutually different communities are likely to fight between themselves more than those that are not. In simple terms, given and unalterable difference was considered as a precondition of conflict. An essay published in 1997 on ethnic insurgencies in the Northeast, for the first time, highlighted the politically contingent and *constructed* nature of ethnicity and ethnic consolidation and this inaugurated a new era in the understanding of interethnic conflicts and conflict resolution in the region.

The beginning of the 1990s was marked by rapid changes in the region's landscape in general and political economy in particular. A series of policies was introduced in order to open the region to some of the 'powerhouse' economies of Southeast Asia and 'liberate' it from its presently landlocked status. This coincided in time with an attempt at exposing the economy of the Northeast to market forces - instead of keeping it constantly on doles and subsidies. The decade marked the reconfiguration of the region into a 'field' – to be improved, developed and monitored, to be brought at par with the rest of India and to be kept under constant care and surveillance. The new policy gaze on the Northeast substantially recast its cartography ('extended Northeast' that extends well beyond the present confines of the region) and contributed to an enormous acceleration of research and inquiry in various directions.

At one level, a section of think tanks and policy advocates like B. G. Verghese, Gulshan Sachdeva, H. N. Das, Jayanta Madhav and a few others prefer to view development as the only panacea to conflict. Baruah, for instance, points out how the new policy of connecting the region with its transnational neighbours is likely to solve its chronic problems ('durable disorder' as he describes it) of conflict, violence and insurgency. At another level, it is also argued that development instead of solving the problems might actually aggravate them. This line of argument draws on available evidences and suggests that market exchanges and transactions follow – if not reinforce, rather than do away with the existing lines of ethnic preferences. A more nuanced view however suggests that development per se might not be able to address the problems of the Northeast. It makes a plea for evolving a new set of policies (like dual citizenship, soft borders and work permits for the 'foreigners' etc) that will help in managing interethnic relations and orchestrating the developmental policies in a way that will benefit the region. In the absence of such a policy, development per se might even benefit India at the expense of this region. Dutta et al (2010) in the same vein make an advocacy for initiating development with an abiding concern for 'human security'.

As part of this new policy gaze being cast on India's Northeast, the region has become a new laboratory for innovating and experimenting with ever-newer technologies of governance. Thus there is the alarmist concern particularly in the writings of Saikia, Bhaumik, Hussain, G. Das and many others that the region constitutes India's 'soft underbelly' and is constantly vulnerable to the machinations of her hostile neighbours and radical Islamist forces. Such a concern has also been instrumental in triggering off a new genre of strategic thinking and counterinsurgency operations. Although violence and insurgency have never been alien to the region (Naga insurgency is considered as the oldest in Asia in modern times) it is only in the new millennium that India's Northeast enters the map of 'global terror'. The writings of the ex-Army generals and strategic thinkers bear testimony to this new and unprecedented trend. In a paper published in 2008, Das discusses in detail how Northeast's entry into the map loses sight of the specificities that the region represents and makes a critique of such *realpolitik* solutions.

In the countries like India, constitution and laws, hitherto enjoying a validity that stems from its origins in a colonial power, and therefore, substantively free from popular deliberations, now needs to self-explain – is it a collection of norms backed by the threat of state sanction or norms whose validity does not primarily stem from the state, but from the fact that these norms guarantee the autonomy of all legal persons equally? In fact, requirements of justice and reconciliation call for new modes of dialogue beyond constitutional prescriptions for mediation, compromise and restraint. (Samaddar 2004) The question of justice, after all, appears to be critical in Bihar in the context of multiple and somewhat overlapping transitions from the colonial state to a post-colonial one, from a primary economy to a manufacturing one, from a state-supported economy to a neo-liberal one.

