

EASTERN



# **Social Unrest and Peace Initiatives**

**Perspectives from North East India**

**Gautam K. Bera, Birinchi K. Medhi  
R.P. Athparia, K. Jose SVD**

# Social Unrest and Peace Initiatives

## Perspectives From North East India

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# Foreword

*Rev. Fr Cyprian Pinto SVD\**

The theme discussed in the larger canvas of North East India demands a thorough knowledge of the emerging socio-ethnic movements and its various ramifications in the context of the individual universe of the study. The papers throw open a number of themes and perspectives in the wider spectrum of identity issues over arching against the backdrop of culture and society in North East India where cultural diversities play a key role in understanding both social unrest and peace initiatives.

In the contemporary North East India, ethno-social aspirations have raised hidden tensions within communities and some of which have emerged as open and sporadic conflicts in various intensities. Observing and evaluating the people's movements for a number of years, say a decade and more, one can obviously fathom the arduous journey and the growth pangs on the one hand and the disillusionment due to the failure to cope up with the local socio-cultural, economic-political aspirations. These voices of the people springing up from a given context calls for a listening ear, an understanding heart, a reasoning mind with an ability to read the signs of the times. Leaders – both political and religious categories – have greater duty than ever to guide their fold towards amicable settlement of small differences to great antagonism. And this will eventually make way for peace and prosperity. Let us pledge that we each one of us proactively intervene in the peace building measures.

One earnestly hopes that this volume will be found useful not only for anthropologists and social scientists but also policy planners

and administrators who will have to undertake works of welfare and development in manifold dimensions. I place on record my appreciation to *SANSKRITI* for conceptualizing the pertinent theme of this national seminar and congratulate the editors and the writers of each of the papers presented in this timely publication.

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## Preface

*“Since wars begin in the minds of people,  
it is in the minds of people that the defences of peace must  
be constructed”*

*(Constitution of UNESCO, 1945)*

Many Anthropologists and other social scientists consider that People's movements in search of identity, human rights and dignity for a prolonged period of time must usher in positive results. That is to say, Peace with Justice is imperative for any individual and society to flourish and grow. Peace and Development are two sides of the same concept of welfare. Therefore, a fresh look on the condition of social unrest and peace initiatives in India became imperative to understand the situation in North East India as our special area of interest. We realized the fact that among the people of North East India this journey in search of peace took quite a long time treading through unknown paths with much turbulence.

Religions give us a unique and positive contribution to create a culture of peace. In Islam we see this concept that when one discharges duties meticulously he/she is at peace with oneself. We must actively be engaged in efforts for peace in our homes, families and communities. We must join with like-minded individuals, of which there are many, to fulfill our duty of enjoying the good and forbidding the evil in the world (Quran 3:104). In the Bible we have Jesus saying, “Blessed are those who work for peace, they shall be called children of God. (Bible/Mt.5:9). In fact Peace is a major preoccupation of Jesus. In New Testament the term Peace occurs about 100 times. So engagement with peace is not a mere work but a committed response to the call of the Divine Master. In the Mahabharata, concept of dharma is seen as the begetter of peace.



“Endued with self-restraint, and possessed of righteous behaviour one should look upon all creatures as one’s own self” (Mahabharata 12.292). From this spiritual outlook to life generates the paramount rule of peaceful coexistence. This is true of other religions as well.

No one will contest that this region is rich in diverse natural resources and enchanting beauty. Our 40 million people have such wonderful strengths to live connected to India even though about 96 per cent of its borders are connected to Myanmar, China, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Now, the current scenario of North East India calls us to reflect on the human conflicts which have led to violence and misery for the civil society. We have shed much tears seeing the violence and blood shed in the name of development, illegal migration, security, unity, land alienation including natural resources. All those led to growing insecurity leading to social unrest and even violence of varying intensities. There are political issues that add to unrest in North East India. Today most of the ethnic communities are aware of their distinct identity and they want to retain their traditional ways of living while there is also an urge to improve social, economic and political status. When the aspirations to make a mark is faced with stiff competitions, turbulence in the community starts and if this exists for a prolonged period of time often violence erupts. Cultural elements too contribute to turbulence in North East India. North East India has to take up hard work, savings to be increasingly put to use, taking calculated risks. Are we able to see North East India as a place of industrious people with a futuristic acumen? Economic development and culture of a place are correlated. North East India is potentially resource abundant area, then why to lack behind in development? The taste of free cash flow will not allow us to work hard, but the option to align with economic tycoons and cultural xenophobia will not take us too far. If resources are available why not tap the source? Why make a hue and cry in the name of development while one is not willing to take risk and sweat it out to achieve a fortune for one self and for the posterity?

