

CONCEPT NOTE & CALL FOR PAPERS

International Conference

Reimagining India's North East: Narratives, Networks and Negotiations

Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia

CONCEPT NOTE

The North East of India, also known as North East Region (NER), comprises eight Indian States namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It shares a common border with five countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal; but it is connected to the rest of India by a narrow land corridor, 20 km wide at its narrowest. Although it forms a small part of South Asia, the region is located at the tri-junction of South, East and South East Asia. The region is one of the most ethnically diverse regions on earth with overlapping ethnicities, cultures and colonial history. People with roots in this region are also located beyond the borders demarcated at the end of the colonial rule. The region was virtually cut off from the rest of the country. This geographical remoteness could have caused a sense of separateness from the mainland.

For instance, the Nagas are divided by borders: within India they live in the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam; in Myanmar they are in Kachin State and Sagaing Division. The border dividing India and China was demarcated about 100 years ago while the one between India and Myanmar was demarcated just 77 years ago. When the British decided to leave India, one more border separating India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was drawn. The one between Myanmar and India is porous and the one between India and Bangladesh is partially fenced due to local pressure against immigration. Nonetheless, these borders were sites of significant migration related to work, political change and the creation of new nations.

Indeed, the regular interaction between this region and the rest of India intensified after the introduction of modern administration in the 19th century, which also brought considerable transformation in its economy and politics. As a consequence, it became a destination of migration. A large number of cadres were recruited, mainly from the areas historically known as Bengal to work in the new administration. Since there was high demand for labour due to the rapid expansion of tea plantation and other industries led to the recruitment of workers. Similarly, the availability of cultivable wastelands attracted the peasantry from the neighboring districts of Bengal as well.

During that time, major changes in Assam's administrative boundaries also took place. It was once administratively attached to Bengal before becoming a Province formed by incorporating additional territories. Further, the Bengali language became the language of administration and education much against the wishes of the Assamese, the region's largest linguistic group. Although the Assamese language was eventually recognised, the animosity between the two linguistic groups lingers.

The 1947 Partition displaced millions of people where Hindus in Pakistan fled to India and Muslims in India to Pakistan. In due course of time, the issue of migration has become highly

politicised in which political parties accuse each other of indulging in vote-bank politics. Public opinion also been polarised. Thus if migration ensures livelihoods to those who migrate, it is also seen a potential source of conflict. In North East India large scale migration into the region is viewed as a threat to identity, societal conflict linked to this has caused larger unrest among the communities.

Anger over large scale immigration from across the borders has spilled over into conflicts between those considered as 'natives' and 'newcomers' and also between 'natives' and Indian state. Some ethnic groups have been resisting Delhi's control over their 'homelands' resulting in protracted armed conflict thereby turning the region into one of the world's most heavily militarised regions. Many believed that Delhi would bow down to their demands if they resorted to violence.

However, discourses on migration generally ignore the contribution of migrants towards the development of the region; instead they are projected as the 'threat'. The process of ethnic mobilization which had started during colonial rule became intensified with the process of state building which enhanced opportunities for ethnic mobilization for the control of territory, economic and political powers. Thus ethnic identity has become more important than ever. There has been a tendency for ethnic groups to emphasize their 'uniqueness' in which they resorted to 'inventing' history. Overlapping claims to ownership and control of land and its resources have translated into conflicts between ethnic groups. The conflicting aspirations have become an important aspect of politics of the region. For several smaller ethnic groups the political dominance by larger ones has been seen as the threat to their cultural identities. The recent conflict between Bodos and Muslims has far reaching implications. It was 'misused' by social media by projecting it as an assault against the Muslims which resulted in rumors of possible violent attacks against people from North East residing in various cities. The rumors forced thousands of students and workers to flee at least temporarily to their 'native' homes.

But this is the age of migration. A growing outflow of migrants from the region is also taking place. The total number of North East migrants to various parts of India has increased from 0.4 million in 1981 to 0.6 million in 1991 and then to 1.1 million in 2001. These numbers are increasing rapidly for a range of reasons including better opportunities to a sense of safety. Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh etc have become major destinations for them despite challenges from local communities. They work as teachers, doctors, engineers, waitress, beauticians and call centre workers. For instance, in a five-star hotel in Goa, a range of employees, including security guards are from this region. In addition, a large number of students have settled in different cities to pursue studies challenging the concept of unique ethnic homelands which came into effect with the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1952. At that time, there were hopes that the problems of the smaller ethnic groups could be effectively resolved. This, however, did not happen.

