

The Academy of Third World Studies  
Jamia Millia Islamia

In collaboration with the  
Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research

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presents

## **Contested Space and Identity in the Indian Northeast**

**Proceedings of a seminar held at the Academy of Third World  
Studies on 14 February 2008**

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## Preface

This small publication is based on the proceedings of a seminar titled “Contested Space and Identity in the Indian Northeast”, which was jointly held by the Academy of Third World Studies and the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, with support of the Heinrich Boell Foundation. The idea for the seminar developed from our shared understanding that the seven sister states of the Northeast, rich in natural resources, cultural heritage and human capital, but also scarred by a legacy of conflict, are not always finding the attention they deserve in an academic discourse prioritising national over human security.

Bringing together leading and aspiring scholars, practitioners and activists working on the Northeast, many from the region itself, the seminar attempted to cover a broad range of issues. The papers presented are grouped in three main categories, namely (1) the role of the state and non-state actors in the politics of the Northeast, (2) the shifting paradigms of identity and community in the borderlands and (3) the variable of perception in the calculation of peace. Of course, the seminar’s modest frame does not do justice to the complexity of the situation in the Northeast. Nor do the interventions offer readily implementable policy recommendations. What radiates from all papers, however, is a sense of thoughtfulness that resists the temptation of jumping to conclusions. We hope to offer a kaleidoscope of richly textured and well thought-out positions, highlighting, in a structured way, political, legal, historical, philosophical, gendered and psycho-social aspects of the situation in the Northeast. With good analysis on the way, solutions are never quite far off.

The transcript has been edited to iron out the occasional irregularity of the spoken word. Some of the speakers chose to amend or add on to their presentations. The articles here published thus differ, in part considerably, from the original presentations. The discussion in the seminar was lively and insightful, but, except for a minor blurb, could not be reflected for lack of space. We hope that the text as it stands now will give food for thought and enrich the discourse on a multi-faceted subject with ramifications extending the geographical limitations of the topic under consideration (justifying, we thought, a paper extraneous to the seminar’s theme, namely on Kashmir). The seminar concluded on a speculative note, a panel discussion on the “bigger picture” in the Northeast. We would like to thank all participants for helping with this publication and leave it for the reader to decide whether it is premature to invite visions for a region, which, but for its geographical denotation, has remained nameless.

New Delhi, December 2008

**Patrick Hoenig**, Academy of Third World Studies, Editor

## **Acronyms**

AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act
AGP	Assam Gana Parishad
BPHRO	Borok Peoples Human Rights Organisation
IDP	Internally displaced person
J&K	Jammu and Kashmir
LoC	Line of Control
MASS	Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti
NMA	Naga Mothers Association
NSCN (IM)	National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu
PBD	Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas
Rs	Rupees
SAFHR	South Asia Forum for Human Rights
ST	Scheduled Tribe
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom

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Moderator: Bhagat Oinam

1. Sanjoy Hazarika
2. Sanjib Baruah
3. Ram Narayan Kumar

Vote of Thanks, followed by High Tea

## Proceedings

### **Shri Prakash, Honorary Deputy Director, Academy of Third World Studies: Inaugural remarks**

We are delighted to host this seminar on the Indian Northeast, which is an area of considerable interest and concern both nationally and internationally. The question we are faced with is how different ethnic groups can live together and participate in the formation of a unified political system. We are seeing this challenge of co-existence and integration in several parts of the world. By way of comparison, we can refer to the controversy in Europe around the creation of a European constitution and the enlargement of the EU membership. So if we take a longer term and realistic view of the Northeast in a comparative framework we will find that we are dealing with issues which are not unique. I think we can learn a lot of lessons from other parts of the world and identify problems, which are common in the process of linking up nation-building and globalisation.

There have been many twists and turns in the process of governance in the Northeast since Independence. Elections have taken place and groups in opposition have formed governments—the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) being one example—so that the dividing line between those who might want independence or self-determination and others who are willing to fight elections when they have a chance of winning is not so starkly drawn. You have Sikkim and Bhutan which both have stable governments and good relations with the Indian state and the Indian government. And you have other examples, Nagas in particular, where this has not been the case. Peace processes involve different groups with different backgrounds and cultural characteristics. Let us also not forget that the Northeast has tremendous potential in terms of economic development even though it probably has not been realised to the extent it should have been. So we are dealing with a broad canvas of examples, problems and histories of politics. One does not have to be swept off one's feet either by the positive or the negative. It would perhaps be better to try and take a more balanced view and a case-by-case approach to the different conflicts rather than seeing the whole region as one of conflict and not one of good governance at all.

India and the Indian middle class have come a long way since 1947 in recognising the challenges of building up a synthetic democratic polity which is more than the sum of its parts, whether they be Naga, Maratha, Rajput or other. The reason why India is able to recognise problems of inequality and poverty in the midst of high growth rates is its commitment to research and study. Higher education is going to create social scientists looking at problems in an analytical and rational way. We are quite free to share our views, to write, to advise the government of India on ways of solving the problems that exist. We should also not underestimate the academic community's capacity to create

innovative solutions. We do not have to copy from other parts of the world; we can take pride in the fact that the Indian system has been created on its own. So I do not think you can forget the progress that has been made along with the shortcomings that remain.

The Academy will be very happy to work with the Centre for Northeast Studies when it is established in Jamia as we do with many other centres here. We have joint seminars and collaborations and peace is one of the issues common to the 'Third World' as a whole. Whether it is Africa or Asia, the process of nation-building comes on the heels of decolonisation and it is ongoing. On this note, may I now please open the seminar, invite the speakers and encourage any questions and observations from the floor.

### **Sanjoy Hazarika: Introduction**

This is really the first event of the proposed Centre for Northeast Studies at Jamia Millia Islamia. It began with a conversation I was having with the Vice-Chancellor by phone. I was on my way to Shillong and I called him up saying here is an idea and he said "It's great! We should do it." The interesting thing is that the Government of India and so many people talk about the Northeast and for the Northeast, but there is not a single centre for Northeast Studies in any university anywhere in the country. As a non-academic, I find it amazing that you are prepared to invest in roads but not in people. So it has taken us about a year to come to a situation where we (the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research) have actually signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Jamia and we hope to be able to establish a physical presence here on campus in the next few months. A good faculty we hope to have from the Northeast, but the students must be from all over the country and the world.

As with all good ideas the test is in the implementation. You know they always say that the next best thing to a good or a great idea is to implement that good or great idea and we have started a long journey with a small step. But what kind of a centre will it be? As I said we hope to have voices, expertise, faces from the region because it is my belief that research and application of ideas must inform both scholarship and policy work and vision. There will be courses and teaching on contemporary political issues, on issues of refugees, connectivity to Southeast Asia, globalisation, integration, governance, civil society, laws—both good and bad—and what we call the green economy, the issues of climate change. I really am looking forward to the joy of ideas in action and this becoming a reality. We wish to bring the best of the Northeast here and we take people from here to the Northeast for collaboration, for study attachments and even for sabbaticals. Tufts University is collaborating with us in the Northeast, they are sending people for research on several sectors and we do not see why it cannot happen here.

A few days ago the newspapers carried an item about the central government declaring 14 hydroelectric dams "national assets", including three in the Northeast. Some of us have a real problem with that because the true assets are people and the living systems on which they depend, which sustain



them and which they should in turn protect and sustain. Instead we talk about constructing monstrosities. We talk about a 'Look East' policy and are investing something like Rs. 50,000 crores (one crore being 10 million) just on roads in the Northeast in the next few years. But we will not invest in people and sustain the systems that make them function, make them a real asset. And I say this as somebody who is deeply concerned about problems of the environment and eco-systems not just because I think that rhinos, dolphins and tigers only need to be saved. I think our attitude to them and the destruction of species reflects our attitude to the destruction of life on earth. So as we seek an application of ideas to research we also seek to inform policy and close the gap between scholarship and policy, between the field and policy. Otherwise you will keep getting not just an infrastructure gap or an attitudinal gap but a reality gap which will continue to expand and deepen. So I hope that the centre when we get it going will actually play a role in that and we hope to see many of you here in an active role, as participants, organisers, teachers and listeners and sharers of your experiences.

Along with five others I have been working on a project for the Northeast called "Vision 2020". I want to share here some key points of a larger vision that I think drives many of us and that should also drive the people who believe in equality and who seek to bring about change in the Northeast. The points are as follows:

- We believe in a Northeast where there is an end to hunger and poverty, where there is food security for all and the old, infirm and needy are cared for;
- The region is at par, economically, with other growth areas in the country;
- Government and governance are community-driven, simple, transparent, accountable and responsive;
- An end to ethnic, territorial and political conflicts with opponents turning into political, social and economic partners;
- A new economic discourse based on sustainable growth and not security-driven;
- Stable relationships with neighbours to the North, South, Southwest and East enabling easy travel and safe investments;
- The region rediscovering itself as a centre of a vast and bustling network of social and cultural flows;
- Ethnic groups are assured that illegal migration will be stopped by effective border management; political reservation for such ethnic groups may assure them of political control;
- Women and girls are empowered and strengthened to fulfil the roles of equal shapers of economy and society;
- Children have a safe and happy childhood and opportunities to realise their full potential through education and sports;
- There is safe and adequate drinking water and sanitation for all households;

- Establish review mechanisms of major development projects with representatives of stakeholders, purported beneficiaries, technical and finance specialists, local NGOs and elected community leaders and ensure that such projects grow out of dialogue and in association with the local communities, where the rights of the environment are protected and benefits accrue to them.