Any one who is attuned to the financial transactions in the region is painfully aware that the funds set apart for the utilization



of this region is much higher than that is assigned for any other part of the country. Resources spent for the development of this region is quite enough. Can it be better utilized for the purpose for which it is set apart? It can be done if the development is a commitment not only of the politicians and bureaucrats but of the civil society too. This takes us to the various papers presented in this volume. No one is so naïve as to think that they have given all the answers to all the problems of unrest. Still, a new effort is made to re-emphasize that peace is possible in our day, only we need to make a commitment and work harder with greater focus, enthusiasm and creativity.

Gautam Kumar Bera in his paper discusses the interaction of the major historical, cultural, economic and political factors underlying the social movement among communities living in this country. He particularly mentions that the social movements, which took place in this part of the country, tend to serve several interests at the same time. This special paper on ethno-social movements, attempts to give a theoretical backdrop to some of the movements that occurred in India. In 2008 NEICR commemorated the birth centenary of Prof. Stephen Fuchs SVD who was an eminent anthropologist. It was then decided to host a memorial award in his honor and the award of the year was conferred upon S. M. Michael SVD. He rightly observes that from the beginning of the existence of SVD the study of cultures of humanity was one of the major concerns of its members. Wilhem Schmidt SVD, a linguist turned ethnologist gave a sound footing to this endeavour. The anthropological tradition of Schmidt has been perpetuated in India by his German SVD scholars among them Dr. Fuchs' contribution is something very special. In the next paper Gautam Kumar Bera arguing in favour of one of the most influential agents of social change that has been put forth in the last century the author has brought into light a major aspect of social mobilization to delineate the tutelary cults of Tripura sovereignty. In the paper presented by A C Sinha one can observe that looking for Peace in North East India is a very important national task that may be held in the process of nation building.



Historically speaking following sporadic as well as organized armed insurgency as a mode of social unrest the North Eastern States' Reorganization Act was passed in 1971 that led to emergence of independent states in this frontier region.

Joy Thomas SVD writes his experiences with the solidarity movements for peace. As a scholar who worked in North East India he calls for an action plan to combat communal forces by opening more peace centres in different cities of India and by educating the public, particularly the young minds, about the rich pluralistic heritage of the country. Gurudas Das in his paper *Identity, Underdevelopment and Violence* opines that the restoration of peace in North East India does not only depend on the surrender of militant forces. India needs to overhaul the militaristic approach towards the restoration of peace while accommodating the interests of the communities and developmental needs. Shelly Barbhuya in her paper *Trade and Tourism* probes in to the reasons of economic underdevelopment in North East India even after 62 years of independence. She observes that North East India was well reputed for mineral resources, forest products, medicinal plants, agro-horticultural products, handlooms and handicrafts. Search for identity has been a dominant feature of the politics of North East India emanating from the awakening of ethno-cultural consciousness and assertion of interest as has been shown by Girin Phukon. He argues that the identity assertions of various ethnic groups are very much acute in Assam. However, despite having differences, all of them contributed their respective share towards the growth and development of a composite Assamese society. Aref Zaman and Birinchi K. Medhi in their joint paper argue that although, having realized the long cherished dream of autonomy, the Mishings are far from being convinced that it would have any positive implications for them because it has enough scope for interference from the State Government. Added to this, limited financial and executive powers are also some of the major handicaps which they experience.

G.C. Sharma Thakur observes that continuous deprivations among any given community very often lead to identity formation.



The post Independence effort of cultural pluralism gradually gave way to assertion of identities by social groups, particularly ethnic groups. Padmakshi Kakoti opines that before the advent of Sankardeva Saktism had been the most dominant religion of ancient Kamrupa. She argues that in Assam the religious reformistic movement of the fifteenth century heralded the symbol of a reawakening of the social and religious life in Assam. She feels that the Sattra organization played a key role in assimilating the youth across generations. Juvenile Delinquency is an outcome of social disorder as has been suggested by Baijayanta Keot, who makes an attempt to focus on juvenile delinquency in the name of ethnic assertion in North East India. He reiterates the role of prophets and traditional gurus in the minimizing as well as prevention of the problem. Deban Sharma and Tom Mangattuthazhe discuss on what are the methods available for peace initiatives. They in no uncertain terms observe the fact that civil society has a crucial role to play in promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed eloquently brings out the Islamic stand point on the unity in diversity of humankind. The author observes that it is a daunting task to explain why the liberal face of Islam is not seen and not focused, despite the fact that Islam is a religion of peace. R. P. Athparia in his paper shows the emergent ethnic crisis of two major tribal groups – Kuki and Naga – in Manipur. The objective of the paper is to understand the social and political implications of these two ethnic groups. S. Benjamin Nattar argues that Social Unrest has become a feature in Manipur mainly due to social prejudices and armed conflicts. He opines that the emotional integration of the people with the rest of the country is still to be achieved. Other issues that have caused social unrest in Manipur include the tensions between various civil society organizations, student unions having different affiliations that seek to work for the benefit of the society, by calling various forums of protest affecting the ordinary lives of the people. Gautam Kumar Bera and Nishi Bera in their paper highlight some preliminary observations on the reform movement among the Riang, who have been shadowed, in



due course of time, by a dominating tribal group, the Tripuri. The Riangs have a long tradition of patronage under the kings of Tripura which once culminated into a feud as has been shown by the authors.

