



ICSSR NERC

Peace in Dialogue

Universals and Specifics

(REFLECTIONS ON NORTHEAST INDIA)

Edited by

Sujata Dutta Hazarika

PEACE IN DIALOGUE: UNIVERSALS & SPECIFICS

(Reflections on Northeast India)

Prof. A. C. Sinha

Edited by
Sujata Dutta Hazarika



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Foreword

The North Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR-NERC), Shillong, as a part of its academic activity has initiated a series of dialogue in different parts of Northeast India by inviting scholars both from within and outside Northeastern region to discuss issues related to peace and peace process in Northeast. Three such dialogue proceedings were published by the Centre in book form under the rubric *Peace in India's Northeast— Meaning Metaphor and Method: Essays on Concern and Commitment, The Guwahati Declaration and the Road to Peace in Assam and Coming Out of Violence— Essays on Ethnicity, Conflict Resolution and Peace Process in Northeast India.*

Now we are pleased to present the fourth series in this direction on *Peace in Dialogue: Universals and Specifics: Reflections on North East India.* The various articles carefully put together in this volume by Sujata Dutta Hazarika under four different sections such as *Democracy and Peace, Redefining Peace: Issues of Governance, Peace: Issues and Strategies in Northeast India* and *Peace in Texts and Discourses* raise different issues with an aim to contain the various ethnic conflicts and to bring an emotional integration of the entire region.

Although the book contains a great deal on the discourse of peace, however, one missing link in this volume is the contribution of Christianity and Church towards peace process particularly in the states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya which perhaps we will address in our next volume.

C. Joshua Thomas

Prof. A. C. Sinha

Preface

The main aim of this volume is to bring to light the different shades of opinion and research on Peace without any claim to have explored all possible dimensions and implications of Peace and its probable negations. But it does make a modest claim to provide a structure with the participatory concern of further engagement with issues that come up in course of this intervention. An important point in understanding Peace is to override the assumption that because conflicts share some general patterns, the framework used to analyze and resolve them ought to be universal and applicable across culture and context. The arrogance of this approach notwithstanding, we have ample evidence now that universal models not only fail but also tend to trigger resentment among communities, especially at the grassroots level. As a result, in recent years, several scholars have begun to address questions of identity and difference in conflict, conflict resolution and peace-building. This includes exploring the roles of culture, history and disparities in power and privilege and new understandings of identity and community, which are emerging in the context of particular struggles. These struggles often involve challenges to and attempts to transform different structures of inequality and oppression along the lines of gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and nationality among other things. Our endeavour claims this as the point of departure.

The present volume brings together essays with diverse methodologies and multiple interpretations of the very discourse of Peace, both through lens of universals in the peace discourse as much as the dynamics of its specifics in the context of North East India. This volume aims to take the 'peace in dialogue' programme a step forward by responding to the needs of the political context offered by India-North-east relations to address diverse issues and urge the

need to sustain such engagement while identifying new approaches to peace building and introducing new ways of thinking about conflict through a critical reflection on contemporary understandings of democracy, diplomacy, mediation and dialogue.

A mark of distinction in this book on peace and its realization is its display of a sensitivity towards understanding Peace not just in its intrinsic individual form but also through its structural dimensions of integration with a collectivity. Through wider worldviews like Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Bhakti cult and Sufism one encounters an embodied dialogue of Peace that interlinks individual to society. In discussing aspects of peace with respect to the different actors, issues and strategies such as women, insurgents, ethnicity, subnationalism, displacement etc., in the context of the Northeast, we have tried to explore the different ramifications and approaches to peace building that can contribute to a holistic understanding of conflict and its resolution in Northeast without limiting its scope to this region alone.

IIT-G, Guwahati
April 2008

Sujata Dutta Hazarika

Prof. A. C. Sinha

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This edited volume, *Peace in Dialogue: Universals and Specifics (Reflections on North-East India)*, owes its primary impetus to a group of academicians, thinkers, policymakers and social activists, who have dedicated their lives to the cause of Peace. Their concerted peace efforts were the original encouragement for the organization of a National Seminar on *Peace in Dialogue: Reflections on North East India* at the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IITG) on 1st and 2nd February 2007. Incidentally, at this time Assam was facing one of its worst encounters with insurgency in the form of an impending threat to the forthcoming National Games in Guwahati. With a national debate and a political discourse of insurgency and national security going on, the wisdom of holding the National Games in a state which could not be declared peaceful was questioned. In this situation, it became imperative on the part of civil society to reduce the operating sphere of conflict and claim those spaces for democratic dialogue and reflections.

We are particularly grateful to Professor Gautam Baruah, Director, IITG, Dr Saundarjya Borbora, Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and Professor Sanjib Baruah, visiting professor at IITG for their unflinching support for the Seminar. Our special thanks to Professor Amalendu Guha, Mr B G Verghese, Professor B P Mishra and Professor Sanjib Baruah. They delivered a series of Special Lectures during the Seminar, which were indispensable for charting a clear territory within the nebulous ambiguity that any discourse on Peace entails. We are grateful to all the resource persons for taking the pain to travel to Guwahati and personally presenting their research papers and also revising their papers and sending them for publication on time.

We acknowledge IITG which provided a highly professional

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We are grateful to Dr C Joshua Thomas, Director, ICSSR North Eastern Regional Centre and the team of their young staff members particularly, Ms Fiasta, Ms Christine and Mr R M Pasi, who worked diligently throughout, deserve special appreciation. It is also our privilege to warmly remember here everyone at HSS Department, IITG for the wonderful cooperation during the Seminar, both academic and managerial.

We appreciate Dr Rangita Bali Waikhom for her valuable assistance in the Seminar as the rapporteur and Dr Siby George, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay for being the copy editor of this volume.

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Prof. B. B. Hazarika

Introduction

Sujata Dutta Hazarika

*"There is no way to peace. Peace is the way." (A. J. Muste)**

The twenty-first century is faced with many new challenges as we continue to grapple with the origins of violent conflicts and explore ways to prevent their eruption and their devastating effects. How can we seriously address and try to effectively stop the rise in violence all around us: from our homes, neighborhoods, nations to the international arena? Peace is thus one of the major concerns of our social and political existence. Right to a peaceful life is the urgent call of the hour, a rare conformity placed between political, cultural and social discourses. One of the paradoxes of modern life is that while innumerable benefits emanate out of leading a peaceful life, modern life somehow seems to accumulate an equal number of conflict sources. While the 'common person' has a very high stake in Peace, because of her natural aversion to violence, 'common citizen' has no power to negotiate peace, which lies with the State. What a common citizen can do is to reduce the operating sphere of conflict and claim those spaces for democratic institutions.