India's Northeast is a place, in some ways comparable to the Balkans, where the on-going protracted conflicts are myriad and multiple in nature. There is conflict between the state and societal groups, conflict among different ethnic groups sharing the same territorial space for centuries, as well as conflict between the union and state governments. To deal with this situation there are arrangements of federal administration, other institutional mechanisms for granting autonomy to the indigenous communities like the autonomous councils proposed in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Moreover, there have been peace initiatives as the ongoing peace talks of the Government of India with the insurgent groups like NSCN (I-M) and ULFA (Das 1994; Baruah 2005; Basu 2006; Basu Ray Chaudhury, Das and Samaddar 2005)

Ranabir Samaddar (1999) dealt with the trans-border migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal. Along with came two moods, two mentalities, and two worlds were in description – that of cartographic anxiety and an ironic un-concern. In that description of marginality, where nations, borders, boundaries, communities, and the political societies were enmeshed in making a non-nationalised world, and the citizen-migrant (two animals yet at the same time one) formed the political subject of this universe of transcendence, interconnections and linkages were the priority theme. Therefore, responding to the debate on the numbers of illegal migrants Samaddar termed it as a “numbers game”. His argument was that in this world of edges, the problem was not what was truth (*about* nationality, identity, and numbers), but truth (*of* nationality, identity, and numbers) itself was the problem. Yet, this was an excessively humanised description, that seems to have downplayed the overwhelming factor of conflict and wars that take place because “communities must be defended” – one can say the “permanent condition” in which communities find themselves. In other words, if we are to understand why human migration becomes a matter of contentious politics and therefore has to be governed by law, administrative practices, customs, and failing all other things, by brutal violence, we have to study the historical conditions of the emergence of migration as a matter of nationalised security, marked all over by collective violence and collective politics.

The nature of the contentious politics of migration cannot be understood without this preceding history of Indian nationalism and the mirror history of the borderlands. The reason is that this history will persuade us not to take a generalised view of the relationship between migration and security, which is perched on the dominant

phenomenon of political borders. In stead, by taking a critical view of the conflicts within the borderlands, we can know the blocks in the scenario, and understand why migration appears in politics as a theme of security, underwritten by a history of continuities and discontinuities through the colonial past and a nationalist presence.

The history of Northeast India from a non-traditional perspective can best be described as a saga of movements of different communities of people. According to a leading historian of the region Northeast India is situated in, “one of the greatest migration routes of mankind,” (Barpujari, 1992, 35) and so it has seen the advent of many different groups of people. One student of geopolitics has summarized these routes as the following:

First, through the north or mountain passes of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, second – through the valley of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra from India and the west, third – by the sea on the Bay of Bengal, passing through Bengal or Burma, fourth – the Assam-Burma routes, one over the Patkai passes in the north-east; leading from the Lidu – Margherita road to China through the Hukawang valley in Burma and the other through Manipur and Cachar in the south-east or south of Assam.(Hazarika, 1996, 41)

The region has even been termed as a museum of races. If one looks at the history of any part of Northeast India it clearly portrays how communities were formed as a result of long-term migrations. It is perhaps best to begin with Assam as in the known history of Northeast India including the colonial period and for sometimes after, Assam constituted the major part of Northeast India. Even today the politics of Assam affects most of Northeast India and perhaps the first agitations against migrations also began in Assam. In the traditional discourse influx of people into Northeast India is viewed as a prime security concern, yet from a non-traditional perspective the interesting point is that even Assam’s own beginnings are traceable to migration of different groups of people from the East and Southeast Asia.

There are a number of myths regarding the origin of the Assamese people. One particularly interesting myth about the people of Pragjyotisha, a name by which Assam was formerly known proceeds thus: A branch of people called Chao-Theivs of China migrated to India at a very early period. They came to be known as the Zuhthis. The word Zuhthis was subsequently transformed into the Sanskrit word "Jyotisha" from where Assam came to be known as Pragjyotisha. But there is very little evidence to corroborate this myth. What can be corroborated however is that the Ahoms were the offshoot of the Tai race. Some believe that the Tai penetration into the Brahmaputra valley happened as early as in the eighth century (Hazarika, 1996, 59). They argue that the conquest made by the Tai-Ahom was not an invasion but rather a peaceful penetration. But the official history states that the “Ahoms, a Thai-Buddhist tribe from the southeast, arrived in the area in the early 1200's. They deposed the ruler of the time and established a kingdom with its capital in Sibsagar. By 1353, the Ahoms controlled a major part of the area, which they renamed Assam. The Ahoms adopted the language and Hindu religion of the conquered people and ruled Assam for about 500 years.”¹