I do not know if you saw today's "Hindu" carrying on the front page a statement by a prime minister. I will paraphrase it as I close. The prime minister made a historic apology to the people for injustices committed over decades, saying he wanted to remove a great stain from the nation's soul. The apology represented a watershed in the nation's history often fraught with ethnic tensions. The prime minister said, "We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on our fellow nationals." This statement was made by the Australian Prime Minister, an apology to the aborigines for injustices inflicted over two centuries of white settlement. Think of a statement like that by a Prime Minister of India towards the Northeast, towards Kashmir, towards wherever there is conflict here. I think that would do a lot in building bridges and reducing gaps because, fortunately or unfortunately, the Northeast continues to think with its heart, not its head, putting a great strain on the heart, which is supposed to feel other things. So I appreciate the fact that all of you are here and I look forward to a very interesting, focused discussion with some of the best minds and spirits from the Northeast and people who have worked in and off the field for many years. Welcome and thank you.

## **Session I**

### **The Role of the State and Non-State Actors in the Northeast**

#### **Sanjib Baruah: “From Memories of the Past to a Vision for the Future: Resolving the Crisis of Citizenship in Northeast India”**

Territoriality and indigeneity are recurrent themes in the postcolonial politics of Northeast India. The saliency of the twin themes can be explained by a number of factors: (1) the residues of colonial knowledge in the post-colonial governmental practice; (2) the morphing of safeguards for customary law into protective discrimination for ethnically defined groups; (3) a constitutional context in which the list of groups entitled to protective discrimination and the boundaries of territorial units remain permanently open to modification; and (4) the frontier character of the region. Territoriality and indigeneity have become favourite idioms of resistance by ‘indigenous ethnic groups’ fearful of becoming a minority. But the prevalent notions of territoriality are more often than not shaped by the colonial spatial order. The continuing hold of colonial knowledge is reflected in both the official policy discourse and the political imagination of local activists.

Indian law continues to make a distinction between subjects governed by customary law and subjects governed by general law, a distinction which is corresponding to the hill-plains binary of colonial wisdom. What were once safeguards for the customary practices of hill tribes has morphed into a model of protective discrimination for ethnically defined groups, in other words, de facto ethnic homelands. This type of politics thrives in a constitutional setting where the list of groups entitled to protective discrimination and the boundaries of territorial units are permanently open to alteration. Yet, this political idiom, especially the indigenous-outsider binary, is far too dissonant with the existing political economy of the region, resulting in episodes of ethnic violence, displacement, recurrent challenges to equal rights and a permanent crisis of citizenship. Those who are mobile are either penalised by being defined as outsiders, or mobility is discouraged because privileges that come with Scheduled Tribe (ST) status are made specific to habitats to which particular groups are fixed.

The Hill Tribes were called so because the vague colonial ethnography fixed them to the hills—their supposedly natural habitat. A problem that the British colonial scholar/administrator confronted in the Northeast was how to make sense of the relatively egalitarian mores and habits of many of the peoples, or rather the absence of caste, more apparent in the hills. Given the notion of India as an essentially hierarchical civilisation, they had to figure out whether the peoples of the Northeast were outside or inside the racial unity of India. There was no easy answer since a short distance away

the ethnic kin of the same egalitarian people performed rituals that could be described as Hindu. Such facts had to be either assimilated into the master principle of caste or categorised as external to the caste system, yet internal to the racially defined unity of India. The hills and plains became the master oppositional binary in the colonial solution to the problem. People were classified as belonging either to the hills or to the plains even though the classification was fundamentally at odds with local cultural dynamics and spatial practices.

How do we think our way out of the box of the colonial spatial order and the ethnic reductionism of colonial knowledge? James C. Scott's work on Southeast Asia, especially his formulations on state and non-state spaces is quite suggestive. His starting point is the fact that historically, in these parts of the world, land was abundant but manpower in short supply. The problem confronting the states in the valleys therefore was how to have large enough populations. The wars in the region were not over territory but about capturing subjects and slaves. The labour-starved states of the plains, however, could not capture the dispersed and mobile populations in the hills for forced labour or military service, nor were tax collectors able to monitor their numbers or their holdings and income. The non-state spaces in the hills and the state spaces in the lowlands were in a symbiotic relationship. Categories like hill people and valley people or rather Hill Tribes and valley people are leaky vessels. There were back and forth movements, wars produced movements in both directions, and, while the attractions of commerce and what lowlanders liked to call civilisation may have generated movements of Hill people downwards, it was never a one-way flow. Thanks to the extortionist labour demands of the lowland states and the vulnerability of wet rice cultivation to crop failure, there were always movements to the hills where subsistence alternatives were available. It is a reflection of this symbiotic relationship that multiple languages are used in such proximity to one another that in many cases one gets inducted into the life of the community not just through one but several languages. When one switches from one language to another and mixes different languages in a conversation in Northeast India, one does not 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.

Nothing illustrates the incongruity of the political idiom of territoriality and indigeneity more graphically than the current controversy over Scheduled Tribe status for the Adivasis, descendants of tea workers who were brought to Assam as indentured labourers as early as a century and a half ago. Adivasi activists argue that since the ethnic kin in their places of origin are recognised as Scheduled Tribes, they should have the same status in Assam. Rather strikingly, Adivasi activists use the bow and arrow as an ethnic symbol, presumably to meet the test of a history of primitiveness that astonishingly enough is still what a group needs to prove to obtain Scheduled Tribe status. Seen through the prism of a global political economy, the tea labour community is part of a larger migration movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that took Indian labourers to plantations in various parts of the British Empire, such as Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius or South Africa. India now celebrates the Indian

diaspora and Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (PBD) honours the descendants of migrants to faraway shores, some of whom rose to become presidents and prime ministers of their countries. Viewed from this perspective, the difficulties faced by the descendants of those who remained within India's border to claim Scheduled Tribe status are extraordinary. Surely, given the contribution of the tea labour community, in blood and in sweat, to the formation of modern Assam, no other group has a better claim to full citizenship rights and compensatory justice than them. Yet in a political culture that is infused with ideas of territoriality and indigeneity, there is little space for articulating their demands, except through a borrowed language of remembered tribalhood and primitiveness. Activists in Northeast India often retreat to memories of ancient kingdoms in support of contemporary territorial claims. In referring to the past, however, they show little awareness that colonial rule profoundly changed spatial and cultural dynamics.

One still finds traces of local spatial practices that stubbornly resist colonial knowledge. However, to discover them one must step out of the colonial archives. For instance, only 40 miles from the city of Guwahati, a descendant of the Guwah king presides over an annual fair, the Jonbeel Mela, where Tiwa, Khasi and Karbi people straddling across the colonial Hill-Plains divide barter edible roots in exchange for fish. The appreciation of such local spatial practices grows with the understanding of the colonial spatial order. Long before Northeast India became a remote and militarised border region in the post-colonial political order of nation states, it was incorporated into the global capitalist economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like other colonial era plantation economies such as Fiji, Mauritius and Guyana. It would seem rather obvious today that memories of a real or imagined shared past, mediated by the colonial spatial order, cannot be the basis for rights and entitlements in Northeast India. Both from a state and a societal perspective, the political and intellectual challenge facing the region today is to bring about a language of politics that is based on an understanding of local cultural dynamics and practices of space as well as a vision of a common future of those who live in the region today.

**Ravi Hemadri: “Civil Society Initiatives and the Indian State in the Borderlands”**

This is the first programme being organised on the issue of the Northeast at the Academy of Third World Studies in a big way and we look forward to the Centre for Northeast Studies being set up at Jamia Millia Islamia, especially those of us who are working closely with civil society organisations in the region. There is a lot of requirement for research to be done on the Northeast and we hope to feed the findings of that research into a dialogue with the government of India to inform its policies for the region. My presentation is going to be about our work with communities and civil society organisations in the 'Northeast' or the northeastern states as I would prefer to call them, minus Sikkim, which is not traditionally considered part of that region.

Let me first clarify that the term ‘Northeast’ has very little social, political and cultural significance. We need to be careful not to lock a great variety of peoples into stereotypes. There is so much diversity in the northeastern states and their trajectories since independence have been so vastly different that we cannot club them together in one category called ‘Northeast’. What stands out as a common feature, however, is the way in which the government of India has been looking at the region from the vantage point of territorial security, with disregard for genuine development and welfare of the people. We need to keep in mind that an act like AFSPA, which has been in operation in large parts of the region for a very long time, authorises even a non-commissioned officer to kill a person on mere suspicion of being a militant or having intentions of breaking the law. This is a clear indication of how the whole region has been in a continuous state of war for the last 50 years.

Historically, there is enough evidence to suggest that communities in the northeastern region have enjoyed autonomy in their homeland for a long time. This of course does not mean that the region was always free of conflict. Naga history, for example, is replete with stories of war. But war over land, resources and territories was also common elsewhere in India. In pre-colonial times, the communities of the region had mechanisms to resolve conflict. With the advent of the British, however, the situation deteriorated and after Independence many communities have been in a war-like situation with the Indian state and with each other. Some conflict situations have seen improvement. In Mizoram, for example, an agreement for autonomy has brought peace, even though we may find it difficult to say this without qualifications. More than 75,000 Burmese migrants live in Mizoram without any legal recognition and simmering conflicts between Mizos, on the one hand, and Chakmas and Lias, on the other, are clear signals that all is not well. We should recall that Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya were carved out of Assam in an attempt by the Indian government to satisfy specific community aspirations for autonomy. But the Naga problem clearly has continued and not abated since. In the case of Meghalaya, the Indian state strove to accommodate the political aspirations of the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia communities for autonomy but evidence has been mounting in the past few years that the Garo people feel disenfranchised and want a separate ‘Garoland’. Statehood is also the political goal of the Bodos in Assam as well as the Karbis, Dimasas and other tribal indigenous communities.