Most conceptual understandings of Peace explicitly or implicitly stress the destructive nature of violence, and focus on nonviolent solutions to problems and conflicts. At the same time, there is also a consensus among scholars and practitioners that Conflict is an integral part of life. Current debates in the field involve the most effective ways to prevent the escalation of conflicts and to successfully intervene when they erupt into violence through a critical examination of the definitions of concepts of peace and conflict resolution. In principle,

* As quoted in the Editorial of the *New York Times*, November 16, 1967.
A. J. Muste was a renowned American non-violent activist.

most studies of Peace conceptualize it as more than the sheer absence of war or physical violence, making a clear distinction between negative and positive peace. Hakan Wiberg (1987) defines negative peace as “the absence of organized, personal violence that is approximately the same as non-war” and positive peace as “requiring the absence of structural violence”.

This definition of Peace entails a broadening of the scope of enquiry by addressing structural violence and emphasizing ‘Justice’ and ‘Equality’ as necessary preconditions for positive peace to prevail. Thus peace cannot prevail without participation of everyone in decision making and enjoyment of human rights and equality.

An important point in understanding Peace is to override the assumption that because conflicts share some general patterns, the framework used to analyze and resolve them ought to be universal and applicable across culture and context. The arrogance of this approach notwithstanding, we have ample evidence now that universal models not only fail but also tend to trigger resentment among communities, especially at the grassroots level. As a result, in recent years, several scholars have begun to address questions of identity and difference in conflict, conflict resolution and peace-building. This includes exploring the roles of culture, history and disparities in power and privilege and new understandings of identity and community, which are emerging in the context of particular struggles. These struggles often involve challenges to and attempts to transform different structures of inequality and oppression along the lines of gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and nationality among other things. Our endeavour claims this as our primary point of departure and ultimately materialize into the making of this volume.

This volume brings together essays with diverse methodologies and multiple interpretations of the very discourse of Peace, both through the workings of its universals as much as the dynamics of its specifics in the context of North East India. It aims to take the peace in dialogue program a step forward by responding to the needs of the political context offered by India-Northeast relations to address diverse issues and urge the need to sustain such engagement while identifying new approaches to peace building and introducing new ways of thinking about conflict through a critical reflection on contemporary understandings of diplomacy, mediation and dialogue.

The Northeast has been an area of great and continuous civilisational intercourse throughout history, and has been thought of as "a gateway of commerce and culture that linked India overland to east and Southeast Asia", a "complex transition zone of linguistic, racial and religious streams." The 'indigenous tribes' of the Northeast represent successive waves of migrants, both from East and West, with many entering the region as late as the nineteenth century. The cultural mosaic was made more complex as a result of the British policy of 'importing' large numbers of administrators, plantation workers and cultivators from other parts of India. However, this historical 'connectedness' was systematically undermined by the British policies of progressive segregation of tribal populations into virtual 'reservations' called 'non-regulated', 'backward' or 'excluded' areas that were administered under a succession of unique provisions between the years 1874 and 1935. These provisions excluded the tribal areas from the pattern of administration that prevailed in the rest of British India, from the operation of the codes of civil and criminal procedures and from a wide range of laws that were thought to be unsuitable to the 'stage of development' of the populations of the hill areas of the Northeast, but at the same time allowed a gradual 'democratisation' that was taking place through the nationalist and eventually the Independence movement. An 'Inner Line' system that prohibited access to these areas to all 'outsiders', except those who obtained special permission from the government, created 'a frontier within a frontier', accentuating the political and cultural schism between the tribal areas and the plains and also between itself and the rest of India.

Regrettably, such isolationist policies persisted in the post-Independence period under the mistaken motives of 'protecting' the tribal population against exploitation by 'outsiders'. The cumulative impact of these policies was a deepening of fissures between tribal and non-tribal populations, as well as a contrived and unsustainable exclusion of these regions from the processes of modernisation and democratisation. Inevitably, with the progressive and natural erosion of these artificial barriers, the local populations were brought into increasing friction with migrant populations that were far better adapted to the institutions and processes of the modern world, giving rise to a proliferation of conflicts throughout the region. The dichotomous administrative system both in the pre- and the post-Independence

era, produced wide variations between the pace of development in the hills and the plains, with the latter dominating the economic profile of the region, and the tribal areas lagging far behind. It is the wide swathe of the Brahmaputra Valley – comprising nearly 22 per cent of the region – that has long been the most economically active, with substantial plantation and industrial estates and reasonable infrastructure.

Moreover, the region with its critical strategic significance and, as is often remarked, remains tenuously connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor, the ‘chicken’s neck’ or ‘Siliguri Corridor’, in North Bengal, with an approximate width of 33 kilometres on the eastern side and 21 kilometres on the western side. This constitutes barely one per cent of the boundaries of the region, while the remaining over 99 per cent of its borders are international – with China to the North; Bangladesh to the South West; Bhutan to the North West; and Myanmar to the East. Illegal migration of Bangladeshi nationals into India and the use of Bangladeshi and Bhutanese territory by insurgents operating in India’s North East are a grave security concern for the region. Circumstances in the theatres of conflict in India’s Northeast go against the general presumption of a direct and self-evident conflict of interests between the government and its various agencies, on the one hand, and the terrorist groupings on the other. A complex collusive arrangement between various legitimate power elites and terrorist groupings exists in every single terrorism-affected State, and this arrangement facilitates a continuous transfer of resources into the ‘underground economy of terrorism’. In contrast to the common perception of terrorist activity as violent confrontation with the government, there is a more insidious subversion of the established order through a consensual regime against a backdrop of widespread breakdown of law and order, and terrorist groupings have demonstrated their preference towards ‘systemic corruption’, rather than the dismantling or destruction of the prevailing political order. Thus looking at the pattern of conflict in the region, which has been in the grip of separatist insurgencies since India’s independence, and ethnic strife thereafter, we can broadly classify the following categories of dissent:

- Movements for secession from the Indian nation-state
- Movements for full-fledged states within the Indian Union

- Movements for autonomy within Indian states
- Movements for reservation or special protection within the autonomous structures
- Strife between tribal population/ groups for control over land or territorial supremacy
- Movement against 'outsiders', foreign nationals etc.

Peace building in North East India, taking into consideration its background of multiple histories and voices in the intersection of innumerable ethno-cultural communities that make up its economic ambit, will have to be seen as a process in transition. Adjusting these diverse sub-nationalities and unique socio-cultural and subsistence economies within the wider Indian sovereign nation state has been a grueling experience for both sides. Although a majority of the communities in this region seem to have reconciled with their common destiny within the Indian union, the psychological problem of adjusting with a so-called ethnic mainstream gives rise to a feeling of insecurity, neglect and discrimination among the tribes which are of the mongoloid origin. This fact is further aggravated by the policies of cultural homogenization undertaken by the policies of Indian Government. Media in the Northeast also reflects this chasm and in fact sometimes aggravates the tension and confusion in the polity. The national and local newspapers which have influence over a large readership most of the time focus on events of violence instead of analyzing the patterns or the process of violence. Moreover, a growing alienation of the civil society from participating in arbitration and peacemaking is leading to the reduction of the operating spaces for democratic institutions and dialogue.