Janet Tellis observes that insurgency disturbs the developmental activities in any state, and she questions isn't insurgency bound to happen when there is peace but no development? Among other reasons for unrest she identifies Migration as the major player. The author also succinctly brings to the fore the multifarious activities undertaken by the Catholic Church in the field of furthering peace initiatives through schools, hostels, Jana Unnayan Samiti, peace clubs and so on. Rajib Chatterjee in his paper portrays a picture of the contemporary West Bengal in general and the district Darjeeling in particular in the context of political tensions. He observes that this tract was always a seed bed for revolutionary movement against socio-economic and political exploitation. As a result, socio-political tensions aggravated between the original inhabitants and the migrants. Binita Basu while writing on the Kamtapuris and their movement in North Bengal observes that a number of ethnic and cultural groups with their different languages, religious faiths and traditions inhabit in this region Kamtapur from remote past. A sense of deprivation and cultural shock started gaining a place in the mind of the Kamtapuris gave rise to a social as well as a regional movement, popular in the name of 'Kamtapuri Movement'. Vijoy S. Sahay in his paper rightly observes that North East India is truly 'unique and unparallel. While asking a pertinent question, 'Do we want once again foreign hands to take advantage of such disunity among the Indian population in general and that of the North East India in particular?' one does not fail to hear the sobbing of his heart. He exhorts every leader to shun every form of corruption and gently reminds us the need of the hour is to think 'homocentric', and formulate 'homocentric values' which will be the beginning of any peace initiative.

It is some time since we are sharing the sufferings and anxieties of our brothers and sisters in India, most particularly in this region.



As civil society we are concerned about the intolerance which has affected thousands of people in N/C Hills, Karbi Anglong, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and elsewhere. Our initiative at SANSKRITI was to net work with others including Government and Non-Government agencies, activists, scholars, professors and researchers to make understanding between communities more cohesive that peace prevails to promote development and vice-versa. Today we are much more convinced that the concept of early education for conflict resolution need to be given a very sound footing by building up initiatives in schools and other educational institutions. We place on record our gratefulness to all the collaborators – Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata; Indian Council of Social Science Research, Shillong; SVD-our parent Society and our learned scholars. A number of people deserve our thanks, among them John Bosco SVD, Manoj Anthony SVD, Julius Ekka SVD, Shri Nabajit Deka, and others deserve special mention. We gratefully acknowledge Rev. Fr. Cyprian Pinto SVD who graciously wrote a thought provoking Foreword for this volume. If the academic world take notice of our efforts and disseminate some of the ideas to ease out unrest by which peace can be reinstated our efforts will be highly rewarded.

Guwahati - 14  
January, 2010

*K. Jose SVD & Gautam K. Bera*  
SANSKRITI-NEICR



# Working for Peace

*Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, SDB*

Many have asked me over the years to put into writing what is remembered of our common effort at Kokrajhar for the re-establishment of peace after the Bodo-Adivasi clash of 1996. I can see the importance of recording something for the benefit of posterity. Once an article was written describing more the lessons learnt from our reconciliation efforts than details of events that took place, though everything you say in this regard will always remain an incomplete tale.

While in Bangalore in May 1996 working on a *Strategic Plan for Youth* animators along with the CBCI commission for youth when I received a phone-call from Lukose SDB informed me that there were several violent incidents in the area of Soraibil and that houses were burnt in many *Adivasi* villages in the neighbourhood. As I did not understand the seriousness of the situation, and since involved in drafting the document, I asked him to do what was possible for the moment until I would return after a few days. He phoned again to tell me that the situation was really serious and that my presence was required in order to make any worthwhile decision in response to the problem. Reluctantly, I took leave of my colleagues who were working on a document for youth, and flew back to Guwahati. Only on reaching Guwahati did I realize how terrible the tragedy was and how entire villages had been wiped out, and that hundreds of people had died. The first thing we did was to rush to Soraibil itself. A veritable war was going on there.



The news grew more and more alarming as we approached Soraibil. People were crowding into the field near the market for security. The army was there, but they had no orders to act. A new Government had taken over that had promised to send the army out of Assam the day they took over the reins of affairs. There was a change of government also at Delhi and leaders were busy with ministry-making, and no one had time for a corner of Assam where some poor people had got into trouble. Next day, as I was on my way back to Gossaigaon and Guwahati, I stopped at Sapkata field. The *maidan* was already covered with shacks. Crowds of *Adivasis* and Santals were moving in to stay together and seek protection from each others' presence. They brought with them only a few things that they could carry and looked worried and helpless. We stopped with them for a while, and speedily a group of Catholics gathered to greet me. Mentally, we were assessing the situation wondering what we could do really to help. The problem seemed too massive, and we had never handled a situation of this nature and this scale earlier. We needed to reflect some more time before we could meaningfully get involved with a measure of self-confidence. Stopping at Gossaigaon, we discussed with the priests what we could do. There were no ready solutions in anyone's mind. Not even the State government seemed equipped to handle the situation, how could we ever step in confidently?