A constitutional device—other than the establishment of states—has been the introduction of Sixth Schedule Autonomous Councils. There are currently ten such Councils in the region, with a steadily growing number of district councils demanding Sixth Schedule status. But even communities who have been having Sixth Schedule status for the last fifty years are aspiring for more. The political elites in the autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills, for instance, have sustained a movement for the establishment of an autonomous state in its own right for the last 25 years. At the ground level, however, there is not much difference between the people in the autonomous districts and those in contiguous districts in Assam in terms of economic prosperity and cultural preservation. The Sixth Schedule Councils

have succeeded in creating multiple power centres, but they failed to usher in a genuine process of democratisation. It comes as no surprise that the people are disillusioned and dissatisfied with the current politico-administrative arrangements for autonomy in the region.

As for the way forward, the political movements in the Northeast have failed to pressurise the Indian government into meaningful negotiations. The Indian polity, for its part, has proved unable to engage legitimate, peaceful and democratic movements for autonomy and statehood. Instead, it has branded the drive for autonomy as anti-national and a threat to security. The criminalisation of the demand for autonomy, in turn, has led to the emergence of various armed groups in the region. These groups have further splintered and are now also fighting amongst one another. While problems of reconciling varying notions of identity, based on specific histories and ideas of autonomy, have contributed to the outbreak of violence, the anti-insurgency operations of the security forces are no less responsible for the mushrooming of armed groups in the entire region. We hardly find a community in the Northeast today that does not have at least one armed group championing its cause. Thanks to a general climate of dissatisfaction with the current situation the militant groups continue to attract young men and women to their ranks. Having failed to overwhelm the armed groups in the region, the security forces target those who are fighting the high-handedness of the police and the security forces, those who are raising their voices for human rights and civil liberties.

Last year Hebal Koloj, the President of Borok Peoples Human Rights Organisation (BPHRO) in Tripura, was arrested and detained under various sections of the Indian Penal Code and the National Security Act until the Agartala bench of Guwahati High Court quashed all charges levelled against him. And only last week, we witnessed the arrest of Lachit Bordolai, a human rights and peace activist in Assam. The Indian government, while lacking a coherent policy on how to deal with armed insurgencies in the region, does not seem to tolerate democratic dissent. At the same time, the military is taking over civilian space. Of course, parallel government is not a new phenomenon in the northeastern states. When the security forces carried out a cordon-and-search operation in the Manipuri village of Oinam in 1987, the Chief Minister of Manipur wrote to the Union Home Minister of India: "The Civil Law has unfortunately ceased to operate in Senapati district due to the excesses committed by the Assam Rifles with complete disregard shown to civil administration. The Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police were wrongfully confined, humiliated and prevented from discharging their official duties by the security forces". In recent times, however, the invasion of civilian space by the military has taken on unprecedented proportions. The security forces today are funding welfare programmes, the construction of community halls, music and sport events.

My last point pertains to the prospect of agreements and accords to create peace in the northeastern states. We should note that negotiations with political groups and armed factions in the region predate India's independence. There has been a wide range of agreements and ceasefires from the Saadullah-

Gopinath Bordoloi Accord of 1945 to the Bodoland Territorial Council Accord of 2003. But if you look at the various legal instruments more closely you will find that no provision has been made for anything going beyond the disarmament and demobilisation of armed groups. Those who have surrendered to the state are made to live in designated camps and then nothing happens. From splinter groups—so called ‘anti-talk factions’—emerge new insurgent outfits who carry on the fight. So agreements and accords fail to satisfy the people and give rise to more conflict, followed by more agreements and accords. The cases of Nagas and Bodos are classic examples of how the cycle of violence is being institutionalised.

**Rita Manchanda: “Redefining Boundaries of the Discourse on the Northeast: A Gendered Perspective on Human Security”**

I want to begin by focusing on the three issues identified in the topic of my talk: human security, gender and redefining the Northeast discourse. I do not think that I need to elaborate too much on human security as a concept but for the purpose of clarity let me just say that much: If traditional security or national security has to do with protecting the state against aggression or internal disturbances, human security has as its referent the individual and groups of people. It is a catch-all concept that grew out of a wide range of social movements and is derived from a variety of discourses—developmental, environmental and feminist. In 1994 the UN Human Development Report denoted ‘Freedom from Want’ as the benchmark for human security, a broad notion that encompassed food security, livelihood security, health security, educational security and more. Others argued that the central theme of human security was ‘Freedom from Fear’, that is, the protection of the individual from the repercussions of conflict, civil wars, genocide and displacement. Admittedly, the explanatory value of human security as a concept has diminished to the extent that it has become an umbrella term. However, what is identifiable is that the individual, the object of the dominant security paradigm, has become the subject of human security discourses. The individual defines and identifies security threats and is empowered to develop strategies for protection. It follows that civil society and women’s groups play a key role in human security and conflict resolution discourses.

In this context, I would like to draw attention to the recent arrest of Lachit Bordoloi, an Assamese journalist and adviser of the human rights organisation Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS). Ravi has already referred to Lachit’s arrest and detention in the framework of discussing intolerance towards dissent, but Lachit is also a member of the Peace Consultative Group and for over a year has been part of a controversial but important initiative for the peace process in Assam. Does his detention signal a policy shift, even the end of the government’s willingness to work with civil society on strengthening the dynamics of peace? Our basic assumption is that civil society has a crucial role to play, especially in resolving internal conflicts.



First we need to understand that the conflicts we are dealing with in the Northeast, or in many of the countries in the region for that matter, are asymmetric in nature. Regardless of whether the conflict is based on claims to territory, identity or self-rule, the common characteristic is that a group is pitted against a state. It therefore stands to reason that peace-making capacities within that social group—or nation—should be tapped. Civil society can also play an important counter-balancing role in these asymmetric conflicts, providing much needed strategic depth. Moreover, civil society brings in, from a bottom-up perspective, concerns that otherwise are not prioritised in peace talks, so called “soft belly” issues such as education, health and human security. And most fundamentally, civil society is crucial for legitimising the peace process. Indeed, as the peace process expands, both the state and non-state actors compete to appropriate the middle ground of civil society.

How crucial the role is that civil society plays is amply demonstrated in the Naga peace process, but it hinges on two major challenges. One is the acceptance by the state and non-state of the role played by civil society. In a sense, you have to have recognition by the armed protagonists to include you, if not at the main peace table, then at a secondary peace table. In the Naga peace process, you have space for the recognition of civil society, particularly from the perspective of one of the main negotiating parties, which is the NSCN (IM). There have been a series of structured consultations with civil society representatives. Within the culture of the Nagas there is social legitimacy for indigenous ‘peace activism’ by social organisations, especially women groups. However, it has been difficult to carry this social legitimacy outside the cultural context of the North East communities. The government of India and the institutions of the state have not given any recognition to the peace-building capacities of these groups, particularly the women groups. In 2003, I interviewed General Kulkarni, then head of the Ceasefire Monitoring Cell for the Naga peace process. In the interview, he categorically stated that there was no need to consult with the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights, the Naga Mothers Association or the Naga Students Federation, for the simple reason that, and I quote: “They are only the mouthpieces of the militants”. This is all the more ironic as General Kulkarni, when he served as army commander in Mokokchung (a district in the Northwest of Nagaland), worked with the local women groups to mitigate the impact of violence, diffuse tensions and create a more peaceful atmosphere for elections.

Let me now come to the question as to why there is a need for gendered analysis of war. A lot of work is being done on the causes of war and how it is being fought, but not much is known about the story of living through war. It is through women’s narratives that the ordinary civilians’ experience of war has come into focus. The state security discourse, which is at its core masculine, just dismisses the human suffering in war as ‘collateral damage’. Militarism expects women to play very specific gendered roles. The human security discourse, on the other hand, is said to be gender sensitive. Even though we probably cannot take this as a given and still have to proactively engage to *make* the human security discourse gender sensitive, it clearly is more habitable for women, given the kind of concerns it addresses. But when

one talks about redefining the traditional discourse on security, it is not only a question of just expanding, but also redefining and reprioritising it. The importance of the feminist discourse derives from the finding that women are positioned in a very particular way in a war situation, because of their social roles as care-givers and reproducers of the nation, their status as socially subordinate in practically all societies, their constitution as purveyors of community identity and their vulnerability to gender-based violence, particularly in identity conflicts. But we should also say a word about the continuum of violence that women experience, violence which is rooted in their social subordination and plays itself out in the everyday experience of peace time or the dramatic times of conflict. We need to appreciate the specific security needs for women in any particular context. Domestic violence generally increases in conflict situations but the need to protect women from violence in their homes hardly ever features in security sector reform. You rarely find space for this kind of analysis or concern.

I do not have very much time to go into gender considerations, but I would like to flag one other thing. It is commonly understood that women are interested in stopping violence because they are the worst sufferers of conflict, particularly in today's conflicts where civilians take the brunt of any outbreak of hostilities, whether it is Iraq, the Northeast or Kashmir. But I want to give a more radical twist to this argument. I charge that women are more sensitive to situations of inequality and better able to design empathetic politics, politics of inclusion because they have had a history of being disempowered, excluded and marginalised. I recognise that there are many faces of women, and gender is intersected by class, ethnicity and caste, but I think there is still some validity to the argument that war and peace are gendered activities. As a corollary of building sustainable peace, we see the importance of deconstructing masculinities and femininities. But do women actually bring anything different to the table than men when they get involved in peace processes?