According to the nineteenth century Sociologist, Emile Durkheim, conflict and change are universal features of contemporary societies and may be considered normal, within limits and even conducive to their well-being. Thus, while it is almost normal for every society to exhibit certain degree of deviance, conflict and security threats, both at individual and collective levels, in the case of the Northeast what one sees as a problem is, the increasing dominance of issues, like, insurgency and national security in political discourses which has gradually displaced and reduced those spaces that should

ideally be occupied by more positive and peaceful concerns of a democratic civil society. While India's democratic ideals can be redesigned to accommodate the aspirations of the people, one needs to accept democratic space as the only holistic philosophy in its contemporary structure which includes human rights, gender equity etc. Thus all issues of democracy could be achieved through the democratic process and the revival of the idea of integration. The real challenge is to elevate the character of democracy to bring peace in Northeast.

Coming specifically to the contents of this volume it has four different sections dealing four diverse issues related to peace in the region. The first section deals on Democracy, Dialogue and Peace and in this section there are three articles and they explore issues of Indian national policy, diplomatic policy and democratic dialogue – all of which have had far reaching consequences for deciding Peace in this region. In the *Post-Frontier Blues: Deficits of Democracy, Development and Peace in Northeast India*, Sanjib Baruah delves into the region's history as a frontier and the fallout of such a policy, manifested as resistance to the frontier model of development. Introducing the idea of a 'post-frontier Northeast', Baruah draws attention to policy challenges that are attentive to the legacy of Northeast India as an erstwhile frontier. He elaborates on the transformation of non-state spaces into state spaces in the Northeast and shows that different parameters are used by the government for frontier and non-frontier societies. Pinpointing the challenges facing post-frontier Northeast, like massive changes in property rights, intensification of mobility as among the *Char* settlers and demographic transformation in Assam, he compares the situation of the Northeast with that in Malaysia and Fiji. If these challenges are addressed through appropriate policy making for the 'post-frontier society', Baruah sees radical reorientation of Indian policy towards the region and indeed the arising of a new paradigm for the future of Northeast.

B P Misra in his article on *Democracy and Dialogue: Lessons For and Lessons From India's North-East* begins by saying that a modern state is only notionally associational but it remains culture and community specific. He asserted that the modern state have often failed to articulate their particular situation due to their imitative approach. According to Misra India's Northeast is in itself home to a

large number of communities and their respective status claims of nativity with one another leads to conflict and strife. Therefore, he is of the view that classical Marxism and modern Liberalism which is both formulated in the tradition of enlightenment is hopeful of rapprochement among all the people despite their differences which will then be the source of unity in a multination state.

Amalendu Guha's piece, *Sino-Indian Peace Process: Background of the Conflict and Its Resolution*, throws up many revelations on threats to peace which are not always external in origin. Speaking mainly to the younger generation of scholars who are not aware of facts leading to the Sino-Indian war of 1962, he attempts to bring forth the trajectory of the chilly experience before the war, the war itself, about half century of cold war that followed and finally the ray of hope now gleaming due to the current dialoguing taking place. The unresolved Sino-Indian boundary question was neglected in the 1950s and gradually disputes that occurred on the border led to the outbreak of the war in which India suffered a humiliating defeat. Conflicting claims over borders along today's Arunachal Pradesh led to an entirely avoidable war, if only the Indian political parties had not created a mass frenzy about the border question and allowed dialogue between the two countries to reach its desired goal. Guha ends in a positive note optimistically hoping that an amicable solution to the Sino-Indian border dispute, which is now in the offing, may give the momentum for solving the more vicious Indo-Pak conflict in a constructive manner.

The second section of essays entitled *Redefining Peace: Issues in Governance* tries to redefine the prevailing discourse of Peace within the wider body of governance, through an analysis of concepts like democracy, dialogue, negotiations, gender and extortion economy. Samir Kumar Das in his paper *Dialogues for Peace or Dialogues for Justice? Towards an Understanding of Peace Dialogues in India's Northeast*, highlights the variegated ways of conducting dialogues and takes cue from Ronald Dworkin's views on taking rights seriously in the light of policy making. The language for dialogue with the state can be either a language of right or one of the collective. The present system of peace dialogue subordinates the rights that are making the collective to thrive. Therefore, Das argues that the importance of the language with which we conduct our dialogues

determines the democratic process. His paper also shows how we are living in an age of policies and how such a language of the collective, has appropriated the dialogues for justice.

On Identity and Underdevelopment: On Conflict and Peace in Assam, Gurudas Das says that the idea of making a nation state by the ethnic Assamese cannot be fulfilled due to many complications and one of the reasons was identity. Further he explains the history of Assam based on identity, politics, ethnic conflicts, insurgency and its economy which ultimately led to the reorganization of Assam in 1972. Das also raised the question on the identity of an Assamese and said that there is no particular concept to term a person as an Assamese. He further discusses the issues which led to the Assam movement and Assam accord which he says was due to the fear and insecurity on the identity of the ethnic Assamese populace. Identity and Underdevelopment therefore resulted to political instability and economic stagnation. Das also emphasizes that insurgency was a by-product of identity movements in Assam. He concludes by suggesting that the residents of Assam should be taken into confidence for restoration of socio-political stability and economic development of the State.

Vijayalakshmi Brara's paper *Women in Peace: But Are They in Dialogue? A Case Study of Manipur* gives insight into how the Manipuri women's movement and organizations are extolled for their participation in peace promotion but marginalized in times of peace negotiations. She makes an attempt to map women's immense participation, role and efforts in public sphere, exemplifying the case of Manipuri women. Questioning the mere agitationist nature of Meira Paibis today, Brara seeks to project an alternative paradigm of women actually brokering peace and other concerns of their day to day life. Deepthi Shankar's paper *Are the Voices Unheard? Women in Peace Process* primarily focuses on the neglected gender issues which have surfaced as a consequence of armed conflict. Victimization of women in armed conflict, the very politics of women's exclusion, women's voices, role of UN in championing the gender issue and international campaign on women and peace etc., are the highlights of the paper. The central aim of the paper is to demonstrate the role women can play in development and peace. Tania Das and Madhavi Bhasin's paper on *Structuring Negotiations for Durable Peace – The NAN Approach*

analyses peace making and peace processes. The paper clearly brings to light the importance of negotiations in engendering peace. They have identified the threat to peace like inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflicts, structural violence etc. The approach to peace suggested is the Negotiation About Negotiation (NAN) approach, which is a quest for lasting and mutually benefiting peace.