As we were on the way back to Guwahati, we could see that the conflict was spreading westwards. Will it reach the end of Assam and engulf the entire valley? Our hearts sank to think of what could possibly happen if the conflict did not stop somewhere. We began to hear of more and more camps spontaneously coming up in different parts of the conflict area where thousands rushed to seek shelter putting up shabby thatch or plastic roof over their heads. Gradually there were some 42 of them, the crowds in some camps like the one at Salakati numbering over 20,000. There were similar ones at Runikatta, Kochugaon, Sapkata and other places.



Back at Guwahati we were mobilizing prayers, seeking advice, but very few were able to take in the massive nature of the problem. There was more a sense of helplessness than of confidence in our ability to offer some manner of help of any significance. I exhorted the parishes to try to attempt some assistance in the best way they could. I heard Bengtol was trying to help the crowds in the Runikatta camp, and that the sisters of Nazareth Hospital had made a short visit to them with medical assistance. As the Nazareth teams were on the way to Shillong, they stopped at the Archbishop's House to share for a while their experiences. The situation in the camps was fast deteriorating. Hygienic conditions were abominably low. Sickneses were spreading. Government medical services had not yet arrived. Someone concluded the evaluation in this manner: 'Most of the children are sick, and all of them will die'. Those words summed up the general impression. It was this statement that seemed to hit me in the jaw and woke me up. Can we allow this to happen? Even if we are unable to do anything, should we not go and at least die with them?' Such was my thought.

Finally we were able to gather a handful of seminarians on holidays and move to Bongaigaon in early June to attempt the impossible. What we could do, we were not sure. Whether it was safe for these young people to move from camp to camp or offer services going into the camps, we were not sure. Whether the government would allow us to intervene directly, we were not sure. Whether we could be effective, whether our work would be appreciated, whether it would serve a purpose in the context of such a mighty disaster, we were uncertain. But we said, 'we will attempt the impossible'. We settled in St. Aloysius Seminary.

Next day we went into the Salakati camp with over twenty-thousand people in wretched conditions. We were shocked beyond words. We were almost in tears. We had never seen human misery descending to such depths. How could we help these people total misery, that was our chief concern from now. But we too were



helpless. The people needed food, medicine, clothes, and shelter. We had almost nothing. Partly, the government also had been caught unawares, but mainly, the governments at the State level and at the Centre were busy politicking, in the midst of power-struggle, ministry making, and key appointments. We had nothing with us ourselves. Fortunately, we had with us an expert nurse, who had brought with her some medicines. We exhorted the other brothers to go round the camp, meet individuals, families and groups, listen to their woes, and encourage them to hold on with patience till better days would come.

One thing we decided to do from the beginning was that we would work in collaboration with other groups in the field and refuse to compete even if someone was determined to do so. But how happy we were to learn that the other churches' approach to this idea was equally warm. As we began moving to the camps day after day, we met the church leaders and other relief workers on the road; we kept sharing what we were trying to do, what we had succeeded in doing, what we thought we ought to do. We agreed to collaborate at every level. A little later, we agreed to work together even more closely, sometimes moving to the camp in the same vehicles, distributing relief material or preparing food for the children.

The ecumenical sharing was not formally organized, but there was much spontaneity in substituting each other. Occasionally all the volunteers met together and proposed plans for the next phase of action. Our collaboration had a cumulative effect, and the district administration was quick in noticing the efficiency with which we were beginning to reach out to more and more camps. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) began calling a meeting of the heads of various teams that were helping in the relief work and to divide responsibilities. That is how in a short time the government of Assam began taking note of what we were doing at Kokrajhar. When Mr. Mahanta, the new Chief Minister of Assam, visited Kokrajhar, he was keen on meeting me and thanking us for our contribution to relief. He would do so again several times.



The news of what we were doing spread like wild-fire and we began having volunteers from all over the country who brought money, clothes, medicines and other things. Seminaries and houses of formation began sending us brothers, sisters, novices, candidates, students, and youth groups as volunteers to go and help in camps. Some came for a week, some for two weeks, some for longer times. They came from Guwahati, Shillong, Kohima, Jakhama, Dimapur, Dibrugarh, Haflong, Siliguri, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Kolkata, Ranchi, Raigarh, Ambikapur, Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and many other places. Nurses came in groups. Doctors too came. Something like 400 volunteers worked during 4-6 months immediately following the ethnic clash.