My own experience in the Northeast, particularly my work with the Naga women, has in fact reaffirmed my theoretical finding that women support politics of inclusion. The Naga Mothers Association (NMA), for instance, intervened in internecine warfare in 1984, creating space for warring factions to dialogue with each other. Naga women tried to create an environment conducive for peace talks by means of what they call 'kitchen politics', appealing to local 'national workers' to desist from actions that would bring reprisals on civilians. Food in fact does play an important part in creating goodwill and a sense of comfort both of which are required to bring together groups that are divided and to try and establish a common forum for dialogue. I have also found in my research that women did reach out, though in a limited way, across conflict divides, for example in Manipur. However, I have found it extremely difficult to try and encourage women to proactively work together on an issue like AFSPA. So obviously there are limitations to what gendered activities can accomplish in the realm of peace-building.

Before I conclude I want to come back to an issue I raised in the beginning, namely the importance in the human security debate of civil society

groups and here particularly women groups and the reason why the state is extremely uneasy about their involvement. You may have seen an item in yesterday's issue of 'Mail Today' that quoted an anonymous Home Ministry source—likely to have been Madhukar Gupta, the Home Secretary—saying: “We do not want the civil society representatives to be involved in the peace process. We want to dialogue directly with the armed groups”. Now there may have been a good reason for him to say what he did in the specific context he found himself in, but on a more theoretical level and on a broader policy plane I think we will have to reflect on whether civil society groups partaking in peace processes actually do represent the ‘space in the middle’ and have a position independent enough to contribute to conflict resolution and provide a counterweight in asymmetric conflict. The importance of the human security discourse is that it democratizes the security debate in terms of creating new visions and, in a very practical sense, building peace.

**Bhagat Oinam: “State, Non-State and Civil Society Space: The Politics of Appropriation and Delegitimisation”**

The place and role of civil society in conflict zones is extremely murky and far from what we may want to call democratic. This finding flies in the face of the notion we have of civil society space in normal circumstances, namely that it is democratic and peaceful. The murkiness becomes all the more aggravated as conflict is generating large-scale violence with the state itself being a contending party. As a result, the notion of civil society helping or guiding the state in areas of governance, conflict reduction and peace negotiation becomes suspect. While it might be true that civil society involvement helps reduce tensions in conflict zones—more so for highly militarised zones such as Northeast India—one should not expect civil society to perform miracles. On the contrary, to solve armed conflicts in the region, the role of the state is extremely important. The Indian state is the target of all dissenting voices—insurgent outfits and civil society bodies alike—and will inevitably respond to these voices.

In conceptualising the agents of conflict we should be clear that there is no fundamental difference between the state and non-state actors. Both are essentially driven by a quest for political power and legitimacy. While the state hankers to retain the power and legitimacy it has so far been enjoying, the non-state actors try hard to become a state and gain legitimacy and control over a place and its people. What both have in common is that they have capacity for violence and are attempting to gain legitimacy through monopolising violence. This can be seen in the way the Indian state and insurgent groups in the region enact their decisions through the use of force. Civil society, on the other hand, should not be lumped in with the ‘non-state’. It is true that both are voicing dissent of positions held by the state. But civil society groups—unlike non-state actors—do not strive to gain power and become a state. They constitute themselves in opposition to the government with a view to achieving very

specific goals. Civil society groups are often charged of being in league with non-state (insurgent) organisations. The Naga Mothers Association, Apunba Lup, Merapaibis and the Naga Hoho are cases in point. These bodies have specific social or political agendas and often work as pressure groups, but at times have been accused of being front organisations of non-state forces. The dilemma of civil society groups today is that they are sandwiched between two violent contenders—the state and the non-state—and yet they are expected to engage through democratic procedures. What needs to be accounted for in the analysis of conflict in the region is the appropriation of democratic space by the state to retain its political legitimacy and the non-state trying equally hard to gain political legitimacy through controlling that space.

Let me illustrate my point by giving you two examples. Take first the case of the Naga Hoho. During the years 2001–02, many members of the Naga Hoho resigned because of tactical differences with the NSCN (IM) relating to issues of ‘political settlement’ and ‘ethnic reconciliation’. The resignation led to NSCN (IM) taking complete control of a body belonging to civil society. What was alarming at that point of time has turned out to become a nightmare today with civil society groups in the conflict-ridden states of Nagaland and Manipur being largely appropriated by one or the other non-state actor. Let me give you another example where the state too has played a role in appropriating civil society bodies. During 2004–05, it was proposed to extend the ‘Ima Keithel’ market, a historic site built by King Khagemba during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and situated in the heart of Imphal city. The place is also known as ‘Mothers Market’ and its characteristic is that it is being run, in its entirety, by women. The proposal to build multi-story structures in the market place to increase the number of shops was strongly opposed by various civil society groups, including women organisations. They claimed that any such measure would distort the character of the heritage site and benefit only the political leaders who would be certain to take over any new shops. But the government was able to drive a wedge into the opposition. A few women organisations supported the ‘people-centric’ policy of the government, arguing that it would end the monopoly of few women retailers. Unfortunately, it is not possible to conclude from the mere occurrence of a debate that civil society bodies are acting independently and autonomously. In both the Naga Hoho and the Ima Keithel cases, the debates turned into an unending game of appropriation in the course of which civil society groups succumbed to the pressure exerted by the contending forces.

An equally dangerous game played by both the contenders is the act of delegitimisation. Failure to appropriate a particular portion of civil society space has the losing party start playing the game of delegitimisation. Main players of the game are the federal state and its regional governments. The Manorama episode reveals the nakedness of the Indian state and the mindset of the military establishment driven by the idea of ‘national security’. Thangjam Manorama, a suspected woman cadre of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), was arrested, raped and killed by personnel of the Assam Rifles. Civil society groups protested against the violation of human rights and condemned the occurrence of custodial death. In response, the state insisted that Manorama

was a hardcore militant and had tried to flee from custody. The statement was used by the defence establishment not only to justify the killing, but also to delegitimise the civil society bodies who appeared in the light of giving 'support' to the insurgent movement. Not only the armed forces, but the entire political and bureaucratic establishment are caught in the mythical fear of national security breaches. To illustrate this point let us reflect on the nude protest of 12 elderly Manipuri women in front of the Kangla Fort in Imphal shouting at the Assam Rifles "Rape us". The protest triggered a mass movement for repeal of AFSPA, which was seen as a symbol of state repression. The immediate reaction of the state, along with the national media, was to suggest that the women had been paid by the insurgents to disrobe. It was also not surprising that some tabloids depicted the women's demonstration in the same fashion as it is often done with nude protests by animal lovers or environmentalists in the West. Unexpectedly, the delegitimation campaign was joined by some women activists in the Northeast who criticised the nude protesters not only for failing to have AFSPA repealed, but also for attracting attention by means too catchy for the movement's own good. The way shady arguments were being advanced from all corners highlighted the manipulative capacity of the state to delegitimise authentic voices.

Under the circumstances, it is extremely difficult to imagine civil society groups playing their role impartially. For civil society bodies to function independently, it is morally imperative that the contenders of power abstain from all interference with democratic (civil) space. Being a legitimate authority, the Indian state has all the more responsibility to enable civil society bodies to function responsibly. But as long as non-state forces continue with the gimmick of appropriation, it will be impractical to expect the Indian state to remain a mute spectator. One cannot quietly watch while the other plays tricks. Thus, the rule of the game is that both the contending parties abide by the normative consideration that civil space is to be left un-coerced amidst each other's military offensives. Civil society initiatives will likely be more meaningful and effective when civil space is nurtured to evoke democratic voices. Democratic dissent is bound to be directed against the state for it is the state that enjoys the legitimacy of a political authority. For a democratic civil society space to emerge, the state has to abide by its normative role. And the non-state forces, if at all they aim to gain political legitimacy, cannot free themselves from normative engagements either.

## Session II

### Identity and Community in the Borderlands

#### **Partha Ghosh: “Assam Within or Without India’s Northeast: A Perspective”**

My paper is a macro analysis from a political science perspective. I start by questioning the very notion of the Northeast. Instead, I use the term ‘regionality’. Obviously there is no such thing as ‘regionality’ because every time I type it on the computer it is underlined red. It is a term I have coined in this context. Let me first clarify that when I talk of the ‘Northeast’ I mean the original seven states it was made up of. Now Sikkim has been added, but that is not particularly helpful because then we should also add Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Kuchbihar. Insofar as the question of ‘regionality’ is concerned, I question the notion on two grounds, methodological and empirical. Methodologically I draw on the philosopher Karl Popper (1902-93) who said that you keep verifying anything that you assume as given, which is why you should try and question the assumption itself. Empirically, I have done some calculations about the demographic situation in the Northeast. As a result, I have identified two dividing lines for the Northeast as a region, namely the distinction between the so-called tribal and non-tribal areas and the differentiation between Assam and the rest. Both support my basic premise that the Northeast should not be considered as a region.

The classification ‘tribal’ I use in the way the Indian constitution does when it refers to the Scheduled Tribes as a legal category. In the Northeast 27% of the population can be qualified as tribal and 73% as non-tribal. Assam has only 12% tribal people. More than 30% of the population in Manipur and Tripura is tribal whereas the share of tribal population in the four remaining states—Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland—lies between 64% and 95%. Given this enormous vertical stratification, does a horizontal policy approach, India’s ‘policy for the Northeast’, treating the entire region as one, make any sense? Let us now turn to the second distinction, Assam versus the rest of the Northeast. Statistics show that Assam has more than double the population of the rest of the Northeast, but only 40% of the territory. The population density in Assam is 340 people per square kilometre, compared to only 66 people per square kilometre in the rest of the Northeast. I am quite aware of the topographical situation and how it offers an explanation for this finding but the point is that if the Northeast meets the requirements of an ‘underdeveloped’ region—as is the common assumption—then Assam, where the bulk of the people live, is also ‘underdeveloped’. Under the circumstances, you would expect the bulk of the central assistance to go to Assam but in reality its share is less than half of what the other northeastern states receive. Assam actually gets what it is paying over to the central government in terms of

income tax revenues. In other words, Assam gives as much as it gets back— Assam is not aided at all even though, in terms of the demographic composition of the Northeast, it deserves the biggest slice of assistance.