Dipankar Sengupta's *Policy Making in a Terrorist Economy* draws up a state of affairs where terrorist organizations lay stress on extortion rather than their supposedly primary issue of secession. He argues that this shift is not conducive to economic growth as economic packages of the state in a terrorist economy will actually help to fill the coffers of the terrorists. Sengupta suggests a participatory and decentralized approach with the village panchayat as the nucleus because such an approach will alienate the sympathizers of the terrorists. Basing himself on Ajay Shani's contribution in this area, Sengupta explores further to explain how terrorist economy sustains itself.

The third section entitled *Peace: Issues and Strategies in Northeast India* explores the concept of Peace, locating it in the specific context of Northeast India. It is felt that the mosaic of complex diversity and culture in this region and its impending shadow of conflict cannot be completely comprehended without touching the sphere of displacement and dispossession, which in itself leads to further conflict and violence. As a result we have also incorporated certain contributions on this aspect of conflict in Northeast, without which Peace Building would be impossible, because in Northeast the main cause of displacement has been *closely linked with inter-tribal conflict arising out of growing identity politics centred around disputes over land and autonomy*. These Papers have contributed to the understanding of displacement in Northeast India due to ethnic conflict, development projects and environmental calamities.

A C Sinha's paper in this section *State Formation, Nation Building and Aspects of Peace in Northeast India* throws light on how the states in the region were formed. He points out that the present violence in the region is an uneven process of consensus building for a regional civil society. Indicating that India started with a paternalistic attitude towards this region and it still continues this approach, he argues that at certain level space was also provided as far as the question of

Northeast in the nation building process is concerned. Peace can be assured only if consensus building among the regional communities is generated. Civil society must create a space beyond the formal structure, work relentlessly, and must assert itself in a civic way. He concludes that one should use democracy to our advantage. Walter Fernandez, in his paper, *The Imperative of a Peace Process in Assam* reflects on what is happening in Assam and how to move ahead. Recalling the positive step of an ULFA manifesto a couple of years ago and the subsequent spurt of disappointing violence, he narrates the difficulties that have been there for peace in Assam to come true. He calls upon civil society to play its role by raising the cultural, social and economic autonomy issues rather than seeing the whole issue as merely political. One needs to avoid polarization and bring people to negotiating table and civil society needs to play a great task in shaping a vibrant Northeast.

Anuradha Dutta's paper *From Victims to Actors in Peace Building*, makes an attempt to analyze the role of the Bodo women as non-state actors and became actively involved in the movement with the initiative made by the Bodo students' movement. Though succeeded in asserting as key players in settling the conflict the paper also focuses on how women organization are excluded from the negotiating table in conflict resolution etc. This paper clearly defines the trajectory of women as victims of conflict, then actors and finally without any power in the specific context of Bodoland.

Chandrika Basu Mazumdar's paper on *Peace in a Dialogue: Tripura Perspective*, begins with the optimistic statement that militancy is on the decline in Tripura. Delving into the problems and prospects of peace there, she hails the new initiatives of attractive package of rehabilitation which is drawing a large number of militants to surrender. Mousumi Chaudhuri's paper *Genesis of ethnic conflict in the context of Karbi-Anglong district* reiterates the historical background of the ethnic violence in the Kokrajhar district of Assam. She reiterates how historically Karbi-Anglong formed a part of hill districts of Assam which was placed under the category of either "excluded" or "partially excluded territory", this categorization more than being a simple administrative division had significant implications for their socio economic growth. The relative isolation

and negligence from the mainstream society and its own multiethnic paradigm paved the way for insurgency and unrest. The demand for autonomous state generated a number of armed groups who compete with each other for supremacy and protection of culture and identity due to threat from other communities. She discusses how transition from their traditional agricultural economy, alien development policies, settling of immigrants encroachment of land, led to a serious onslaught on their socioeconomic structure leading to large scale identity crisis and violence.

Gita Bharali in her paper *Development-Induced Displacement, Deprivation and Rehabilitation in Assam: Critique of NPRR 2003* discusses how development projects such as dams, factories, mines etc have been initiated and implemented in the last five and a half decades resulting in eviction of 50 to 60 million people, out of whom 40% are tribals. Only about 33% have had some sort of resettlement, the quality of which is far from satisfactory. The paper discusses the extent of land acquisition, displacement and deprivation caused by the development projects in Assam and also discusses the rehabilitation scenario in the State and make a critique of the rehabilitation policy from that point of view. Monirul Hussain's paper entitled *IDP's in India's North-East: Waiting for Elusive Resettlement and Rehabilitation* specially emphasizes the issue of ethnic violence in the Karbi-Anglong Hill District, in Assam during the month of October to December 2005. He considered the status of the IDP's in India and called them 'refugees in his/her own country'. Hussain also points out that in the Northeast, all the three categories of Internally Displaced Persons namely; those induced by environmental causes, conflicts and developmental projects together augment the general situation of conflict and violence among groups trying to secure their exclusive access and rights to limited resources.

The last section entitled *Peace in Texts and Discourses* explore the universals of Peace by reflecting on the notion of Peace in the works of Shankardeva, Ajan Fakir, Ibn Rushd, Wittgenstein and Nichiren Daishonin. These papers bring out the concept of Peace as understood by both science and religion as the universal truth transcending mundane questions of application and thus provokes a contagious hope to seek solution. Krishna Barua's paper *Bhakti as*

the Essence of Peace: Srimanta Sankardeva's Aesthetics of Prayer brings out how Sankardeva's aesthetics of prayer, initiated in the turmoil torn fifteenth century Assam, restructured the indigenous and traditional aesthetics and infused a new spirit of peace in the lives of the people. She also shows how Sankardeva's teaching can bring peace in the households and act as a link between people in conflicts.

Crossing the Border: Inter-religious Dialogue in Medieval Assam by Archana Barua is an interesting discussion on the pre-colonial medieval Assam's *Bhakti* movement, which paved the way for a healthy dialogue with Islam in Assam. The key players of this dialogue between two faiths were Sankardeva and Ajan Fakir. Barua bemoans the absence of such inter-religious interactions in contemporary Assam, while pointing out its potential and relevance to bring harmony in the current conflict-ridden society. The point that Akiojam Thoibisana and V Prabhu bring to attention in their *Negotiating Religious Discourse towards Peace* is the paradox of the inherently peaceful message of the religions and their actual propensity to trigger vicious conflicts, due to the tendency among people to look upon 'religious events' with a scientific, historical eye. The two authors propose a way out of this impasse by taking a Wittgensteinian stance towards religious events. They propose that if religious events are taken truly for their religious value, and reserve the scientific and historical criterion for matters of facts, violence in the name of religion could be avoided. Such a view perhaps broadens the base for negotiating the discourses related to religion to ensure peace and how we can bring peace through proper religious interpretation. Rahul Jain's paper in this section, *Rissho Ankoku Ron* draws a parallel between thirteenth century Japan and present day Northeast. The paper speaks about Nichurian Dishonin, a thirteenth century Buddhist sage and philosopher, and his treatise, *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, on politics, philosophy and religion. Jain tries to draw the parallel between the two situations and pleads for replicating the successful practices which worked in one situation in the other. We will be much pleased if the twenty articles authored by scholars from diverse backgrounds in this volume on the theme peace could lead to a meaningful dialogue to find lasting peace in the trouble-torn region of Northeast India.