Historians such as Barpujari agree that the Ahoms started expanding their kingdom in around 1512 AD when they led a successful expedition into Panbari in the north bank of Brahmaputra. In 1523 the Ahom's annexed the Chutia kingdom. In 1536 the Kachari kingdom of Dimapur fell into the hands of the Ahoms and slowly the kingdom emerges as a multi ethnic entity. Meanwhile, in Kamrup the rise of the mongoloid Koch power marked a new epoch in history. But the Ahoms continued their conquests in the Brahmaputra valley. A conflict between the Koch and the Ahoms seemed inevitable. When war took place it led to significant movements of population (Hazarika, 1996, 61). It was through the Koch that the Mughals got their information about this part of the world and hence the Muslim invasion began. After the Koch kingdom the Mughals led repeated expeditions against Assam until Mir Jumla concluded the Treaty of Gilajhari Ghat in 1663. Towards the close of the eighteenth century the frontiers of the expanding Burmese empire reached Assam. The Burmese expanded their authority over Arakan and Manipur by 1813. It was the weakness of the Ahom kings due to numerous revolts of different groups of people such as the Moamaria uprisings that brought the Burmese to the frontiers of Cachar and Sylhet. Successive Burmese invasions by the end of 1821 made them virtually the rulers of this region.

The Arakan refugees finally brought British attention to this region. These Arakan refugees were a point of dispute between the British and the Burmese governments. When the British intervened against the Burmese and annexed the territory in 1826 they ostensibly did it to safeguard the interests of those refugees but undeniably this was also the way they strengthened their frontiers. They constituted the region into an administrative division under a Commissioner and started using the name Assam. Further they added to it the southern hill, plateaus and plains, which they subsequently annexed. The whole territory was constituted as a province on February 6, 1874, as the province of Assam under a Chief Commissioner.¹ By the time the British arrived different branches of the Tibeto-Chinese family of languages including the Tibeto-Burman and the Siamese Chinese and also people belonging to the Aryan groups lived this region (Hazarika, 1996, 42). Therefore, a non-traditional reading of traditional Assamese history portray that even before the arrival of the British not just Assam but most of Northeast India was already a multi-ethnic region.

At the time of the arrival of the British there were not just thousands of independent village communities in India but "six major Hinduised states," including "the Koch, the Tripuri, the Jaintia, the Kachari, the Ahom and the Meithei"(Chaube, 1999, 36). It was the British, as stated earlier, who brought the Garo Hills, the Naga Hills and the Jaintia Hills within the Assam province. The immediate consequence of the British rule was that some fresh groups of people entered Northeast India and added to the cultural diversity of the region. The other consequence of British rule was the weakening of communal control of land "through the payment of compensation for land acquisition to 'owners', chiefs and 'rajas'"(Chaube, 1999, 44). In subsequent sections of this paper both these developments will be discussed in greater details. It will also reflect on the masculinisation of the region.

The British were in the region for less than a century and so it is said that they failed to develop a native base for the administration. Most of the Commissioners or Deputy Commissioners in this region were British. Some of the other subordinates were from the plains including Bengal. The Bengalis were brought to the region not just by the British but also by the rulers of Tripura who invited Bengali settlers into his territory from the sixteenth century. According to political historians such as S.K. Chaube their lure was money that they paid to the rulers. “The same consideration led the other hill chiefs to settle Nepali cattle breeders in the hills in the early British days, and businessmen from the plains in the comparatively recent period” (Chaube, 1999, 45). However, the movements of such groups of people will be discussed later. For now it might be interesting to see how the British administrators viewed people’s movements within the region.