I have lived in Guwahati for three years which, in itself, does not make me an expert. But if you breathe the politics of the region you develop certain perspectives and travelling to other parts of the Northeast, I could not help feeling that people in the rural areas of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya are better off than in many parts of Assam. My travel insights may have been impressionistic, but when I calculated all these figures I knew that I was onto something. Assam is not going to get anything out of central government assistance unless the way resources are allocated is being changed. I have two conclusions to draw. First, stop considering the Northeast as one single region in policy terms. The distribution of aid needs serious reconsideration given the fact that only 10% of the total developmental budget for the Northeast is earmarked for Assam. Secondly, Assam will fare better if it can extricate itself from what I call the ‘Northeast syndrome’. All economic and social indicators show that Assam is better off than many other states in India. Yet since it is associated with the ‘Northeast’, Assam is considered an underdeveloped state, creating a disincentive for private capital to go there. In my understanding of the macro dynamics and politics of India I hold that the ‘Northeast’ tag actually is counter-productive for the state of Assam.

**Sunita Akoijam: “The Psychological Impact of Violence on Society: Living in a Culture of Fear”**

The visible impact of violence has been thoroughly studied and well documented. Whether it is Africa, Kashmir, Sri Lanka or India’s Northeast, images of starving children, mutilated bodies, helpless civilians caught in crossfire, mothers mourning for their ‘vanished’ children have been flashed in newspapers and on television. Beyond the visible and obvious impact of violence, however, there is a culture of fear, an unnatural environment to which people living in conflict need to get acclimatised. Just like people in extreme climatic conditions prepare to adjust to seasonal changes, people living in violent conditions take this culture of fear as a challenge to be tackled on a day-to-day basis. Living with trauma has become the order of the day for these people. Unheard and unseen, the invisible imprints of troubled times linger unaddressed.

In my paper I will be talking about some of the things I have experienced as a journalist in Manipur. I will focus on an incident that occurred in a Manipuri village quite recently and that is still very much in the collective conscience of the people in the area. In September 2007, a soldier of the Assam Rifles was killed in an ambush near the village of Umathel, some 70 kilometres from the capital Imphal. That same night an Assam Rifles battalion made the round in the village with the dreaded midnight knocks. All male inhabitants of

the village were called out, including teenage boys, and, in some instances, also women. As a result of the ensuing 'interrogation', 16 persons suffered physical injuries and a four-month pregnant woman lost her foetus.

The physical wounds of that night in Umathel have healed but the psychological trauma lingers. I was told many sad stories during my visits there. A 17-year old boy, for instance, continues to experience seizures every time he is exposed to loud noise. You are sitting and talking with him and suddenly he has fits and you have to attend to him because he has heard a bus. His doctor advised that he leave the boarding near his school for a quiet place away from all noise. He is not alone. There are other boys who used to go out at night to run errands for their families. They are no longer able to do that. Even when they go to the bathroom, they insist that somebody wait for them outside. Grown-ups are often just as traumatised, albeit less visibly. They are putting on a mask of indifference. Many of my adult interlocutors were initially very defensive, some in denial about being affected beyond the apparent. But a simple question like "Why aren't you talking about what happened?" would trigger a volcano of emotions.

During my last visit to Umathel, almost four months after the raid, I went to meet a few people who had not come out to give their statement in a Public Interest Litigation case filed by some local human rights organisations. I went to ask what was keeping them from coming forward and giving their statement. A doctor in his fifties maintained a long silence and avoided my questions before he finally spoke up. He said: "Do you know where I am living? I live far from Imphal where you have police and human rights defenders. I live at the mercy of mighty ones. My house is just next to the road. If this evening somebody comes and plants a bomb near my gate, you know what will happen when the security people find it? I will be beaten up and, along with me, all the male members of my family. I grew up with ethics and a desire to stand for what is true but there is no space for me to follow my conscience. We live amongst thorns, we have to learn to get used to the pricks."

I also met a young teacher who is in his early thirties. He told me that it was around midnight when he was called out that said night. He went out without a shirt because he had been sleeping. Before anything, the soldiers started beating him. They walked him to another tribal village several kilometres away, all the while beating him. Then they lost interest in him. From that night, he said, he is finding it hard to concentrate on work. He has started practising yoga to calm his nerves. When I asked him why he didn't complain publicly he told me: "For me, if I die, that's the end of my story. But I have a family, people who depend on me, if something happens to me, who is going to protect my family?" He drew my attention to the remoteness of the area he was living in, the fact that there was no police station or any help within reach. The uncertainty surrounding him and his family, he said, did not leave him a choice but to compromise his sense of justice.

We must assume that the silence enveloping what happened in Umathel is reflective of the goings-on in other nooks and corners of Manipur, also the capital Imphal. Even if you want to speak up when you have nobody to



approach for help, you may feel it is better to keep quiet. For many people living in conflict situations, adapting to a culture of fear has become the norm rather than the exception. This is why it is so important to talk and to do something about it. Fear breeds insecurity and mistrust. The engineering of a culture of fear in society will hamper the process of restoring peace. It will put the future of a nation in jeopardy. Any discussion of peace and development without addressing the culture of fear will remain an exercise in futility. The time has come to work towards the psychological rehabilitation of people suffering from prolonged exposure to violence in its many facets. When we are discussing the casualties of war, we should not forget the wounds inflicted on the soul.

**Sanghamitra Misra: “Between Borders: Writing Histories of Borderland Identities in Northeastern India”**

Sharing borders with Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Northeast of India illustrates the predictable story of the creation and erasure of marginal spaces and their histories by the master narratives of the state and various nationalisms. My paper studies the historical dimension of politics of space and identity in the western borderland region comprising the colonial district of Goalpara (in the then province of Assam), the eastern Duars (regions at the foot of the West Assam Himalayas), parts of northern Bengal and the southern hills of Bhutan. The first section of the paper is a historical narrative about the pre- and early colonial world of space and power in the region, while the second section looks at the response of local groups to the spaces created by the colonial state. The exploration of the persistence of shared history is reconstructed here primarily in the form of sites of confrontation and contestation between indigenous and colonial notions of space and power. What was the people’s imagination before the colonial state came in? How did they see physical space, cultural space, linguistic space? How did the colonial state transform this imagination and what were the spatial strategies used by the colonial state? All of these questions become very relevant today when we are talking about the revival of the silk route and a lot of contemporary policy implications. In lieu of a conclusion, the paper suggests that we need to go beyond the colonial archive to be able to offer a more complex reading of the fragmentary plural worlds of the borderlands.

I begin by exploring the shared history of the region, arguing that its rich resources provide the context for the overlapping notions of territory and political authority prevalent in pre-colonial times, a concept very different from the unitary notion of sovereignty and territoriality associated with the colonial state. The declarations issued by the Bhutan king to the local chieftains of the region are a good historical source for identifying the notions of overlapping sovereignty between local polities. The chieftains of Bijni, Sidli and other communities considered themselves as independent “Rajas”, while acknowledging the authority of the Bhutan monarch. So here we have a mix of

interdependence, superiority and reciprocity. The tribute system is also characterised by variety and ambivalence. The Bhutanese claims changed from one administrative unit to the next, while the rulers of Bijni and Sidli made whatever demands they thought expedient.

Another illustration of shared rule prior to the British occupation of the region is the system of alternate control over passes through the Bhutan hills and the eastern Duar area, including passes such as the Kuriapara Duar, by the Bhutan kingdom and local powers. The collection of tributes from the Duars underwent seasonal changes. Colonial sources report that in certain areas the Souba, a representative of the Bhutan king, descended from the hills of Bhutan only in December and January when the cold climate had rendered the region “comparatively healthy”. On the eastern frontiers of the western borderland, the Ahom rulers were frequently embroiled in conflict with the state of Bhutan. Space and power were shared as well as contested and the population was being subjected to exactions from several authorities, all of whom, and I quote again from colonial records, were “equally obnoxious, equally oppressive in their dealings”.

Several writings from this period appear to suggest that the concept of shared sovereignty governed Bhutan’s relations with other neighbours as well. William Griffiths, a colonial official, wrote a tour diary of Bhutan and described how Bhutan appeared to have no connection to Sikkim, while the kingdom paid tribute directly to Lhasa and indirectly to China. So when the Raja of Koch Behar (a small state south of the kingdom of Bhutan and west of the Brahmaputra valley kingdom of Ahom) was kidnapped by the Bhutan authorities, an appeal was made to the Dalai Lama of Tibet to have him released. The Ahom rulers also sent an annual ‘Peshkash’ or tribute to the Dalai Lama. What emerges from this puzzle of power politics is that relationships of patrimony in pre-colonial times are extending over an area much larger than generally assumed, including Tibet, Assam, Bhutan and northern Bengal. In this context, it is interesting to note that the idea of shared history and regional connectedness is not foreign to Southeast Asia either. Scholars like Thongchai Winichakul and Benedict Anderson show that in the pre-colonial era power was grounded much more in the reach of the ruler than the notion of territory. Winichakul suggests that ‘like a cone of white light cast down by a reflector lamp, power was both undifferentiated in quality and fused or concentrated in form’. Power was concentrated at the centre of the kingdom and if we imagine authority as this light, the core where the light is the strongest symbolises the concentration of power and as it diminishes towards the peripheries, there are increasing possibilities of overlapping sovereignties.