As the volume of work increased, the DC gave us buses to move to the camps every morning at 8.00 A.M. and return by 6.00 P.M. We were very particular that they all return to their base at Gossaigaon or Bongaigaon so that they could have a good rest and be ready for the next day's hard work. We didn't want them to stay on in the camps for the nights and get malaria, and bring the entire venture to an early end. Days were very hot and sticky. Each day we were taking responsibility for more and more camps, until we counted 42 camps and close 250,000 (mostly *Adivasis* and Santals, but also Bodos) people we were looking after.

The government was already beginning to supply food and other material to the riot-victims. But rice and dal did not exactly suit the needs of children. It was a turning point in the history of our relief work, when we decided to undertake the direct feeding of the starved children in the camps. They were already emaciated, sick, reduced to skin and bones, and reaching the stage of the dying Ethiopian babies whose figures we had seen in pictures. Death was beginning to catch up with these babies as well. It called for great daring to launch a baby-feeding programme in all the 42 camps: buying adequate number of large vessels, getting milk power and sugar in adequate amounts, collecting firewood and lighting fire in



places often completely wet and covered with water. But, for all the trouble, there was great joy in the faces of the volunteers when in the evening we sat together for an evaluation of the day. They had seen starving children gulping down the food with enormous satisfaction, the mothers beaming with joy, all elders delighted at the entire venture. New life came into the children.

As we sat for evaluation every evening, so too we had a short prayer in the morning together: mass with a short exhortation. We called it the "**Mysticism of the Brief Moment**". That short spell of God-experience, of mysticism, that brief encounter with God, kept the team motivated and united during the several months we worked together. We needed it. We needed it also because, in spite of the fact, that we were almost killing ourselves with work, we were criticized. The leaders of the VHP would be putting the cause of the Kokrajhar clash to the Christian missionaries. Speaking from Delhi, Bhopal, Nagpur, Kanyakumari or even from Guwahati, they would be saying the Missionaries were behind the ethnic violence, while pretending to be peace-makers and pious relief-workers. But none of them would dare to visit Bongaigaon or Kokrajhar. Since we were working with the district authorities, we were acquainted with many of the officers, and shared information, skills, medicines and equipments with them. We had decided never to give the impression of wanting to compete with any government agency or outshine others, but always to collaborate with all.

Such contacts, and friendships based on them were to help us a great deal when we moved from mere relief work to peace-efforts. Though we were not close to the armed young people who had launched the conflict, we would make an all effort to meet anyone whose opinion seemed to count with the two communities. We remember, on one occasion, crossing some forest areas and rivers to reach the place of a young person who seemed to hold very radical position with regard to paying back for the injuries received, and whose view, many said, were very decisive. We didn't



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Such contacts, and friendships based on them were to help us a great deal when we moved from mere relief work to peace-efforts. Though we were not close to the armed young people who had launched the conflict, we would make an all effort to meet anyone whose opinion seemed to count with the two communities. We remember, on one occasion, crossing some forest areas and rivers to reach the place of a young person who seemed to hold very radical position with regard to paying back for the injuries received, and whose view, many said, were very decisive. We didn't



mind spending the whole day walking, and having arrived, waiting for this young man, as though he was the most important man in the world for me at that moment. He indeed was. The issue we had in hand was the life and death of hundreds and possibly thousands people. He was overwhelmed that I had taken so much trouble to come and meet him. Of course, we had nothing much to say. All we wanted to do was to listen, and then add a humble word of exhortation that the problems could be solved through dialogue.

Gradually that was the simple message we kept repeatedly giving to those who seemed to wield any influence in society: anger is not productive, remembering the past is not helpful, shall we begin to look forward, is there possibility for a dialogue? Gradually we came to know more definitely which leaders were respected in both societies, who exaggerated, who was unreliable according to public esteem, who was controversial, who was known to have ulterior motives. We as a Church would never have thought we would be in a position to initiate negotiations, since our community was small, and all the Christians put together formed, may be, about 10% or less of either tribe. But by now we had acquired some credibility. We had a respected image before the two communities, before the government, before the local administration, to some extent even before the radicals. Even the last group knew that we were neutral in the issue and were eager only for the common good.