The demand for new states shows few signs of abating. But there are now indications that this will not go unchallenged. The perception of what was in the best interests of national security was also prone to change over time. At the time of the reorganisation of states in India, it was believed that the North East should not be divided. But pressures from various groups saw the bifurcation of the dominant state of Assam. Individual demands for smaller states could also be

derived from a greater prominence being given to tribal identities. Tribal ethnicity played a major role in the creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and was an important factor, along with national security considerations with an eye on China's claims on the area, in the creation of Arunachal Pradesh.

Ethnicity lies at the heart of politics and political mobilization finding expression in education, land, cultural policies, employment and development. Across India, different ethnic groups have come to believe that an adequate share of political power is necessary to retain their cultural identity and also economic development. Such aspirations are legitimate, but difficulties arise once these aspirations become connected with the exclusive administrative boundaries for self-governance.

The salience of ethnic identity has been determined by the extent to which they differ culturally from other groups with whom they interact; the extent to which they are advantaged or disadvantaged relative to other groups; and the intensity of their past and ongoing conflicts with rival groups and the state. Further the incentives that prompted political action could be due to: the resentment about losses suffered in the past; the fear of future losses; and the hopes for relative gains. The relative importance of each of these factors depends on a group's changing position in relation to other groups and to the state.¹

However, the proportion and the quality of conflict and cooperation depend on the *relative resources* at the disposition of each group such as demographic, organizational, economic, technological, locational, political and ideological. In addition to these objective determinants of power, the quality of inter-communal relations depends on the *congruity* or *disparity* in goals between those who control the state apparatus and the leaders of the constituent groups. If the goals are the same, the outcome is likely to be consensual. If the goals are incompatible, the consequences will be tension and conflict, and the outcome will be determined by the relative resources controlled by the parties. This introduces to a third determining factor—the conventions, rules, procedures, and structures, *the institutions for conflict management*.²

At the same time, ethnicities are 'in an endless process of transformation' where ethnic groups 'contest, revive, create, negotiate and renegotiate their ethnic identity.' Recognition and analysis of the contested and shifting alliances is central to understanding the identity politics.

In addition, the continuous use of opaque laws like AFSPA against non-state armed groups has resulted in extensive violence and brutality. Local people and civil society groups have mobilised to protect and promote basic human rights since violence, extraordinary legislation and limits on freedom of association and expression have become part of everyday life. Further Delhi is blamed for the lack of development, but there is also realization that local initiatives are needed for development to actively take place.

¹ Ted Robert Gurr. 2002. *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

² Milton J. Esman. 1975. 'Communal Conflicts in Southeast Asia', in Nathan and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

These movements also cannot be fully understood without revisiting the role of the State, as many of these movements have been shaped by its actions and inaction. Militancy, state initiated violence and the modernization of governance appear inter-related. Delhi relied on a three-prolonged approach: security, divisive and law and order, while at the same time expanding avenues for political dialogue and generously funding allocations to ‘tame’ the rebellion. Thus, we have seen militarisation in the region. New States have been created. The region is the only territory of India in which a ministry (MDoNER) looks after matters relating to the planning, execution and monitoring of development projects.

The response to the crisis in the region has tended to be centered on the use of force and the promise of development. Unfortunately, both these policy responses have been, at best, only partially successful in coping with the problem. Indeed, we cannot rule out the possibility of these measures even contributing to an accentuation of the crisis. There are however other options that have not received the attention they deserve. The region has vocal civil society groups which work on the issue of human rights and tackling of social challenges.

One aspect of this conflict has been the proliferation of different kinds of civil society groups. Some have been also at the forefront of promoting localised peacebuilding efforts and initiating reconciliation processes. Therefore an overview of the institutions that cause conflicts, ease conflicts, and institutions that emerge from conflicts are important. The conflict in the region can be partly seen as a result of the inability to enforce a set of abstract rules leading to the emergence of new institutional practices on the ground.