The notion of overlapping space and power is also reaffirmed by the trading practices prevailing in the region at that time. The area under consideration had close trade connections with Bhutan, Tibet, western Assam and southern Bengal. Items for trade included horses, cloves, asafoetida, sugar, oil, salt and timber. Colonial records mention caravans carrying goods all the way from Lhasa. The Raja of Tawang paid tribute to Lhasa when purchasing cotton and other goods at the Udalguri Fair. Several fairs are being held even

today catering to the needs of Tibetan pilgrims. All this is evidence of the existence of a notion of sacred topographical space, different from the geographical space. Turning to the colonial period, we see a transformation of the culture of this transitional and fluid space into a world of new rigidities, despite certain continuities. The colonial regime deployed new spatial strategies erasing overlapping notions of sovereignty and fragmenting the region into the kinds of political units that we are familiar with today. Even ties between settled and peripatetic communities were now reduced to more dichotomous, binary relationships. The reorganisation of space was tied up with the proliferation of institutions of economic, administrative, judicial control.

In the second section of the paper, I will focus on what happens post this transformation and the response of the local elite to the changes that the colonial state brings about. The local elites responded to the way the notion of space was changed and transformed by articulating a different history. The Zamindars, the class of landowners, and the emerging middle class, who had relatively easy access to recorded history and the ideological practices of the state, created new politically and culturally charged spaces, and produced narratives countering the ones given to them by the colonial state and the Assamese and Bengali nationalists. Since these counter-narratives frequently reclaimed the spatial strategies of the state and used them effectively to fashion places of their own, the spaces produced were similar to the ones constructed by the colonial state and not in opposition to its ideologies. I therefore call them 'connected spaces' because although imagined in opposition to the state, they are not really very different from the kind of spaces that the colonial state created.

As a historian I am struck by how people in the region were investing money during that period to produce history texts, atlases, maps, all of which were going to be used to construct an imagination of an area modelled on the pre-colonial past, despite the fact that none of this material was taught in the schools of that region. Colonial borders were negated, and legitimacy was sought in a 'golden past'. The people of Goalpara, Assam's westernmost district during the colonial period and an important part of this transitional region, wrote alternative histories of a pre-colonial past when Goalpara was part of a borderland kingdom spanning the Bhutan foothills, the eastern Duars, Koch Behar and eastern Bengal. All of this can be seen as imaginations of a borderland identity.

Time constraints will not allow me to go into details but it is interesting to note that counter-narratives of language offered continuous resistance to appropriations from both Bengali and Assamese nationalist narratives, apart from the colonial discourse. The Rajbanshi language was propagated by the local elites as a link language for people of the region. Thus apart from history writing there also was resistance to a determination of linguistic hierarchies in the region. In the colonial census people were forced to identify themselves as either Bengali or Assamese speakers. Some of the local elite felt that they should have been allowed to express allegiance to Rajbanshi in the census. So we are again talking about resistance to colonial categories as

well as attempts to use language as a means for territorializing the cultural identity of the borderland. In this context the use of Rajbanshi language takes the form of a political statement. Of course, we need to be aware that the privileging of Rajbansi marginalises other forms of speech so that we have a continuing process of appropriation within appropriation.

I would like to end on a note which has a lot of resonance with Sanjib Baruah's paper, namely that we have to go beyond the colonial archives to frame the discourse of stability. There are a lot of transitional spaces that are only waiting to be captured. But to do so we need to be having a closer look at oral traditions and narratives which talk about connected spaces in very different ways. The rich oral narratives of the borderland region which negotiate not only with the totalising narratives of Assamese and Bengali nationalisms but also with the hegemonic discourse of 'stability' that is hostile to all notions of fluidity could be important alternate sources for writing histories of the region. It is often away from the records that we can see the plural fragmentary worlds that the people of the borderlands continue to inhabit.

### **Aküm Longchari: "The Caravan: State Identity and Self-Definition"**

A shared humanity consists of a spectrum of caravans of culture, each defining itself and searching its way, in the way it knows best. These caravans are interrelated, interdependent and inter-connected, perhaps even to the extent of changing and altering the course of one another. Taking the example of the Naga experience, let us imagine a caravan criss-crossing through time and space, a caravan of culture meandering peacefully towards its destination under the stars of history. And in the course of our journey, an interruption takes place. Another caravan comes along and, through the use of force, hijacks our caravan of culture. It takes control of our caravan, alters the direction in which we were going and so now we are a caravan in control of others and moving towards an alien destination. The further the caravan strays from its original path, the more the caravan ceases to be the maker of its own culture. This, in turn, reduces the caravan's ability to define its own existence, thus undermining its self-determining capacity. This is the dilemma: Do we continue on the path that has diverted us from the original destination? Or do we try to take control of the caravan to go back to the point where we were diverted, and resume the course originally intended for us?

Perhaps the following example will help us understand the situation better. There is a Naga village called Lungwa in Mon district (in the North of Nagaland), a village inhabited by the Konyak people (one of the many tribes that constitute the Naga people). Somehow the international border between India and Burma runs right through the middle of Lungwa village splitting it in two—half of the village now lies in Burma, the other half in India, half of the villagers are Indian and the other half Burmese. There are two schools in

Lungwa, one run by the Indian government and the other by the Burmese government. This village is partly in Burma, partly in India, and within India itself, partly in Nagaland and partly in Arunachal Pradesh. One village now has three different 'state' identities. This situation is not unique. Many variations of the predicament facing the caravan can be found in villages and towns alike. But how does this situation affect collective memories of the people living in these villages?

Another example is the city of Dimapur. If you wish to come to Nagaland, you are required to have a Restricted Areas Permit. Many people do not have prior knowledge of this requirement, so they come to Dimapur and then find themselves faced with the trouble of the permit. Dimapur is next to Assam and there are areas where the dividing line is demarcated by small streams. Sometimes immigration officials would say, "Ok, just cross the stream", a stream maybe as broad as a table, and once you reach the other side you are rid of the problem because you are in Assam. So when you are on the Naga side of the border, without a permit, you are in breach of the law, but when you move to the other side, you are within the law. This example highlights the tension between state security vs. peoples' rights and territorial security vs. human security. Such clashes of concepts intensify the caravan's predicament and the interplay of the two caravans results in a struggle of power and rights, making dehumanisation both a paradoxical and inevitable destination.

The art of imposing new identities and artificial boundaries has indeed been the focal point of statecraft. It is nonetheless important to recall that the rationale of territorial integrity is not the end, neither is it absolute in itself. A shared humanity is made possible only when the caravan exercises its right to self-definition and to be the maker of its own culture. It fundamentally also involves determining the nature of the relationship between the caravans, which means addressing perceptions of boundaries. There may very well be a perception that boundaries are soft, flexible and fluid rather than rigid geographical lines. Shifting positions from limited perceptions of shared boundaries can open up possibilities for dialogue and mutual understanding between the caravans, providing a sustained and enduring approach towards a shared humanity.

Let us now turn to yet another village, Anaki, which exists side by side with the village of Galeki; Anaki is in Nagaland, Galeki is in Assam. The two villages have a long tradition of shared boundaries and relationships and their inhabitants have land on either side of the boundary. So in many ways their boundaries are overlapping. But what happens when the state imposes itself? The boundary stops being fluid and flexible; it becomes rigid and impenetrable, to the extent of destroying relationships between the two communities. Mind you, the relationships they have shared, endured, fostered, nurtured and nourished have existed for generations. Then suddenly one becomes the encroacher when crossing over to the other side to cultivate one's own land. The state-people conflict conveniently becomes a people-to-people conflict. This clearly demonstrates the politics of boundaries. Human security

needs to precede territorial security. The limitations of the concept of territorial integrity are best illustrated by the dictum of Judge Hardy Dillard in his separate opinion in the International Court of Justice case on Western Sahara (1975): “It is for the people to determine the destiny of the territory; it is not for the territory to determine the destiny of the people.”

At the end of 2007, two people were shot in Dimapur; one died, the other was injured. Both belonged to the NSCN (IM). The next day the Indian army claimed that they had been shot in Khatkhati, which is in Assam. An investigation showed that the shooting had actually occurred in Dimapur itself, but then the body of the dead person had been taken across the state border to Khatkhati. This was done because in Nagaland we have a ceasefire proscribing the killing of insurgents, while it is permitted to do exactly that just outside the state of Nagaland. It will be worthwhile to examine why India has viewed borders and boundaries in the Northeast as rigid and inflexible lines which cannot be altered—even if it contravenes the basic rationale of territorial integrity—while it has no compunction in redrawing and creating new state boundaries in the Indian subcontinent.

The Naga examples help provide initial insights into how state identity has fragmented peoples’ identity and the right to self-definition and how state-building has destroyed nations. State identity plunges the caravan of culture into a four-fold predicament: First, it determines who is in and who is out, who is included, who is excluded; second, it distinguishes between one’s legal and illegal status; third, it has turned state-people conflict into people-to-people conflict, destroying a rich heritage of good relationships between communities and across state boundaries; fourth and finally, it has introduced the politics of geographical boundaries. The question arises as to how this complex predicament can be transformed in a way that is inclusive and recognises the rights of the people who are being affected. How can the question of state identity and people’s identity be approached without asking the question of self-definition?