The leaders of the various relief groups were supportive, the administration was encouraging, and even people who seemed to be close to the radicals did not seem to be opposing. So we decided to call for a meeting of some 40-50 leaders (about 25 from either side) at Guwahati. But who should come? Who should be invited? The armed young men would surely not come. Those who were close to them could not easily be persuaded to come. We were sure that it was worth having a meeting only if people who mattered in society came for the discussions. We persuaded my colleagues not to invite people who were controversial in society or had a



questionable reputation, even if they wielded great influence in society, e.g. radical political leaders. We thought it better to bring together those who were respected in society, e.g. professors, writers, poets, artists, cultural leaders, and socially important people, who had untarnished name and were not inclined to exaggerate in one direction or the other. While it was easy to describe the ideal person in this manner, it was not always easy to find such a person, much less, persuade him to come. However, we did not limit ourselves to sending out letters to some leaders, but went personally, talked to individuals, coaxed and cajoled, begged and pleaded, argued and tried to persuade, tried all of sorts of human stratagems to make sure that certain significant persons would not be missing. We were eager that the strength on either side of number and of social influence would be evenly balanced. Since we had a personal approach, we succeeded to some extent. A number of people who really counted came. There was a great discomfort for persons in conflict to come and live together under the same roof for three days, when it came to having meals together, sitting in the same hall together, when it came to relaxing together in the evening. Meantime, in any case, the mood of the group had changed, and the participants were ready for an attempt at dialogue.

We, organizers, would take no specific stand nor suggest any specific solutions: who should compromise what, whether there should be compensation, who should go back to where. We would limit ourselves to facilitating the entire process, ensuring certain studied presentations on the theme of peace, partly based on religious faith and partly on good sense and human experience of the past. We would indeed urge that some sort of compromise was required on either side, showing that in life there was no possibility of living together and achieving anything together without an attitude of compromise. We were not asking either side to compromise on their essential goals, but to give up some lesser goals for greater benefit. We often pointed to the advantage in having the other community around, for the evident reason that they played a complementary



role in the economy and social life to one's own. One important reason why they would listen to us was that we did not begin by condemning either side. We showed absolute sympathy for those who suffered. We also spoke with respect about those who had certain goals for the advancement of their own people and were committed to the economic, social, cultural and political interests of their own community: whether it concerned land ownership, job opportunities, marketing possibilities, education opportunities or election chances. We showed sympathy even for those who took to violence since they could see no other way of solving their problems. We tried to argue, not at the first stage but after discussions and deliberations, that if we reflected and discussed long enough, we would find other ways of solving the problems than violence. If we were truly creative, a hundred other ways of handling the anxiety would open out before us.

Very often peace negotiations fail because the peace-makers bring readymade answers to the problem. We have seen peace animators rushing to condemn the fighters, trying to prove that the fighters are unprincipled, hard-hearted, wicked; that they are terrorists. Such peace-workers may be right, but they probably lack psychological wisdom. Political leaders too, who begin to deal with the issues in this manner, fail. They gloriously fail to make an impression, to convince. They are not using a pedagogy that will work. Once you condemn, you have no possibility of dialoguing with them any more. But if we are non-judgmental, if we go to the point of even appreciating the young radicals' commitment to their own community, the suffering they and their people have gone through, and the compulsions under which they took to violence, it would be easier to talk to them. This takes time, it calls for patience, it calls for understanding the psychology of persons who have opted for violence. Here we are not speaking of 'actual terrorists' with whom We do not like to compare those young men who are merely in search of answers.



“ If the matter is merely anger between two communities, whatever the grievance, it is somewhat easy to handle. We can always make a human appeal to the two human groups that are having some human problem among themselves. But if a political party(ies) is behind one group or another, if the government is encouraging one side for some (negative) policy reasons, if some mighty economic interest is happy to keep the two groups striving against each other...in other words, if there are other forces at work, a simple humanitarian intervention becomes much more difficult. The situation becomes impersonal, and a human appeal does not easily make an impact. If, in the same way, some anti-Christian group is determined to make sure that Church efforts end in failure, it becomes even more difficult. However, we were fortunate that in the Kokrajhar conflict, we did succeed to make an impact on the leaders of the communities in conflict who came to Guwahati for dialogue, and through them to assist the rest of the communities gradually to re-think their positions. It was decided in the meeting that each leader in his own area would cooperate with his counterpart to organize bigger gatherings of the local people and make similar appeals for peace.

Meanwhile also the government was making their own efforts. Both communities began meeting each other at least in public places, e.g. market, bus. However, the camps continued to exist for months and even years, partly because the community leaders insisted on conditions that were not easy to fulfill, and partly because they were from forest areas and the government could not allow them to re-occupy the forest. But the tensions relaxed. New problems came up, inner-community anxieties took away the bitterness of inter-community conflict, until the events 1996-7 became just a part of history.

### **Churachandpur : Kuki-Paite Conflict 1997-98**

The Kokrajhar experience went into Christian memory in a mighty way. Many communities remembered that the success of the relief and reconciliation effort was much due to the fact that we



worked unitedly for a common cause. The Kokrajhar model was repeatedly referred to in situation of tensions. That is how it happened that in 1997 when the Kuki-Paite conflict erupted, many leaders in Manipur invoked the Kokrajhar model to ensure success in peace-negotiations. Dozens of villages and hundreds of houses had been burnt. About 500 people had been killed. There was a measure of helplessness when hostilities broke out so fiercely between these communities that were ethnically so close. I proposed that, if the leaders were able to bring some significant persons of both groups to Guwahati, we would host a reconciliation meeting at one of our institutions. This was a great encouragement to them. They mobilized the needed resources and flew 28 participants for the proposed meeting at Guwahati. The two groups had been so alienated from each other that they had separate meetings during the first day, working out their own strategies for the following days. By the second day the two groups met together in a common hall. Summarizing the discussions, we may say that the assembly passed a few resolutions, each participant promising to take these to his own people and try to persuade them to respect them. After all, these were proposals of a large number of church leaders, and they called for respect. We prayed and parted. We heard later that the resolutions of the meeting were heard with respect, but the mood had not yet come for the cessation of hostilities.