Section I:

Democracy, Dialogue and Peace

1

Post-Frontier Blues: Deficits of Democracy, Development and Peace in Northeast India*

Sanjib Baruah

The Northeast Indian story is a far cry from the dominant national narratives of 'India Shining' – the slogan that celebrates India's democracy, high economic growth rates and its new-found prestige in the global arena. Today our policy towards the region seems to be at a crossroads. The debate on the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) underscores a policy impasse. The Reddy Committee recognizes that the law has become "a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and highhandedness" and it recommends repealing the law. But it also wants key elements of AFSPA to remain. So it recommends that some of its provisions be incorporated into a pan-Indian counter-terrorism law, in effect proposing a significant reform with one hand and taking it away with the other (Government of India 2005: 75, 77).

New Delhi's thinking on the region has of late zeroed in on closing the development gap as a magic bullet. Funds transferred annually from the coffers of the Government of India to Northeastern states, according to the Reserve Bank of India's Deputy Governor, now add up to more than what India gets from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other multilateral institutions put together. The amounts are higher

* The argument presented here is further developed in my *Postfrontier Blues: Toward a New Policy Framework for Northeast India* (Washington D.C.: East-West Center, 2007). The publication is available on-line: <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/>

than the total foreign aid that Bangladesh receives (Mohan 2003). In the context of this analogy, it may be useful to recall some of the debates on international development assistance. Influential critics were skeptical of aid because in its single-minded attention to bridging “gaps”, it ignored the qualitative factors that might inhibit growth.

A recent World Bank report on Northeast India sees institutional arrangements – one of the qualitative factors that critics of international development assistance had in mind – as the major obstacle to utilizing the region’s vast water resources for sustainable development. It finds a highly centralized approach that suffers from “the paternalism of central-level bureaucrats, coercive top-down planning, and little support or feedback from locals.” There is widespread distrust of these centralized structures among local stakeholders, who believe that most developmental initiatives would bring no benefits to them. The institutional arrangements are so dysfunctional that even an embankment project designed to benefit the people of an area, may be opposed by the very people it is supposed to benefit (World Bank 2006: 13-14). This provides further testimony to the impasse in our Northeast policy.

The commitment to spend more money to bridge what officials see as a developmental gap is unlikely to get the region out of what the World Bank calls its present “low-level equilibrium” of poverty, non-development, civil conflict and lack of faith in political leadership (World Bank 2006: 30).

Surely, it is time to recognize errors in old habits of thinking, ask some hard questions about how we have come to this point, critically examine prevailing policy frames, and envision a strategic course reversal.

Here I introduce the new term, ‘post-frontier’, to draw attention to policy challenges that are attentive to the legacies of Northeast India as a frontier. During British colonial rule much of the region was treated as a frontier – an area with vast tracts of ‘wastelands’ that needs to be settled with population from outside. But what outsiders saw as ‘wastelands’ had alternative uses for the locals – whether shifting cultivators or hunter-gatherers. It is hardly surprising that tensions between ‘outsiders’ and those with claims to being indigenous have been a perennial source of conflict in Northeast India. I try to

identify a number of policy challenges that can be understood in terms of the region's history as a frontier, and the intended and unintended consequences of policies adopted in response to resistance to the frontier model of development.

Development policy and conflict management tools, which were blind to these contextual factors, have had serious un-intended adverse consequences, including fuelling old conflicts and generating fresh new ones. Directly addressing these challenges – policy-making for a post-frontier – could be the foundation for a radical reorientation of Indian policy towards the Northeast. The term is not meant to describe an actual condition. It is more a tool for imagining an alternative vision of change. This paper is meant as an initiative towards a debate that one hopes, would lead to a new paradigm for Northeast India's future.

Northeast India through the Lenses of Comparative History

In order to place Northeast India's predicament in a historical and comparative context, the region's extraordinary diversity and the in-between space it occupies as a cultural borderland, is a good place to start. All standard accounts of Northeast India refer to its linguistic and ethnic diversity.

Languages in Northeast India "live so close to each other," says Mrinal Miri, that "in many cases, one gets inducted into the life of the community not just through one language but several languages, so people grow up as naturally multilingual beings." When one switches from one language to another and mixes different languages in a conversation, "one doesn't move from one vision of the world to another in a kind of schizophrenic frenzy; but one is, as it were, a native citizen of a multi-visionary world" (Miri 2005: 55).

But what accounts for the region's extraordinarily large number of languages, dialects and ethnic groups? James C. Scott's distinction between state spaces and non-state spaces might give us a handle on the phenomenon. One of the world's "largest, if not *the* largest remaining non-state space" according to Scott is

the vast expanse of uplands ranging from northeastern India and eastern Bangladesh through northern Burma, northern Thailand, three provinces of southwestern China, most of

Laos, and much of upland Vietnam all the way to the Central Highlands— more than two million square kilometers. Lying at altitudes from 500 meters above sea level to more than 4,000 meters, it could be thought of as a Southeast Asian Appalachia, were it not for the fact that it sprawls across seven nation states (Scott 2007).

Historically this region's ethnic landscape has had "bewildering... 'gradients' of cultural traits." A person speaking three languages, for instance, was, and in many places still is, fairly common. If language was a poor clue to identity, so were rituals, clothing, food habits, or body decoration. This often frustrated ethnographers of an earlier era, looking for neat boundary lines (Scott, 2000: 21-22). Thus in the case of the Nagas, ethnographers and missionaries engaged in a struggle "to make sense of the ethnographic chaos they perceived around them: hundreds, if not thousands, of small villages seemed to be somewhat similar to each other but also very different, by no means always sharing the same customs, political system, art or even language" (Jacobs *et al.* 1990: 23).

Scott suggests that such a confusing ethnic landscape has something to do with swidden agriculture – the common mode of livelihood in the hills. Historically, in these parts of the world, land was abundant, but manpower was in short supply. The problem confronting States emerging in the valleys was to have a large enough subject population. Thus wars were not over territory, but about capturing subjects and slaves. The labor-starved States of the plains could not capture the dispersed and mobile populations in the hills for forced labor or military service; nor were tax collectors able to monitor their numbers or their holdings and income. Thus non-transparency in relation to the surveillance systems of the lowland States was the very rationale of the life-styles of the hills and might even explain their ethnic landscapes (Scott 2000: 2).