There are a number of accounts by British officials that speak of their experiences in the northeast frontiers. One such account is by George Dunbar who was stationed in the present territory of Arunachal Pradesh. His reminiscences dealt with frontier people such as the Abors, the Mishimis, the Hill Miris, the Nishis and some of the Naga tribes. Quite unconsciously Dunbar recorded at least three types of movements of people in this region. They included movements for official purposes including movements by the army, and for non-official purposes such as movements for trade and movements as pilgrimages. When Dunbar went to the Dihang valley for the Abor expeditions in 1911-12 he found the area “rather densely populated with strangers” (Dunbar, 1984, 193). He also found out that there were robust trade relations between these people, the Tibetans and people from the south. In one particularly lucid passage he describes how in some villages, “everything that could not be made locally was Tibetan stuff, brought down by traders.” He speaks of regions where, “trade comes almost equally from north and south. Along the foot-hills, of course, the Abors get all they need to buy from shopkeepers in the Plains” (Dunbar, 1984, 212). He speaks of square blue porcelain beads that were used as mediums of exchange. But these beads were not made in the region but “Bori traders brought them down from Tibet” (Dunbar, 1984, 219).

Dunbar speaks of different groups of migrants who had in the recent past migrated to these areas. One of them was the Kebangs, who migrated from Riu and established a powerful village. Another group interestingly enough were the Nepalis, whom he calls the Gorkhas. He speaks of “hundred thousand Gurkha settlers, who mostly became graziers” (Dunbar, 1984, 287). Dunbar is not the only person to speak of Gurkha settlements. There are others as well who speak of their presence in this region from a much earlier time. *The Gazetteer* of Naga and Manipur Hills while discussing the state of immigration into these areas speak of the Nepalese as the main foreign settlers in these regions. It describes the rest of the foreign population as “a few coolies and cartmen from Bengal and the United Provinces, a few artisans from Punjab, and a few traders from Marwar.” The Gazetteer also mentions “emigration from the district could not be measured with any degree of accuracy, owing to the changes in boundary that had recently taken place” (Allen, 2002, 35). Even though the Gazetteer mentions that migrations are few and far between but in another instance it speaks of among a total of eighteen shops in Kohima, thirteen were owned and maintained by Marwari merchants

(Allen, 2002, 59). In Imphal town among the existing thirty-six shops Marwaris owned twenty-nine of them (Allen, 2002, 107). As if the presence of Marwaris seemed so commonplace that their influx for trade did not seem exceptional enough for a special mention.

From the commentaries by British administrative officials another trend was apparent. It was to mark the frontier as a space very different from the civilized world. This sense of difference underpinned their attitude towards the frontier people. These people were considered less than human and so they could be treated with contempt. There was no need for a civilized response to them. No wonder then that these memoirs are replete with stories of how the frontier people deserved the violent response that was meted out to them. Allen's Gazette discusses how the British felt that "the Nagas should be taught a lesson," when they refused to submit to the British rule. Allen also discusses how some Naga villages opposed British advance in the early part of 1880s and so the British officials felt that "it was necessary to open fire, and some 50 or 60 of the enemy were killed." It was also remarked that the "punitive expeditions were a regular feature of the administration of the districts, as it was only by this means independent Nagas could be taught that the lives and property of those who had submitted to us must be respected" (Allen, 2002, 23-25). Of course respect for the lives and property of these frontier people were never felt necessary.

Allen's account was not in any way exceptional. Even Dunbar, who wrote much later, felt how it was necessary to have a strong force to protect the frontiers. Dunbar spoke of different violent tribes such as the Daflas. He said that the threat from the Daflas made it imperative for the British to establish outposts in the Aka country (Dunbar, 1984, 285). It was always threat from aggressive tribes that made it imperative for the British to respond with violence and to militarise the region. Dunbar said peace in the borders was threatened by the acquisition of sophisticated weapons by trans-border tribes. And for that purpose it became necessary "to re-arm the local forces, and issue better weapons to villagers in the administered districts than they had previously allowed them for their own protection" (Dunbar, 1984, 304-305). British rule therefore played its part in not just making the North-eastern region multi-ethnic but also created borders and boundaries within frontiers and between different groups of people that they marked as civilized and uncivilized.