There are either good or bad boundaries, but there is no such thing as an entity without boundaries because all forms of political relationship require the concept of boundary. Nevertheless, rigid and imposed boundaries have been associated with many of the conflicts in the region. They have been blind and ignorant to the realities of the people, causing the obstruction of a people’s dignity. It is quite essential to recognise that boundaries in reality are not the same as what one can see on a map; they shift, change, overlap and make necessary adjustments pushed by historical and human factors. Boundaries are in constant transformation because they manifest the dynamism of ever-changing power relations. States have time and again exercised, within their parochial fold, the power to monopolise the organising of territorial space. At the end of the day, it is not borders and boundaries that divide people, but human hearts and human values that have had hegemonic systems superimposed on them. The borders are between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, the free and the bonded. The ultimate dividing line is between state identity and the right to self-definition.

This predicament shows us where the Naga caravan is stranded at this point in time. Rethinking, reviewing, redefining the notion of the state is absolutely imperative. Without raising these questions the tension between the pursuit of power, on the one hand, and the pursuit of rights, on the other, will exacerbate the conflict between security and justice, state identity and self-definition. By declaring that the existing boundaries in the Northeast will remain unchanged, the Indian government betrays a lack of political will to address complex issues of self-definition. Perhaps it would best serve democracy if the people, through a democratic referendum, collectively demonstrated that existing territorial boundaries are unable to safeguard their interests. The expressed will of the people inevitably prevails over territorial integrity. After all, it should be the people who determine the destiny of the territory.

The Naga caravan is caught in that dilemma right now. We cannot leave it to the state alone to find a solution and we cannot allow negotiations to be reduced to the negotiating table. The process of finding sustainable solutions has to go beyond that. But what happens is that people who are involved, in one form or the other, become victims. A few years ago the go-between of the Nagas and the Indian government was arrested for allegedly planning to hijack an airplane. This story is now being repeated in the case of Lachit Bordoloi (Lachit is a human rights activist from Assam and a member of the Peace Consultative Group, a go-between of the Indian Government and ULFA). Lachit's arrest shows that nothing has changed, except the name and the place. In the Naga experience the Indian government is interested in conflict management rather than conflict resolution. But managing and controlling a conflict is denying the people the right to live with dignity!

## **Session III**

### **Avenues to Peace and the Prism of Perception**

#### **Walter Fernandes: “Demystifying Development as a Recipe for Peace in the Northeast”**

The assumption in most peace efforts—or rather attempts at managing conflict—is that the Indian Northeast lacks development because of conflict. You cannot invest in the Northeast because of conflict. There is an equally important counter to it: the reason for conflict is the lack of development. In any event, development is one area where the militants and the state come together. Both want development, both seem to believe that development will solve the problem. This perception is based on the assumption that the youth are joining the insurgents only for want of a job. Given the high unemployment rates in the Northeast, the prospect of becoming an insurgent attracts the youth. The state rehabilitates surrendered militants by giving them a reward such as a job or a small tea garden. The problem with that logic is that it can close the vicious cycle of conflict. When you are rehabilitating the youth by giving them a job are you not conveying the message that they should first join the underground, then surrender?

I am exaggerating, of course, but only to show the ridiculousness of the argument that the economy or the search for a job alone drives the youth towards the militants. Even if one were to concede that there is force to the argument, one cannot accept the assumption that people do not invest in the Northeast because of the insurgency. The situation is more complex than that. Take a look at the 1950s when the overall situation in the region was peaceful. At a time when the rest of India launched development projects through five-year plans, the Northeast was already suffering from a serious lack of development. In the 1950s, the Northeast was used primarily as a place for rehabilitating refugees from East Pakistan. A study on development-induced displacement in Assam from 1947-2000, which our centre did two years ago, shows that out of approximately 1.4 million acres of land taken over by the state for development projects more than 3,00,000 acres were used for refugee rehabilitation. That process continues today through encroachment on land by immigrants. Some suggest that the borders be closed to prevent immigration. Of course, such a measure by itself is no solution as immigrants seem to find it easy to bribe their way into the country. In interviews we were conducting with Bangladeshi immigrants in 2004 it emerged that the bribe for crossing the border amounted to Rs. 400. It must have gone up by now. Once the immigrants have entered the country, they encroach on community land, helped by land laws that recognise individual ownership of land, but consider community-owned land as state property although such communities,



particularly tribes, have been living on it for hundreds of years, much before the law was made and the state existed. Thus, what is called modernisation of the legal system, modern development or modern governance really is alienation of the people from the land. This is the main source of conflict.

The biggest chunk of land, however, was taken over for the purpose of building infrastructure and for security reasons. It should be noted that in the Northeast development is always seen from a security perspective. Development projects finally started in the 1960s after the refugees had been rehabilitated. However, when the Sino-Indian conflict occurred in 1962 the Northeast was suddenly considered a buffer zone. This thinking had already governed British policy-making with respect to the Northeast. It became the dominant thinking again after 1962. By way of example, I would like to refer to the tourist development of the Tawang monastery, a resort in Arunachal Pradesh. For years a controversy has raged on whether a good road should be built to this resort. The security forces categorically oppose such plans for fear that the Chinese might take advantage of the road in case of an offensive. Similarly, good roads are not being built to the Manas sanctuary in Assam for fear that the 'terrorists' will use them. Thus, tourism, potentially a major source of income, is discouraged in the name of security. Jobs that could be created are lost and discontent is caused among the youth.

Apart from the security and immigration dimension to the question of land use what is problematic is the type of development that is happening in the Northeast today. The region is being turned into a supplier of raw material and semi-finished products. The people feel that even the 48 mega-dams that are being planned in the Northeast are meant to produce power for use outside of the region or even the country. More importantly, the new development projects will result in land shortages, while creating very few jobs. A case in point is Tripura where development resulted in insurgency. Hindu Bangladeshi immigrants—who are to be distinguished from the first wave of East Pakistani refugees—have been coming and occupying land for decades, bringing down the proportion of tribals in the population from 58% in 1951 to 31% today. In 1960, the land laws of the state were changed, making encroachment by the immigrants more easy. As a result, the tribals had lost more than 60% of their land by 1970 and that is when the Dumbur dam project was announced. The project displaced some 9,000 families (40,000 people) but only 2,554 of them were given compensation. The rest were not even counted. This was the last straw. The people rose in revolt. In the Assam movement from 1979-85, the tipping point was the issue of Bangladeshi immigrants post the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. But the problems started much earlier. A study shows that fewer than 20% of the workers employed in the 1960s development projects were locals. Workers were brought from outside, while the local workforce was bypassed. Assamese writings of the late 1960s and early 1970s already betray a deep resentment toward the state. That is also the time when one sees a discussion unfolding on the issue of indigeneity, pitting against one another those who are indigenous to the Northeast and those coming from outside.

Now what can we say about the new development projects that are being envisaged? Forty-eight massive dams are planned for the next decade alone. Three of them were just declared 'national assets'. A very great amount of land and resources will be needed for these projects, much of it tribal land and community resources that are not counted for compensation purposes. These projects will not even create jobs. For example, in the Assam Gas Cracker project (a joint venture that was set up with the expectation of boosting local employment as a result of investment in downstream plastic processing industries), the creation of each job is expected to cost about Rs. 1.5 million. Assam alone has three million unemployed people. There simply is no money to put people into work. And yet, more land is taken over and more people are being displaced, most of them falling through the cracks of any statistic. According to official records, Assam has used 3,90,000 acres of land for development projects. The actual figure is closer to 1.4 million. The difference exists because common land which is people's sustenance is not counted as it is considered state property. Most of those who lose it are tribal communities. As a result, the number of displaced persons in Assam stands at about 4,00,000 by official count, when in reality it is closer to 1.9 million, more than half of them tribals.

What does the future hold for the people who are not even counted? The data for 1947-2000 show that 56% of the displaced families have pulled their children out of school to turn them into child labourers. Illiterate and unqualified, they will find it hard later on to get a proper job. Tribals feel the impact more than others. They constitute half of the displaced who had been sustaining themselves on common land. They are the ones who have suffered the greatest losses. In the end, they are the ones who are revolting. It is easy to blame the immigrants, but the fact is that the law makes encroachment on the land possible. Common land is considered state property. The communities have no voice when the immigrants come and occupy it. It is irrelevant to them whether the newcomers are Bihari, Nepali or Bangladeshi. What matters is that they are losing their livelihood. The resulting shortages lead to ethnic conflicts. Again, the immigrants are portrayed as a source of conflict but it is mainly the present-day type of development that causes trouble.

As far as peace talks are concerned, the state may enter into negotiations with insurgent groups—as was the case with the Boro Liberation Tigers—but that does not accomplish much when the state negotiates with only one group which some feel has been set up by the state itself. In such a scenario, any resulting 'peace accord' is eyewash. It does not address the basic issues. The political, social and cultural issues relating to autonomy, identity and land are not part of the negotiations between the state and the militant groups. Those who can raise these issues are ignored. Civil society is either sidelined or presented as belonging to the other side, the insurgents. The economy is important, but we have to find another type of economy that is linked to the land, the culture of the land and the identity of the people. This I think is a search in which civil society should and can get involved.

## **Namrata Goswami: “Understanding the Ground Realities: The Naga and the Dimasa Peace Processes”**

In this presentation, I am going to provide an overview of the realities on the ground in the Naga and Dimasa inhabited areas of Northeast India. Of course, ‘reality’ is a very subjective word—it will always reflect the reality as I see and interpret it. That said, for supporting my arguments, I mostly draw on my field work in Nagaland and the North Cachar Hills, including approximately 100 interviews I held with Naga and Dimasa households in several villages and my visit to Camp Hebron, the headquarters of the NSCN (IM). I also draw insights from my attendance as an observer at the Sixth Naga Peoples’ Consultative Meeting held in Camp Hebron in July 2007. My first argument with regard to the Naga peace negotiations is that not much is forthcoming in the negotiations between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM). Both sides are holding on to their entrenched positions and appear more interested in posturing to their respective constituencies rather than trying to come to a solution of the problems at hand. Secondly, the peace negotiations are too much in the public eye. I do not think negotiations conducted so visibly can really be successful. There are too many actors and vested interests involved. There are also too many constituencies that each group is trying to reach out to and the respective actors are locked into their publicly stated positions.