As Christmas approached, we were still hearing about the continuation of the conflict. So, soon after Christmas, some of us of the Joint Peace Team from Guwahati got up early morning at 2.00 A.M. and made a dash to Churchandpur. Really, a war was going on in Churchchanpur. The little town was divided into two a Kuki zone and a Paite zone, and firing would begin around 10.00 P.M. and go on till around 3.00 A.M. Some of us went to meet a group of Paites on the first day. I was asked to lead at the prayer and say a few words in exhortation. Then began a prolonged discussion during which nearly all of the 30-40 Paite delegates who were present spoke. They thanked us for coming to help them, for the good advice we gave, admitted that it was wrong to fight, but asked us to see what the Kukis were doing. They gave a long list of



complaints against the Kukis. After a very long session, we had a meal at about 3.00 P.M. which confirmed all that was said. The next day, when we went to the Kukis, they had a similar list of complaints about the cruelties and excesses of the Paites. Though both parties respected our call for ceasefire for New Year, they continued hostilities immediately after that. We went back to Guwahati and wept. We prayed. We sent our prayers to Churachandpur.

Young men had to keep awake day and night to defend their communities. A moment of exhaustion comes for everyone. Arms were running short, resources were limited, a new government in Manipur pressed for peace. The combatants began to think that the advice of the peace-makers was valid. Gradually wisdom dawned on them. The local Peace Team we had set up met again and again, came to certain conclusions about peace, signed an agreement, had a meal together. A little later they wondered why they had fought at all.

### **Haflong : Dimasa-Hmar Conflict 2004-5**

We had thought that inter-ethnic conflicts were becoming a matter of ancient history when all of a sudden there broke out a bitter conflict between the Dimasas and the Hmars at Haflong. Kukis and other communities too from Manipur were on the side the Hmars. The Dimasas are the ancient settlers in North Cachar hills. They own the land. But the Hmars who came later were well-educated and were able to get good jobs in the local administration. They were also good cultivators, industrious in work, and prosperous. Meantime the Dimasas were becoming conscious of their identity like the Bodos, and of their ancestral domain. Whatever was the immediate flashing point, here again not less than 400 people were killed and large numbers had rushed to camps for shelters.

The Joint Peace Team was asked to help. Gradually it became possible for any of us, even one person, to represent the entire team when there was an emergency and many were too busy to be immediately involved. Mutual confidence had already been built. We seemed to think alike and often spoke in similar fashion even when



we had not made any previous agreement. The Shillong Peace Team too decided to merge with us and make a single Joint Peace Team for the region representing all the churches of the Northeast. This development enabled us to intervene fast enough in every circumstance, and get involved in many more things.

We did a lot of work contacting the leaders of the respective communities. When the Dimasas actually came to Guwahati, they were offended by what some Hmar leader had said as they found in the day's paper, and went into a hotel to stay apart on their own. They refused to come up to where the rest of us were staying. I went down and spent the whole morning pleading with them to come at least for a short time and make it possible to listen to each other. Finally they consented. Once they came, they were eloquent. And though the points of view of both parties were irreconcilable, we agreed that all further violence should cease, that all threats be stopped and that both parties should cooperate with every peace effort. Though this was the least that we could agree to, hostilities ceased and dialogue began between the two groups under the aegis of the government. Except for a few individual incidents, peace returned to the North Cachar Hills.

### **Diphu : Karbi-Kuki Conflict 2005**

There seem to be no end to ethnic conflicts: this time between the Karbis and the Kukis. Even as the Haflong troubles were ending, we had heard of possible problems in Diphu. The Kukis have always been a tribe that moved. During the recent years, when Manipur was in turmoil (Naga-Kuki, Kuki-Paite conflicts), many Kukis had begun moving down to Karbi Anglong in search of living space. Many of the Karbi leaders had settled them in remoter hilly areas, receiving some money in return. Being hard-working cultivators, the Kukis began doing intense cultivation of ginger and other spices in the hills and earning impressive sums in consequence. Armed young Karbis began levying a tax on them, which they kept raising from time to time until it became unendurable. Then trouble arose. This is one version. In any case, mutual killings and burning of houses followed and people of both communities rushed to places around



Diphu and settled themselves in camps. The story was the same all over again. The Joint Peace Team visited the camps, announced relief with the help of local peace teams already working there, called for peace and appointed local leaders who would go out to convince the armed young men to cease fighting. Miracles happen. With many failures, one following the other, success came at last. Peace has returned.