In this part of the world there was a symbiotic relationship between the non-State spaces in the hills and the State spaces in the lowlands. Thus the categories such as hill tribes and valley peoples are 'leaky vessels'. There were back-and-forth movements between the hills and the plains. Wars produced movements in both directions. While the attractions of commerce and what the lowlanders like to call

civilization may have generated movements of hill peoples downwards, it was by no means a one-way flow. Thanks to the extortionist labour demands of the lowland States and, the vulnerability of wet-rice cultivation to crop failures, epidemics and famines, there were also movements to the hills where more subsistence alternatives were available (Scott, 2000: 3-4). This is the material context of the situation described by Miri as one of languages living close to one another and people living in multi-visionary worlds (Miri 2005: 55).

The transformation of non-state spaces and peoples into state-spaces has taken place all through history and in all parts of the world. But that does not make it – or at least all aspects of it – desirable. The transformation of non-state spaces has meant among other things the “massive reduction of vernaculars of all kinds: of vernacular languages, minority peoples, vernacular cultivation techniques, vernacular land tenure systems, vernacular hunting, gathering and forestry techniques, vernacular religion, etc” (Scott 2007). Incidentally, vernacular religion is a much better term to think of the traditional religions of the peoples of the old non-state spaces of Northeast India than the style of thinking that assumes that the faiths of the whole world can be divided into the standardized categories of major world religions such as Hinduism, Islam or Christianity.

Northeast India’s enormous linguistic and cultural diversity reflects the resilience of the legacies of historic non-state spaces despite powerful odds. For pre-colonial States in the region such as the valley States of Assam (the Ahom State), Manipur and Tripura, the project of transforming these non-state spaces into state spaces was, to use Scott’s phrase, no more than “a mere glint in the eye.” But the modern Indian State, both in its colonial and postcolonial incarnations, is able to mobilize the resources necessary to realize such a project. Thus for more than a century, the vast Asian transnational non-state space has been going through what Scott terms the world’s last great enclosure movement – “albeit clumsily and with setbacks” (Scott 2007).

Some long-term trends in the agrarian history of South Asia give concrete evidence of this process at work in Northeast India. During the century after 1880, “when statistics appear for the first time”, permanent cultivation expanded at extremely high rates in Northeast India, “faster than almost anywhere else in South Asia.” Much of this

expansion was the result of “people in the agrarian lowlands investing in land at higher altitudes.” Indeed “the physical expansion of cultivated farmland remained the major source of additional increments of agricultural production in South Asia until 1960” (Ludden, 2003: 17). The expansion of agriculture has also meant massive immigration into the region from other parts of the subcontinent and consequent increases in the density of population.

This transformation – including the multiple forms of resistance to it and, in postcolonial times, the reformist impulse of a liberal democratic order mediating the process – provides the backdrop to some of Northeast India’s conflicts. In the same mix are the proto-national projects that developed around the old valley States – especially Manipur and Assam –, ‘entrapped in the linguistic imaginary of the territorial State’ (Appadurai 1993: 418). With less and less influence over the drama unfolding in the historic non-state spaces around them, they feel marginalized and besieged in the colonial and subsequently post-colonial, pan-Indian dispensation. The other important historic valley state, Tripura, however, has had a somewhat different postcolonial history.

That colonial Assam was seen as a frontier – an area with vast tracts of ‘wastelands’ – and that the story of tea in Assam begins with those ‘wastelands’ being made available to European entrepreneurs, is well known. But tea is only a part of the frontier story. While present-day Assam was the core of this new frontier with its tea plantations, oil wells and coalmines, the rest of Northeast India too had its place in this frontier story. The Inner Line that is still in force in today’s Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram formed the security parameter of the colonial economic frontier. Designed to keep “primitives” bound to their “natural” space in the hills, the Inner Line defined the limits of the “civilizational” space beyond which the colonial State would not provide security of property.

“Development through modernization,” is not the same as “development through frontier.” There are important differences. “Frontier societies assault and ultimately replace traditional societies” and migration plays a key role in “detaching their populations from the sources of their pre-frontier traditions.” On the other hand, non-frontier societies develop through “modernization.” Change happens there “in place so that their people have never been detached from

their traditional environments; instead they have had to modify their traditions in place” (Elazar 1996: 184).

With the advent of British colonial rule in the 19th century and the “discovery” of tea, Northeast India initially seemed destined for a frontier model of development as a matter of State policy. However, political resistance made this policy frame difficult to justify and “development through modernization” became the default policy model. But the policy shift did not necessarily halt the social and economic forces let loose by the frontier model of development introduced by British colonial rulers. Indian policy-making, whether in the matter of economic development, or peace building strategies, must be sensitive to this conflict-prone context.

Despite the ubiquity of the process of non-state spaces being transformed into state spaces, frontiers are not natural, they are man-made. It is unequal political power – often conquest – that turns territories into other people’s frontiers. It is not surprising therefore that political resistance in a frontier typically makes an appeal to the principle of self-determination. Yet once an area becomes a frontier, the process is not easily reversed. It may be difficult and, sometimes even undesirable, to reverse some changes in what was once a frontier landscape. For instance, development projects intended to improve conditions may face the constraint of limited labor supply, thus forcing at least a reformist version of the frontier model to be revived.

Policy Challenges of a Post-frontier

This essay is part of a larger work that seeks to identify issues that are specific to Northeast India’s post-frontier predicament. Among these challenges are: (a) the legacy of prohibited and unprohibited spaces, (b) the transitional state of property rights, (c) areas of labour shortage, (d) subsidy as a permanent condition of most Northeastern states, (e) mobility-intensive livelihood strategies of settler communities, (f) the transnational dimension of population movement, and (g) an unsustainable two-tiered citizenship regime. Here I will elaborate on just two of these challenges.

a. Accommodating the Livelihood Strategies of ‘Char’ Settlers

Among places regarded as ‘wastelands’ by British colonial officials

and thus considered suitable for settling new migrants were the *chars* – unstable temporary islands or braid bars – of the Brahmaputra river system. Though some *chars* become permanent, many do not. But since sediments make for very fertile soil, people settle in *chars* despite the hazards of floods, erosion and submergence, temporary as well as permanent.

In pre-colonial times some of the *chars* were used to grow winter crops like mustard and pulses and a variety of paddy called *ahu*. The colonial policy to settle East Bengalis on this frontier was a source of conflict because local cultivators lost their seasonal access to that land. Further, the decision of colonial officials to permanently settle people in the *chars* did not suddenly make them hospitable to round-the-year living.

Yet nearly 2.5 million people – nearly 9.4 percent of Assam's population – now are counted as inhabitants of *chars* and, not surprisingly, 68 per cent of them live below the poverty line (Government of Assam, 2005: 4). A very large part of Assam's Muslim population of East Bengali descent is *char* settlers. Indeed the Assamese term, *Sorua Musalman* (Muslims of the *char* or *sor* in Assamese) is almost synonymous with the term, Muslims of East Bengali descent, as opposed to ethnic Assamese Muslims.