In another section of the frontier there were massive flows of migrant people with diverse consequences. Different hill tribes in Tripura came from upper Burma. There is one school of opinion that the people belonging to the hill tribes of Tipperah were a branch of the Shan tribe of Burma (Ganguly, 1983, 2). People from Bengal started moving to Tripura from the sixteenth century. The rulers of Gaur gave the kings of Tripura the title Manikya. "Ratna Manikya patronized the settlement of a good number of Brahmins, Vaidyas and Kayasthas from Bengal in Tripura. This was perhaps the first case of immigration of population into Tripura from the west as against all the earlier flows of immigration being from the east and the northeast" (Ganguly, 1983, 3). In the initial period royal patronage encouraged migration from Bengal. The British Government appointed their political agent in Agartala in 1871. Following this the rulers

of Tripura were encouraged to appoint administrators from Bengal. Some of the first magistrates were from Bengal. The ruler of Tripura had his own zamindari called Chakla Roshnabad, which was situated in Province of Bengal. The ryots of this zamindari were all Bengalis. In the 1911 census it was estimated that 97,858 people spoke Bengali. They formed over one third of the population of 2,29,613 people.

Migration from Bengal did not mean that other migrations from east and northeast stopped. In fact migrations of groups such as the Reangs, Kukis, Lushais, Mags, Chakmas and Tripuris continued. But these people did not come for administrative jobs. They arrived in search of jhum lands. In some cases community conflicts might have driven them to Tripura (Ganguly, 1983, 4). Another reason for massive migrations into Tripura in the nineteenth century was that until 1880 there was no regular land revenue system in Tripura. In many cases the Maharajas granted land in perpetuity at a fixed rent and where no grants were made the usual custom was to farm out collections. In most cases grantees could get exemptions from paying land revenue by giving free service to the state. After 1880 a number of rules came into force for regulating the land tenure system. Yet fragmentation of holdings, the landlessness of a large part of the rural population and the illegal transfer of lands from tribals to non-tribals continued even after the passage of Tribal Reserve Orders of 1931 and 1943 (Gan-Chaudhuri, 1980, 106-107). Yet, since the migrants themselves constructed the discourse on migration, particularly the Bengalis, until recently the hills of Tripura were termed as the benign hills (Ganguly, 1983).

In most other parts of Northeast India the migrant populations were not looked upon as kindly as in Tripura, and perhaps no history of Assam in the post colonial period can be written without dealing with the contentious issue of migration. There is a school of thought that argues that British efforts to recruit labourers for tea companies “took the shape of a well-planned conspiracy” (Bhattacharya, 2001, 33)¹ The British from 1770 decided to raise land revenue so high that it became impossible for a common cultivator to depend on agriculture alone for their livelihood. But the Assamese cultivators were still not interested to work in British companies as wage earners. The British then had to import tea labourers. First they looked towards China. But with the rising cost of labour they wanted to recruit locally. The problem became all the more acute during the boom in tea markets in 1860s. The Assamese were still apathetic to plantation jobs and so the British turned to Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc. The result of such a policy was that *The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863* was passed. This opened the floodgates for migrants.

Government officials such as Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharya are of the opinion that most of Assam’s woes began with these migrants. There are others who may not hold such extreme views but still blame British policies for much of Assam’s problems today. They feel that although the British were responsible for making Assam a multi-ethnic state but their policies kept the Hill and the Plains people apart. The “Inner Line Regulations were introduced ostensibly ‘to discourage unnecessary interference with and economic exploitation of the tribal people’; in reality [it was used] ‘to exclude all contact, between them and the inhabitants of the plains.’”¹ Such a policy adversely affected the

development of the tribal people. When Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam (1939-42) prepared his note on the *Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam* he stressed the differences between the people of the administrative areas of the Hills and Plains ethnologically, linguistically and culturally. He noted that over the excluded areas the British had at best “the most shadowy control” (Reid, 1942, 295). According to historians such as H.K. Barpujari this may have alienated the hill and the plains people of whom the hill people were largely tribals.

