Concept Note: Seminar on History in the Northeast as a source of Conflicts and of Peace Initiatives. Guwahati, October 27-29, 2009

Northeast India is the abode of many ethnic groups ranging from the Meitei-Pangal, Naga, Kuki and Mizo in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland to the Garo and Khasi in Meghalaya, the Boro, Karbi, Assamese, Tai Ahom, Rabha and Dimasa of Assam to the Aka, Adi, Nyishi and others in Arunachal and Tripura. The Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys and the hill areas have distinct cultures, traditions and histories but have co-existed for many centuries amid peace and cordial relations combined with conflicts as well as social, economic, cultural and political dependence or inter-dependence. In the past there were conflicts around land and power. They have got intensified during the last one century.

Diversity becomes a problem when inequalities are based on cultural or racial differences or when groups perceive each other as a threat to their identity. Identity assertion is often based on contesting claims over a homeland, territory or other resources. The rise of a dominant community adds to the threat and results in an atmosphere of mistrust and fear of domination. From it grows a feeling of vengeance. The threat has heightened in the wake of land and other shortages. Amid the ensuing conflicts groups articulate their identity in linguistic, cultural and ethnic terms. Increasingly the elite turn the cultural systems, values and practices into tools of competition for political or economic power.

That explains why poverty, along with weak governments and lack of efforts to address the ethnic problems and developmental issues has resulted in a period of instability and armed struggles. Thus, apart from identity, land, economic benefits, immigration and ethnic discrimination, basic to the conflicts is the failure of the State institutions, lack of a national identity and a low level of state legitimacy. Insecurity grows among the people because of the conflicts that affect all groups but have a greater impact on the youth. Because of fear enveloping their society the democratic institutions make no sense to most people, especially the youth. A gap is thus created between the communities. The imposition of a dominant will on the remaining communities can further widen this gap.

History has been a tool in this interaction on one side in protecting the identity of the people and on the other in antagonising them from each other. Each community uses history for its own good without taking the genuine rights of the others into account. Each community has rewritten exclusive histories of itself that speak of its own rights to the exclusion of the rest. That shows the need to have a mature intellectual debate on this issue in order to make a contribution to sustainable peace. A possible alternative is a composite history that shifts the focus from conflicts to interactions between different communities, both cooperative and divisive. Today the focus is on divisive relations alone. That shows the need to take a new look at the history of the Northeast and take steps towards a possible composite history that moves away from the exclusive ethnic histories which legitimise conflicts. A composite history will not solve the problems that result in ethnic conflicts in the region but can be an important step towards a solution. This step can support the initiatives of many civil society groups that have played an important role in addressing the causes of ethnic conflicts in the region.

Thus, most ethnic conflicts emanate from ethnic consciousness and nationalist aspirations. Many of them are around land that is not only an economic commodity but also the centre of the culture and identity of most communities of the region. Since identity, land and other resources are inseparable, identity assertion is central to the effort to protect the natural resources. Ethnic movements often supported and legitimised through exclusive ethnic histories
are thus means of asserting one’s right over the resources. Every community uses these ethnic histories meant to protect its livelihood to declare itself the first inhabitants of a given area. Based on it the community demands exclusive rights over its resources and benefits. Thus, what causes conflicts is not history as such but the search for an exclusive identity because of economic shortages and attacks on their culture. History only legitimises the conflicts. That shows the need to take a new look at the history of the Northeast and take steps towards a composite history that moves away from this exclusive approach and understand inter-dependence.

Search for Alternatives

With this in view the participants of the seminar on peace and conflicts organised by North Eastern Social Research Centre on October 16-17, 2007 suggested that an umbrella be provided for persons who are in a position to take steps towards a composite history of the region. They hoped that through a long process that will take many years, a few steps will be taken towards a history that unites the ethnic groups instead of dividing them and taking them towards conflicts. The participants suggested that NESRC take the initiative in bringing such persons together for initial discussion. As a first step they suggested a series of seminars in each State of the region to bring together scholars, peace activists and community leaders for a reflection on the conflicts and the role of history in them.