The sedentary bias in development thinking cannot fully grasp the condition of *char* settlers. Often politicians and officials talk about giving *patta* or permanent settlement rights to *char* dwellers. There is talk about cadastral survey and land records as a way of avoiding land disputes. But while it may be possible to do that in some cases, the basic fact is that a flood plain is not meant for permanent settlement.

In wealthier countries, one could have considered the option of gradually weaning people out of some of the most vulnerable and flood-prone *chars* – and having only seasonal cultivation as in pre-colonial times and thus avoiding the annual political theatre of flood control and flood relief.

Mobility is an essential part of the strategies of livelihood for people settled in the *chars*. Lost in the controversy over illegal influx from Bangladesh is this aspect of *char* living. Movement of *char* settlers takes many forms: one or two members of a family, including children, may work in other places; there may be seasonal migration

of males; or entire families may move elsewhere. Thus over the years, descendants of those settled in the *chars* of Assam have dispersed to all parts of Northeast India and beyond.

One sees evidence of this dispersal at election times in Assam. Muslims of East Bengali descent go through enormous trouble to vote. Trains to Assam during elections carry large numbers of poor people of 'Bangladeshi' descent – some living in slums in other parts of the country. They travel to Assam to vote in villages – mostly in *char* areas – where they are registered. In Guwahati there is a noticeable shortage of rickshaws and vegetable peddlers on election day, because many people in these occupations leave the city and return to places where they are registered to vote. Voting is clearly more important to this segment of the subcontinent's multitude than to many upper and middle class citizens. This is because their claim to being in the country could rest on something as fragile as a 'voter's slip', given the conflation in public discourse between the dispersal of earlier generations of settlers and the question of illegal immigration.

The Indian discourse on 'Bangladeshis' takes attention away from the question of what attracts outsiders to the once prohibited parts of this post-frontier region, notably places like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. Descendants of *char* settlers have responded to the growth of informal land markets and are getting dispersed all through the region.

b. Still a Frontier?

While the dispersal of the descendants of earlier generations of *char*-settlers is an important dimension of India's 'Bangladeshi' discourse, there is little doubt that significant levels of cross-border migration from eastern Bengal has also continued. The Partition could not suddenly change the logic of a frontier and switch off the flow of people from one of the subcontinent's most densely populated areas, to a relatively sparsely populated region that was once regarded as a frontier open to new settlements, but is now separated by an international border. Indeed from the point of view of Northeast India, the effect of the Partition was mostly to intensify the migration pressure from East Bengal, with Hindu refugees now becoming part of the flow.

It is often difficult to distinguish a Muslim Bangladeshi from a

mobile *char*-settler – mostly Muslims of East Bengali descent. At the same time the political consequences of the perception that this migration is unstoppable cannot be exaggerated. In my book *India against Itself*, I had suggested that there is affinity of the situation of Assam with that of Malaysia and Fiji because in all three places large-scale colonial-era immigration had produced a stubborn pattern of conflicts between groups seen as immigrant and those with claims to being indigenous. There are demands on the part of groups claiming to be indigenous for primacy in terms of official cultural symbols, economic opportunities, and even political power in all three places. Cultural policy and immigration policy are especially sensitive issues and they have seriously threatened democratic stability.

Assam's long slide into political instability including the present era of insurgency and counter-insurgency began in 1979 as a social movement protesting immigration. The situation is structurally similar to the political crises in Malaysia and Fiji. But while Malaysia and Fiji managed to develop institutions and practices – albeit fragile ones – that are responsive to indigenous demands, in Assam there has been little acknowledgement that the immigration question requires a robust policy response. The continuation of immigration into Assam in the postcolonial era has made an already precarious demographic and political balance worse. The fact that Malaysia and Fiji are independent sovereign countries with jurisdiction over immigration policy, while Assam is not, has made all the difference in producing these very different outcomes (Baruah 1999, 67-68).

Anindita Dasgupta has pursued the comparison between Assam and Malaysia in greater detail. While Malaysia officially froze immigration and “clamped the lid firmly on the citizenship issue,” she writes, thanks to the Partition and the emergence of “a new migrant-exporting state, East Pakistan/Bangladesh,” Assam did not. The settlement of refugees in Assam took place despite significant Assamese opposition, and it “re-opened the matter of citizenship time and time again.” The absence of an effective immigration policy has produced, in her words, “a sense of a demographic disaster” from the perspective of the indigenous population of Assam (Dasgupta 2005). However, both immigrants and locals in Assam have adapted to the demographic transformation more creatively than is usually recognized.

A passage that often appears in the literature on immigration to Assam is that of C. S. Mullan, a British colonial official responsible for the census report of 1931. He had predicted that, "immigration was likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invasion of 1820, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization" (cited in Sinha, 1998).

In retrospect, Mullan was both right and wrong. The demographic transformation of Assam did indeed take place exactly as Mullan had predicted. But contrary to Mullan's prediction, as Monirul Hussain points out, "the entire East Bengali Muslim peasant community" adopted Axomiya or Assamese as their mother tongue (Hussain 1993: 207). This has produced a cultural politics very different from what Mullan had in mind. Thus the real fears of the ethnic Assamese today, as M.S. Prabhakara argues, are quite different from the "standard" view. It is not so much that they fear that Bengali speakers would eventually outnumber them and that the existence of the Assamese and their culture are in danger. Their real fear is that the new generation of Assamese speakers – mostly Muslims of East Bengali descent – would claim Assamese as their own language "stealing away, as it were, a crucial cultural patrimony which defines the Assamese people" (Prabhakara 1999: 70).

But while Assam may have adapted creatively to its massive demographic transformation, its present political troubles also are, to a significant extent, the result of the seemingly un-resolvable nature of the problem of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. The issue has become further complicated by trends towards Islamicist cultural radicalization in Bangladesh.

But while Indians talk about millions of Bangladeshis living illegally in India, official Bangladesh flatly rejects the notion. There are no mutually agreed upon procedures between India and Bangladesh for identifying – not to speak of deporting – illegal immigrants. Thus when Indian law-enforcement officials deport a Bangladeshi national, they drop the person in the no-man's land between the two countries. A person is literally thrown out of the country and s/he is at the mercy of two armed groups – the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on one side and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) on the other.

This is a rather pathetic performance of sovereign power by a State with big power ambitions. No sovereign country would like to accept a person unilaterally deported by another country. There is little recognition in India that a deportation decision involves two countries and not one. Were official Bangladesh and official India to find a way to talk about cross-border population movement rationally and as equals, at least some aspects of it could be better managed.