Immigrants from neighbouring districts of Sylhet, Mymensing and Rangpur were populating the plains. The Bengalis were fast replacing the Assamese in the officialdom. Bengali had to be made the language of the court in place of Persian, as there was numerous Bengalis in the administration and when a Persian scribe went on leave it was extremely expensive and difficult to replace them (Barpujari, 1975, 75). The Bengalis also became indispensable because only they could teach in the newly established government schools. They continued to occupy most of the white collared jobs much to the resentment of the Assamese. In other sectors such as trade, both wholesale and retail, the Marwaris enjoyed a monopoly. Beside trade they acted as moneylenders and agents of tea garden managements. According to some social scientists the “immigrants occupied in an organized way waste lands, grazings and forest reserves” (Barpujari, 1998, 37). By 1931 most of the wasteland in the Brahmaputra valley was occupied by the settlers. Many felt that in their hunger for land the immigrants encroached on government land and land belonging to the local people. By 1941 the immigrants “penetrated the then Lakhimpur district. After Saadullah became the Premier of Assam for the second time in August 1942, it is alleged that he attempted a systematic settlement of East Bengal Muslim peasants in Assam” (Saikia et.al., 203, iv).

To the Assamese opinion the situation after 1947 became worse. Between 1958 and 1961 the number of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan rose from 4,87,000 to 6,00,000 (Barpujari, 1998, 39). “The decade also witnessed a large inflow of migrants from other parts of India seeking economic opportunities in trading, construction work, and white collar jobs” (Saikia et.al., 203, vi). It is alleged that during 1971 a large number of East Pakistanis fled to Assam and many of them did not return to their places of origin even after the formation of Bangladesh. Sentiments regarding “foreigners” started hardening after 1972. In 1979 during a bi-election about one-sixth of the voters were declared foreigners by courts. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) declared ‘no revision, no election,’ meaning without a revision of the voter list no election can be held in Assam. They demanded detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners. They had support from organizations such as All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad and (AAGSP) and Asom Sahitya Sabha. Violent clashes occurred all over Assam. The movement dragged on with the political parties divided in their opinion. For the next few years communal riots recurred in a number of areas and violence spread across communities. Even the moderate Assamese opinion was moved by a “genuine fear that unending immigration across the border will reduce the indigenous people into a minority and the fate of Assam will be the same as that of Sikkim and Tripura” (Barpujari, 1998, 65).

Fear of immigrants did not stop with Assam. It spread to other parts of northeast India as well. Trouble with “foreigners” started in the Mizo Hills much later and according to some social scientist it had a direct association to India China relations. Initially the Mizos were more concerned with their ethnic kin left in Burma. For that purpose “the members of the hill tribes of Burma border lands were allowed to enter India without any passport, ‘provided they did not proceed beyond 25 miles’ from the land border” (Pakem, 1992, 106-107). Hence most of the immigrants came to Mizo hills from Burma. However, even before that the Nepalese had settled in this area. The Nepalese or the Gurkhas, as they were known, came to the region from the beginning of the nineteenth century. But according to official records their settlements began in 1891 “after permanent forts were constructed in Aizawl and Lunglei” (Pradhan, 2004, 58). Gurkha settlers continued to remain in Mizoram until 1980, when their identity question cropped up. Initially the state of Mizoram agreed to confer some citizenship benefits to Gurkhas who had settled before 1950 but that notice was later rescinded. Some social scientists of Mizoram, who might even be sympathetic to the case of the Gurkhas, still consider them as “illegal immigrants” (Sangkima, 2004).