### **Karbi-Khasi (Pnar) Conflict and Others**

The Karbi-Khasi tension arose more or less at the time of the Karbi-Kuki conflict. Though the entire Joint Peace Team was not involved in assisting during this tension, some of the members did go to the place and offer help. Similarly our Peace Team intervened in a helpful fashion when the Bodo-Muslim clash took place around Udalguri 2008 and the Zemei-Dimasa conflict occurred in 2009.

### **Conclusion**

Those from other parts of the country may not be able to understand the context in which the above mentioned conflicts take place. Social activists are confused, the know-all intellectuals are annoyed. Ideologically led thinkers suggest solutions that are contradictory, administrators try to bribe or browbeat the more vocal or the more violent. We need today the gentle voice of anthropologists, psychologists, sensitive educators, intelligent administrators. We need the assistance of person having convictions in deep ethical and religious principles. We must not be satisfied with the answer that the human being is inclined to violence, until we have sufficiently explored the other most important truth that the human person is also sociable, kind, understanding, forgiving and eager to live in peace with other. Those who believe in this dimension of humanity today will make a major contribution towards the solution of some of the most worrying problems in human society.



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# Ripples of Peace

*V.M. Thomas SDB*

It takes me back to December 2003 when we organized the Peace Initiatives and the North East consultation on Peace which brought together peace loving people from different backgrounds, professions, religions and ethnic identities. This effort was continued in the subsequent years through workshops, symposia and seminars on issues related to peace. Historians and academicians who have studied and analysed the situation of unrest of North East India will agree that a long history – political, social, ethnic and linguistic – is attached to the so-called unrest of the region. Many factors are at play: fear of domination, unrestrained and illegal migration and influx, resentment against cultural and political hegemony, struggle for ethnic assertion, search for individual and collective identity, underdevelopment and lack of opportunities, aspirations to take control and capture power are some of the underlying causes.

In the international media, North East India is sometimes referred to as “India’s Violent North East”. In the context that vast majority of people living in North East India do not want violence and do not subscribe to violence, violent North East India is an unjust label. However, we may have to take the blame for this undeserved tag attached to the region. While the few who are responsible for violence have attracted international attention, the vast majority who love peace and want peace have remained silent. It is said that the world is evil not because individuals who indulge in evil, but because of those who watch and do nothing about it.



Bringing peace to the region that has gone through years of social unrest is not going to be easy. It calls for the contribution and concerted effort of individuals and communities. Any lasting and worthwhile transformation in society often begins with daring and courageous individuals who venture out into action. Someone has to throw the stone to create the ripple. Someone has to light the candle to disperse the darkness.

“Somebody ought to do it, but why should I? Somebody ought to do it, but why can’t I?” The question one asks will make the difference and will explain how one can remain passive and irresponsible to a situation or be challenged to do something to bring about a positive transformation. In fact today there is a reversal of this passivity and lethargy. People do not want to remain silent spectators and mute witnesses to violence any longer. There is a great realization of the need for a joint effort to make the voice of peace heard. History has proved time and again that only a constructive dialogue can solve conflicts. For years, we in the North East India have been grappling with the effects of uncertainty, turmoil, and fear brought about by the unending violence, ethnic clashes emanating from the varied aspirations and militarization of the region. The question before us is how we can come out of the current mess that we find ourselves in. The situation is not one person’s or one community’s making. The blame must be shared by all of us – the ordinary citizen, the politician, the bureaucrat, the banker, the man in the uniform, the student leaders, teachers, thinkers and media persons. We need individuals and organizations who will take into their hands the responsibility of building up a new power composed of healthy, educated, responsible citizens and a new economic order consisting of employed, self-reliant, corruption-free individuals.

Every phase of human history holds the hope of a better tomorrow. We are the inheritors of this hope. We are not only the inheritors of selfishness and oppression but we are also the children of hope – a hope that sets us free. We ought to preserve this hope



for a better tomorrow and do our best to make this hope a reality. The culture of peace renders development possible, sustains the protection of the environment and the personal well being of each human person. If each one assumes his/her own part of the responsibility in the family, at work, in the society, in the region or the nation, the culture of peace will become a reality. We here at Don Bosco Institute work with youth and educators to usher in a culture of peace.

The theme of peace is intertwined with the themes of justice, self-determination of people, of the quality of life, of the use of natural resources and the use of energy. Peace therefore is not the ancient "tranquility of order". In our time the concept of peace cannot be isolated from that of human rights, freedom and ecology. It is the state of being, and a process of progress, it rejects war and welcomes co-operation. I wish that everyone present here truly become agents of peace, builders of co-operation and partnership, fostering reconciliation and generating compassion.