A post-frontier policy paradigm would necessarily mean recognizing the transnational dimension of many of Northeast India's challenges including the question of the cross-border movement of people. Turning the region's international borders from spaces of confrontation into spaces of cooperation would facilitate policy-making more generally in areas such as developing water resources and transportation.

The Bangladeshi question, however, is only a part of the larger question of immigration and demographic transformation of the region, and the perception of minoritization by indigenous groups, that animates many conflicts. Last month the Hindi-speaking migrants in the area around Tinsukia in Upper Assam became a focus of attention when the community was targeted for attack by ULFA seeking to open a third front, when faced with the pressures of a counter-insurgency operation.

Tinsukia as a railway junction and urban centre developed in the last century primarily to take out coal, oil, tea and timber to the rest of India. Before its twentieth century transformation, Tinsukia, then called Bengmora was the capital of the independent Muttok (or Motok) kingdom that came under the British colonial rule in 1842, fourteen years after the rest of Assam. Today for all practical purposes Tinsukia is a Hindi-speaking city where the Assamese and other indigenous communities are a minority, while the villages around it are dominated by the Motok-Moran people proud of their history of political resistance. These villages have been a solid source of support for the ULFA. That the hinterland of an urban area marked so clearly in terms of its contemporary political economic niche and a Hindi-speaking cultural profile would be a natural magnet for ULFA is not surprising. There are few other places in Assam where ULFA's thesis that natural resources are being sucked out to the rest of India in a classic colonial relationship seems more plausible.

Towards an Alternative Policy Frame

Siddharth Deb's *The Point of Return* is a poignant novel on the lives of the refugees of the 1947 partition and their descendants in a nameless Northeast Indian hill state. In a region where the idea of ethnic homelands appeals to local political activists, as well as to policy-makers looking for ways to put a lid on conflicts, the Partition refugees are seen as interlopers. As a result, the refugees after leaving "their homes forever to try and find themselves within the nation," discover that their journey is not over. "The hills that appeared beyond the horizon were only another mirage, their destination just another place that would reject them." The narrator on a visit to his 'hometown' remembers the 'life time of fear' that the protagonist had felt, and from which the son, the narrator, had run away to escape. A hill-town that had "drummed in the message of death" to the protagonist, he imagines, must have seemed "like a lost spot on the map of the nation, its remote beauty and even more remote violence surfacing in the national newspapers only as little single-column reports of 'disturbances'" (Deb 2004: 292, 295).

Finding ways to compensate the indigenous peoples of Northeast India, symbolically or substantively, for the historic injustice done to them by the colonial imagining of the region as a land (almost) without people, should undoubtedly have been a priority in India's approach to Northeast India's postcolonial future. That did not happen, at least not as an explicit goal of Indian policy. This is undoubtedly a major reason for Northeast India's troubled postcolonial politics.

But at the same time it is in the very nature of what is once a frontier that not all changes in its landscape can be wished away and undone. Thus in Assam we intuitively accept that tea plantation and *char* lands cannot be returned to their original claimants. But ironically, we do not accept that reality when it comes to, say, land occupied by impoverished descendants of tea workers. However, the issue has not been explicitly presented this way to the public, thanks to the mystification by a policy discourse that makes ethnic homelands seem to be the epitome of social justice – a discourse that is in fact completely out of sync with the region's actually existing political economy.

Compensating for historical injuries in a frontier can sometimes take the form only of symbolic justice.

In a post-frontier condition, trying to undo history by enforcing hard boundaries between the indigenous and the outsider – as Indian policy seeks to do in many parts of the Northeast – restricts the capacity to aspire to certain ethnically defined groups and not to others, and risks perpetuating a politics of violent displacement and ethnic cleansing.

The recent reorientation of Indian policy towards Northeast India is mostly a commitment to spend money to bridge what officials see as a developmental gap. It is not a break from the tradition of incremental policy-making by muddling through. It is unlikely to get the region out of its present “low-level equilibrium” of poverty, non-development, civil conflict and lack of faith in political leadership (World Bank 2006: 30). What is needed is a radically new paradigm for Northeast India’s future.

When Amitav Ghosh went to the Thai-Burmese border in 1996 after visiting the leader of the Burmese democracy movement Aung San Suu-kyi in Rangoon, he had hoped to find that democracy would have an answer to Burma’s unresolved civil war. But by the time he left he was no longer sure (Ghosh 1996: 49). On democracy’s ability to resolve civil conflicts, Ghosh would not have found grounds for more certitude and optimism across Burma’s border to India.

For while formally democratic through much of its history, the postcolonial Indian State has asserted sovereignty in the Northeast with significant display and use of military power.

Indian policy towards the Northeast is at a crossroads today. The debate on the Armed Forces Special Powers Act underscores a policy impasse. The Reddy Committee, to its credit, recognizes that the law has become “a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and highhandedness” in the region and it recommends repealing the law. But it also wants the key elements of AFSPA to remain. So it recommends that some of its provisions be incorporated into a pan-Indian counter-terrorism law, in effect proposing a significant reform with one hand and taking it away with the other. The stated goal of this contradictory recommendation, remarkably enough, is to end Northeast India’s sense of being discriminated against (Government of India, 2005: 75, 77).

AFSPA is about to enter its sixth decade – it is almost as old as Indian democracy. Arguably, illiberal democracy is the only kind Northeast India has known. Yet if the current debate on AFSPA is any guide, no one expects a sudden outbreak of tranquility. There is no credible roadmap to get Northeast India out of what the World Bank calls its present “low-level equilibrium” (World Bank 2006: 30). Surely, it is time to recognize errors in old habits of thinking, ask some hard questions about how we have come to this point, critically examine prevailing policy frames, and envision a strategic course reversal.

While commenting on the dysfunctional nature of the institutional arrangements governing water resources in Northeast India, the World Bank warns of the dangers of path dependency – of being locked into bad choices even when better alternatives are available. What is needed in order to build a more accountable institutional framework, it says, is “strong political will to counteract the tendency of a society to follow the path it has already taken due to the political or financial costs of changing it” (World Bank, 2006: 14). This applies not only to managing water resource, but to India’s entire approach to the Northeast.

While in Burma, Amitav Ghosh had pondered over the inherent arbitrariness of national boundaries in this especially heterogeneous part of the world with many “putative nationalities.” He concluded that on balance, Burma’s best hope for peace “lie in maintaining intact the larger and the more inclusionary entity that history, albeit absentmindedly, bequeathed to its population almost half a century ago” (Ghosh 1996: 49). The same can be said of Northeast India.

But to be able to break away from the region’s troubled past and present – its post-frontier blues – a new policy vision must also be post-national: one that is not entrapped by the national security manager’s narrow imaginary of the nation state, where nation building as a metaphor becomes “a handsome neoclassical building in which political prisoners scream in the basement” (P.T. Bauer, cited in McCloskey, 1990).

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