The seminar of October 14-15, 2007 came after ten seminars held in different states of the region (Table 1). Eight seminars were held during 2008 (Table 2) in preparation for a national seminar on The Role of History in Conflicts and as a Tool of Peace in the Northeast being proposed in this project for the first week of October 2009. The above seminars as well as the one that is proposed are meant to be a platform for civil society groups and for scholars in history and other social sciences to come together in search of a common understanding of their society. It is hoped that this discussion will continue in the form of a search for a composite history of the Northeast as support to peace.

A composite history of the Northeast will not solve the problems that result in ethnic conflicts but can be an important step towards a solution to them. This step can support the initiatives of many civil society groups that have played an important role in addressing the causes of ethnic conflicts in the region. With this in view the participants of the seminar on peace and conflicts, held in October 2007 suggested that an umbrella be provided for persons who are in a position to take steps towards a composite history of the Northeast. It is hoped that through a long process that will take many years, a few steps will be taken towards a history that unites the different ethnic instead of dividing them. The participants suggested that North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) take the initiative in bringing such persons together for initial discussion. With that in view they suggested a series of seminars in each State of the region to bring together scholars, peace activists and community leaders for a reflection on the conflicts and the role of history in them. The present project is its follow up.

Steps Taken till Now

Ten seminars were held during 2007 in preparation for the above region level seminar on peace processes in the Northeast. We had realised by then that most states had many peace activists but they do not know each other. So the objective of these seminars was to bring them together state by state under the same roof for a day or two to share their experiences and find ways of coordinating their work. No effort was made to coordinate them. We only provided an
umbrella for them to share experiences. It was for them to decide whether and how they wanted to work together (list in Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Peace Initiatives, Khasi Hills</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>April 26, 2007</td>
<td>MLCU</td>
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<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Peace Process in Manipur</td>
<td>Imphal</td>
<td>June 9, 2007</td>
<td>DSSS, Imphal</td>
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<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Peace Process in Nagaland</td>
<td>Dimapur</td>
<td>June 30, 2007</td>
<td>Peace Channel</td>
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<td>04</td>
<td>Students in the Peace Process</td>
<td>Tura</td>
<td>June 16, 2007</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Students’ Role in Peace</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>July 14, 2007</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Land-related conflict in Tripura</td>
<td>Agartala</td>
<td>August 4-5, 2007</td>
<td>ASHA</td>
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<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>Land conflicts, Karbi Anglong</td>
<td>Diphu</td>
<td>August 11, 2007</td>
<td>Jirsong Asong</td>
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<td>Peace in the Garo Hills</td>
<td>Tura</td>
<td>August 13, 2007</td>
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<td>09</td>
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<td>Kohima</td>
<td>Sept. 29, 2007</td>
<td>Peace Channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Migration &amp; Conflicts</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
<td>Oct. 4, 2007</td>
<td>Assam University</td>
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</table>

These meetings culminated in the seminar of October 14-15, 2007. Its participants felt that each group in conflicts wrote its own ethno-centric history to legitimise the conflict. A decision was therefore taken to follow up with seminars on history. That was done during 2008 in different states (Table 2). As a follow up two regional seminars are being planned in 2009. The first of them will be a meeting of peace activists from five states of the Northeast on May 7-8, 2009. It will be a continuation of the thirteen seminars held in 2007 and 9 in 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Month/Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Follow up Planning</td>
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<td>02</td>
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<td>9th February, 2008</td>
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<td>03</td>
<td>Garo-Khasi Conflicts</td>
<td>29th March, 2008</td>
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<td>04</td>
<td>Conflicts in Manipur</td>
<td>22-23 Apr. 2008</td>
<td>DBC, Maram</td>
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<td>05</td>
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<td>28th July, 2008</td>
<td>CEPEM, MU</td>
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<td>3-4 September 08</td>
<td>MLCU</td>
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<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>History and Conflicts</td>
<td>September 7, 08</td>
<td>Inst of Tai Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Peace Activists Meet</td>
<td>May 7-8, 2009</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Composite NE History</td>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Planned</td>
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</table>

The second is the region level history seminar being proposed in this project. The search for an alternative will continue at the proposed seminar which will be held around three themes each of which will be coordinated by a scholar who will prepare a concept paper on it and identify three or four scholars to write papers on it. More persons will then be invited from the possible invitee list given below. Priority will be given to persons chosen by the coordinators.
even outside this list. More will be invited in consultation with them from the list to participate or present papers.