The case of the Chins was even more bizarre. Historically, people inhabiting the Mizo hills were considered part of the Kuki-Chin tribes. Thus the Chin people had close connections with the Mizo people. But in the majoritarian Mizo discourse when in the early 70s the Burmese government started taking actions against the Mizos apparently even the Chin people did not give them refuge and became belligerents. Hence these Mizos living in Myanmar had to move back to Mizoram (Sangkima, 2004, 83). When in 1988 a military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), came to power after brutally crushing the pro-democracy movement the Chins faced enormous problems. The predominantly Buddhist SPDC embarked on a campaign to “Burmanize” the ethnic minorities in the country and a large number of Chins have come to India to escape the religious, cultural and political persecution in their state, where the majority of the population is Christian. When the initial influx of refugees came to India the government set up camps for them, but the camps were closed in 1995 as ties improved between India and Burma. Since then the Chin people have been scattered all over Mizoram state and in the absence of any humanitarian support have been surviving by doing whatever work they can find. In early 2003 the number of Burmese in Mizoram was estimated to be at least 50,000 (*Refugees International Bulletin*, 23 July 2004). According to human rights activists the way the Chins “were treated by the Mizoram government and the local people discourage them from claiming their refugee status” (Hre Mang, 2000, 63).

Attitude to immigrants in most of Northeast India is negative. Tripura, for certain groups of immigrants was an exception until the 1980s. Since the discourse here is shaped largely by the Bengalese there is some recognition that Bengali migrants have had both positive and negative impact. Not just after 1947 but also in 1971 a large number of Bengalese from East Pakistan came and settled in Tripura. Two factors encouraged the heavy influx of refugees into the state. “First, there was no perceptible local resistance to the immigration of the refugees. Secondly, a sizeable Bengali speaking population already living in the State provided all help and assistance to their incoming brethren”

(Bhattacharya, 1988, 16). In the case of Tripura refugees are considered in the Bengali discourse as growth boosters and the main source of labour input. Although it is recognized that they are responsible for the rise in population and tremendous pressure on land, however, they are still considered to have contributed substantially and positively to politics and economy of the region. (Bhattacharya, 1988, 16)

While appreciating the necessity of strengthening the State particularly at a time when communities living in the Northeast are up in arms against each other and the region is in the grip of what is called ‘global terror’, Oinam and others make a plea for redefining its moral foundations. Counterinsurgency operations, viewed in this light, prove to be counterproductive. As Baruah (2009) puts it: “... except for a rhetorical nod, substantive measures for building and nurturing institutions of good governance scarcely feature in the policy agenda of Indian counter-insurgency experts or believers in a development fix”. This calls for what Baruah (1999) earlier described as ‘alternative institutional imagination’ and recasting India’s federal relations in a way that provides for ‘institutional accommodation to its subnational communities’.

While the institutional debate figured prominently in the literature on the Northeast particularly towards the end of the millennium’s first decade, State response in terms of actual governance initiatives in this direction was virtually non-existent. In other words, development and counter-insurgency operations were the mainstay of State response to conflicts, insurgency and violence. By the end of the first decade, violence and insurgency could be contained albeit with a varying degree of success in most of the Northeast and the task of pacification is nearly over.

While pacification has brought in considerable stability and peace in the region, this has pushed the question of rights, justice and democracy into the backburner. CRG studies in peace and peace accords contained in such books as *Peace as Process* (2001) the series on *South Asian Peace Studies* and *Politics of Dialogue* etc. seek to bring these issues into the centre of public agenda.

As India’s Northeast was gradually being viewed largely through the prism of conflict literature, the question of justice highlighted during the Naga and Mizo insurgencies got marginalized. Rather, this new conflict literature started buttressing the demand for homeland by different ethnic communities sharing the territorial space in the region. The earlier anthropological studies were now being used to underpin the ethno-nationalist movements fighting for ‘homelands’. Over and above, the issue of refugees and trans-border migration began casting its shadow over the dynamics of politics in India’s Northeast. Therefore, the question of border added a new dimension to the politics of this region.