This conference is a continuation of the last two international conferences held at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Gottingen in 2011 and the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna in 2013. It will be organized by the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi on the **4th, 5th and 6th of February 2015**. It will bring together a group of distinguished scholars from India, Europe and other parts of the world.

Submissions are invited on the themes and proposed panels from social scientists drawn from different disciplines such as sociology, economics, history, political science, geography, literature, anthropology, linguistics and philosophy who are working on issues concerning North East India to present their work and nurture a network of social scientists.

Themes and Suggested Panels

Theme 1: Narratives and Identity in the North East Region and its Neighbourhood

- Sources of ethnic identity
- Narrating the past and the present
- Contested histories
- Literature, ethnography, anthropology and history

Theme 2: Networks, Mobilization and Rationalization

- Ethnicity across borders
- Our migration and their migration—the dynamics of inflows and outflows

Modernity, Identity and Conflict

Theme 3: Negotiations, Exploration and Expanding Ethnicities

Ethnic identities for contemporary Indian nation-building

Expansion and contraction of ethnic groups

Centre vs. States

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Jamia Millia Islamia University

New Delhi, India

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The North East of India, also known as the North East Region (NER), comprises eight Indian States namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It shares a common border with five countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal; but it is connected to the rest of India by a narrow land corridor, 20 km wide at its narrowest. Although it forms a small part of South Asia, the region is located at the tri-junction of South, East and South East Asia. Perhaps due to this, the region is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions on earth with overlapping ethnicities, cultures and colonial history. It is also one of the most troubled and heavily militarised regions within the country with a long history of secessionist movements and violent insurgencies in almost all the states. Consequently, and also because of its geographical remoteness from Delhi, the processes of infrastructural development in the region have been impeded leading to further complications and resentment. This had also implied that the volume of scholarly research on the region is still very small.

Ethnicity lies at the heart of politics and political mobilization finding expression in education, land, cultural policies, employment and development. Across India, different ethnic groups have come to believe that an adequate share of political power is necessary to retain their cultural identity and also economic development. Such aspirations are legitimate, but difficulties arise once these aspirations become connected with the exclusive administrative boundaries for self-governance.

The proposed conference is third in a series of international conferences, the first of which was held at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Göttingen, Germany in 2011 and the second at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna in 2013. It will be organized by the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi on the **4th, 5th and 6th of February 2015**. It hopes to bring together a group of distinguished scholars from India, Europe and other parts of

the world, doing innovative research on the issues of social identity and intergroup relations relevant to Northeast India and its adjoining areas of Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal.

Submissions are invited on the themes and proposed panels from social scientists drawn from different disciplines such as sociology, economics, history, political science, geography, literature, anthropology, linguistics and philosophy who are working on issues concerning Northeast India to present their work and nurture a network of social scientists.

Themes and Suggested Panels

Theme 1: Narratives and Identity in the North East Region and its Neighbourhood

Sources of ethnic identity
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Theme 2: Networks, Mobilization and Rationalization

Ethnicity across borders
 Our migration and their migration—the dynamics of inflows and outflows
 Modernity, Identity and Conflict

Theme 3: Negotiations, Exploration and Expanding Ethnicities

Ethnic identities for contemporary Indian nation-building
 Expansion and contraction of ethnic groups
 Centre vs. States

We invite scholars to submit a conceptually innovative initial paper/abstract of 500-700 words on any of the sub-themes outline in the concept note (by 1 June 2014). A panel of three members has been constituted to review the abstracts; the selected scholars will be invited to develop original papers and possible inclusion in an edited volume or special journal issue. We could select about 30 papers (by 7 to 14 September 2014). Each scholar will have at least 20 minutes for presentation and another 10 minutes for discussion. The selected papers will be circulated among the participants before and during the conference.

Limited financial support may be made available to promising junior scholars.

The participants could travel the last day of the conference to a quiet resort to sit and discuss the way forward. The conference will close with a cultural event.

Important Dates:

Place and dates of the conference: Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi & **4th, 5th and 6th February 2015**

Submission deadline for abstract of 500-700 words: 1 June 2014

Submission deadline for registration: October 2014

Submission deadline for full papers: December 2014

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