1. Ethnic identity and the role of history in the Northeast.
2. The role of history in various conflicts in the Northeast.
3. Methodology of writing history as a tool for peace building.

**Tentative list of participants:**

- Dr Joy L. K. Pachua, JNU, New Delhi
- Dr Sanghamitra Misra, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi
- Dr Sanghamitra Choudhury, New Delhi
- Prof. Patrick Hoenig, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi
- Dr George Thadathil, Principal, Sonada College, Darjeeling district
- Dr Abhaya Aier, Women’s Studies Division, Nagaland University
- Dr. Abraham Lotha, St Joseph’s College, Jakama, Nagaland.
- Visakonu Hibo. Head, Dept. of Sociology, Japfu College, Kigwema, Nagaland
- C. P. Anto, Director, Peace Channel, Dimapur, Nagaland
- Dr Kedilezho Kikhi, Nagaland University
- Prof. Alphonse D’Souza (Retd) formerly of Phesama, Nagaland
- Prof. David Siyemlieh, NEHU, Shillong.
- Dr Glenn Christo, VC, Martin Luther Christian University.
- Dr Philip Abraham, Dawagre, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya.
- Dr C. J. Thomas, Director, ICSSR-NERC
- Dr Anthony Kaba, Department of History, Don Bosco College, Maram, Manipur
- Dr Leban Serto, CEPEM, Manipur University;
- Dr Deben Sharma, Peace Studies, Manipur
- B Loitongbam, Imphal
- B. Nattar, Manipur Government College, Imphal
- Dr Robert Tiba, Dept. of History, Diphu campus, Assam University
- Dr Sajal Nag, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar
- Dr Chandan Sharma, Dept of Sociology, Tezpur University.
- Dr K. Kabhi, Dept. of Mass Communications, Tezpur university.
- Prof. M. N. Karna, Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University
- Prof. Girin Phukan, Dept. of Political Science, Dibrugarh University;
- Dr Dwijen Barman, Lecturer, Putimari College, Kamrup Rural district.
- Dr Jayanta Sarmah, Nowgong Girls’ College, Nagaon
- Dr Gorky Chakravarty, Doom Dooma College, Tinsukia, Assam.
- Dr Debabrata Sarmah, Jorhat College, Jorhat;
- Dr Jerry Thomas, Principal, Don Bosco College, Jorhat;
- Dr Yankahao Vashum, Eastern Theological College, Jorhat.
- Dr Dilip Gogoi, Cotton College, Guwahati
- Dr Sanjay Barbora, Panos South Asia, Guwahati.
- Dr Nani Gopal Mahanta, Dept. of Pol. Sc. Guwahati University.
- Dr Priyam Goswami, Dept. of History, Guwahati University
- Dr Uttam Bathari, Deputy Director, ICHR-NERC, Guwahati
- Ms Elizabeth Devi, Omeo Kumar Das ISCD, Guwahati
Prof. Anuradha Dutta, Omeo Kumar Das ISCD, Guwahati  
Mangneo Lhungdim, Regional Manager, IGSSS, Guwahati  
Dr Thomas Menamparampil, Guwahati  
Dr Catherine Chopecosa, NEDSF, Guwahati  
Santiago Savari, Director, NEDSF, Guwahati  
Prof. (Retd) Udayon Misra, Dibrugarh University (Guwahati)  
Tom Mangattathuzhe, Diphu Citizens’ Forum for Peace, Karbi Anglong  
Ms Meghali Senapati, TISS-NERC, Guwahati  
Dr Swabera Islam, K. C. Das Commerce College, Guwahati  
Dr Archana Sharma, Director, Women’s Study Division, Gauhati University  
Pranab Jyoti Neog, Director, Xavier Foundation, Guwahati.  
Students from the Department of History, Gauhati University  
Department of History, Assam University, Silchar  
Department of History, Dibrugarh University  
Department of Sociology, Tezpur university  
Department of History, Cotton College, Gauhati  
Department of History, Handique College, Guwahati  
Department of History, B. Borooah College, Guwahati