A good deal of literature has cropped up highlighting such issues in recent years. And in this context, civil society is primarily viewed by such scholars as Mishra, Hazarika et al and Biswas et al as the vehicle of democracy. This is understandably in tune with the current accent on civil society by the global multilateral agencies. The literature in this regard continues to be dominated by a patently modernist understanding

of civil society according to which civil society is supposed to be (i) an ‘inclusive space’ cutting across identities and ethnic boundaries (Mishra) and (ii) a space that also sets democratic ‘deliberation’ in motion (Biswas et al). Such an understanding refuses to trace the roots of civil society in the existing society that according to this line of argument continues to be divided along ethnic and primordial lines.

While much of this argument is normative and does not squarely tackle the question of how such a civil society could come into existence in a conflict-torn region, Das draws attention to the micro-histories of peace-making in the region. The works of Banerjee ed. (2008), Dutta and Vernal (2009) etc may be cited in this context. Designating all this as the ‘unofficial’ peace process, his monograph on *Civil Society, Conflict and Peace* (2007) raises the question of why this unofficial process is never brought to bear on the official process. The so-called civil society initiatives because of their separation from the society at large have by and large been unable to make much headway.

For identifying the possible pathways to conflict management, there will be a need to highlight the perspective of justice instead of a predominant perspective of national security. In case of the India’s northeast, quite often the question of human security is neglected. The issue of displacement and the other humanitarian and human rights issues are also crucial. In this connection, there is also a need to study the phenomenon of state violence Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Das 2005; Das 2008; Hazarika 2000; Hazarika 1994; Rajagopalan 2008)

In view of all these, there is a need for multi-layered, multiple-level dialogues. Dialogue with the insurgents will not be enough. The dialogues will not be merely for ceasefires between the rebels and the state. Dialogue will be necessary with the members of different segments of the society. That would enhance the peace-building capacity of the society, in general. But, in India, the government usually views all kinds of initiatives for dialogues as anti-state (Samaddar 2004)

In other words, we need to draw inferences from the current geopolitical context in which the dialogic politics of peace is shaping up. In narrating various practices of dialogue, we need to examine the geo-political and ethno-political contexts in which dialogic acts take place or are barred, because these contexts suggest how these dialogic practices gather their forms amidst war and peace. At the same time, there is a need to have a descriptive account of dialogic situations and dialogic relations, to indicate what dialogue signifies to the politics of peace. Hence the importance of relational accounts in studying practices – the discursive and institutional forms of the dialogic acts, the dialogic situations, the rough contours of the dialogic universe. It is important to note which makes dialogue a dialogue, or, what is this with which a dialogue constitutes itself? There is a need for reflecting on the forms and institutions of dialogue, in particular, on what political rationality has made into one of the most established forms of dialogue or conversation today, namely constitution and constitutional forms of accommodation and conversation. Is the right of self-determination the source of conflict or a contribution to conflict prevention?

We can see how issues of gender, borders, borderlands, migration, security, self-determination, and justice animate the democratic agenda and how the contentious literature on the Northeast is trying to grapple with this task of redefining democracy.

After all, it is quite difficult to bring the issues of rights, justice and democracy into the public agenda in the post-pacification era. Now that people are accustomed to peace and the insurgents are only too unwilling to return to jungles, the democratic agenda becomes the largest casualty. The most important question is how to consolidate the peace constituency and turn it into a form of social power so that democratic agenda can be brought back and pushed through in public discourses. Dutta et al (2010), Samaddar and Banerjee (2010), Das ed. (2008) chronicle a number of contemporary people's movements particularly on such humanitarian issues as displacement, resource crisis, transparency in governance etc which have been successful in bringing often otherwise conflicting communities together. The future of today's peace agenda lies not in pacification but in democracy. CRG's works are only a pointer in this direction.

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