As for the people’s perspective, two things came out in the interviews I conducted in 2007. First, the Naga population is disillusioned with the way both the NSCN (IM) and the security forces are functioning. I was told that that NSCN (IM)’s positions and statements were arrived at in a ‘culture of the gun’ rather than a democratic process. Interestingly, when questioned about the people’s perspective, one of the NSCN (IM) commanders told me that in long-standing conflicts where power and interests are entrenched, it was not enough to trust the appeal of emotions and claims to self-determination. He said and I quote, “For you to sustain your secessionist campaign, you simply have to resort to coercion and violence”. It seems to me that his statement is borne out by the way intra-state conflict plays out all over the world. Whether you take Bosnia, the Shining Path in Peru or the NSCN (IM), rebel groups everywhere resort to violence to establish loyalties. My second finding was that none of the people residing in proximity to the NSCN (IM) headquarters seemed to fear for their lives. I admit that my respondents may have abstained from negative comments for fear of retaliation but then again they did complain about extortion from the NSCN (IM) who sends out their rebel cadres at night demanding ‘taxes’. I was told that a government clerk making Rs. 8,000 a month would pay the militants 10 per cent of his salary as ‘tax’. The percentage of salary cuts increases as one goes up the pay scale. I also asked many questions about the concept of sovereignty, which in my understanding is the main bottleneck of the peace talks and I was impressed by how deeply some of my interviewees thought about the ramifications of the ‘war on terror’, post 9/11, for the separatist violent discourse. The Ao Naga Hoho President, for instance, told me that in the 1960s and 1970s, sovereignty could have been a strong variable in supporting the Naga movement, but raising the issue of

sovereignty in the present context could be problematic given the fact that India was a rising power. To some extent, even the NSCN (IM) leadership admitted that the contours of the entire structure of world politics had changed. There is wariness at the world stage towards non-state armed groups.

Turning to the substance of the peace talks, the NSCN (IM) demands a unified 'Nagalim' (Greater Nagaland) comprising of Naga inhabited areas in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland and across the border in Myanmar. When you talk to the Jeme Nagas in the villages of the North Cachar Hills (Assam), you will hear that they generally support unification with Nagaland and a Naga state, but they fear forcible conversion to Christianity and extortion, especially those getting compensation for land taken over by the state for use in a railway project. On the other hand, I was disturbed to see that the peace negotiators from the government did not have any kind of framework for the negotiations. And when I probed deeper into why there was no framework they vaguely referred to the Saami Council (a non-governmental umbrella organisation comprising Saami groups from Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden). Well, the Saami Parliament in Norway would perhaps have been a better example for political representation across territories as demanded by the NSCN (IM), but even that has its limitations in terms of political and financial powers. I think that what the government of India is trying to do in the peace process is not a very serious effort at resolving the Naga issue. It is more about being able to manage the issue at this point of time and making it clear that they are having a military presence in Nagaland. And how can you meaningfully talk about development in these areas when you have an overt military presence, even in educational institutions, especially in the Naga villages? I do not know how people are ever going to be comfortable living in a state which is supposed to be democratic and yet so military in its behaviour.

When it comes to the Dimasa areas in the North Cachar Hills, there is even more flux. First of all, there are more than 30 ethnic groups living in that area. Secondly, you have seen the situation getting politicised from the 1990s onwards. I kind of grew up in the Dimasa area and I recall that up to the 1990s this region was free of violence. You have had different communities—Dimasas, Hmars, Kukis, Jemi Nagas—all living together in peace. But now institutions like the District Council seem to have started favouring one particular constituency over others and there is a heavy Dimasa majority bias in the North Cachar Hills. Power clashes between communities and between clans within the Dimasa community occur in regular intervals. The problem is compounded by disputes over access to limited resources. Now what can we do about the situation in the Dimasa areas? From what I can see the picture is pretty grim. The peace process with the 'Dima Halam Daogah' (Nunisa faction) is faced with many of the issues we have seen in the Naga process.

Firstly, you have a classic case of insurgency fuelling counter-insurgency. Secondly, you have issues of representation in the Dimasa group. The women's organisation, which came into being much before the Dimasa group, is openly questioning the legitimacy of the Dimasa group representing them. The so-called Dimasa representatives are not elected; they occupy their

'positions' by resorting to the use of force. And the people in civil society, whom we are talking about so much, whom we feel can be empowered, will have to take sides. They will have to make a choice between supporting a particular rebel group or the army. Many civil society groups in the Dimas and Naga areas have told me that they are forced to write the occasional op-ed article in a newspaper in support of one side or the other. And then suspicion creeps in. Common people often find themselves in paradoxical situations. I will give you the example of a father from Langting area of the North Cachar Hills in Assam. The father has two sons, one working with the local police and the other associated with an insurgent outfit. Now that man is looked at with suspicion by both sides before he has even done anything himself. Ultimately, you have the gun forcing you into one loyalty or the other or you may end up having multiple loyalties, none of which may be of your own choosing. The sad news is that the message of these peace processes for the young and politically active is that the more you can project violence, the more you are capable of bargaining. But everything said and done, even the strongest rebel group is weak in comparison with the centre. In a situation of inequality, there is no shared sovereignty.

By way of conclusion, I will maintain that the main principle governing peace processes in the Northeast is asymmetry of power. The state may be prepared to make small concessions but it will not be what the rebel groups want and the outcome will be determined by the interests of the state. So I think we really need to ask first why violence is taken up by people despite this stark reality of power and we also need to debate on why it is that we are justifying and rationalising the means that both the state and the non-state actors are adopting instead of questioning the rationale of power and self-interest that is wrapped around these notions of separatism, ethnic movement and representative state structures.

#### **Fasiha Qadri: "Peace and Conflict Narratives: A View from Kashmir"**

I was thinking that the participants may be wondering what Kashmir is doing in this seminar on the situation and the issues in the Northeast. Before going into the heart of the matter, let me just say that while I was listening to whosoever spoke so far, I felt that the issues taken up here mostly relate to Kashmir. We could be having a debate about Kashmir along very similar lines. The security issues, the problems that ordinary people are faced with are essentially the same. And that feeling is very much intensified after hearing everybody here sharing their experiences and insights, particularly Sunita talking about the psychological impact of the conflict on the people and Akum telling us about the village of Lungwa cut into two or three by arbitrarily drawn borders. That precisely describes the agony Kashmiris are facing since the turmoil began. The only qualification I would like to make here is with regard to the origin of the dispute and the anamnesis of the resistance movement. This is very different in Kashmir. And the issues relating to development and development-induced

displacement we have heard about from Walter do not really apply to Kashmir either because there development is at a halt.

I was wondering what kind of a perspective I could give you from Kashmir in light of the seminar's theme: contested identity and space. As far as identity goes, we Kashmiris are in a profound dilemma. You will be aware that there is Indian-administered Kashmir and Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The dividing line between the two is called the Line of Control (LoC). Families have been divided by that line and a lot of agony and divisiveness has been caused. People have been rendered dead to each other for all practical purposes while they are of course very much alive in their respective divided places. Kashmiris do not really identify with either of the two entities as they are. Kashmir to them is the whole of the divided region of J&K. Let me illustrate that point by an example. When I have to introduce myself to somebody I say I am from Kashmir. Most of the time people are not satisfied with my response. They ask me, "Which Kashmir are you from?" But that really is an impossible question to answer. I cannot express in words what I am feeling then. I feel divided and I feel alienation from my own path and it is very painful. I guess that is the meaning of the word 'identity crisis'. If I have to explain which part of Kashmir I'm from—and anything I say is taken as a political statement—does it not mean that I don't have an identity to begin with?

Let me now say a word about the peace process between the state and the non-state actors in the Kashmiri context. The state has offered talks, mostly not unconditional. Some non-state actors have taken it up on that offer and others have not. I understand that there never is a guarantee for talks to yield results. However, the talks, the dialogue, the process must be purposeful, meaningful, with a specific agenda and not just to buy time. Years and years of negotiations have delivered nothing substantial on the ground so far. To the contrary, the state has successfully used divisive tactics to drive a wedge between the various non-state actors. At this point, I would say that the peace process has proven to be a sham. Its only objective seems to be to hoodwink the international community. And it is the people who bear the brunt of that policy. Conflict breeds more conflict. Just like Sunita has done with respect to Manipur, I would like to give you an example of the psychological impact of violence on the Kashmiris. In the one and only psychiatric hospital run by the government in Kashmir we have had a few dozen patients in the course of two or three years before the resistance movement started. Now the number of people seeking treatment goes into the thousands and you have to make an appointment with a psychiatrist three or four months in advance. Rita very rightly spoke about how conflict is entering the domestic domain. In Kashmir you see how family life is getting politicised and disrupted because conflict is being taken into the homes. The whole of Kashmir has become a garrison. The mere look of the otherwise beautiful place works heavily on the minds of the common people. And the ripple effect is manifest in every aspect of their lives. People no longer have patience to listen to one another. There is so much mistrust, suspicion, uncertainty, lack of hope and confidence. There has been an alarming increase in suicide rates in Kashmir because of the conflict, and not just among civilians. The security forces also find it hard to cope with the

situation they are working in. Very often now we hear about security personnel committing suicide or killing their superiors, subordinates or peers. This phenomenon speaks volumes about the intolerable, pathetic and highly stressful living environment in Kashmir.

When you look at the map you will see that Kashmir and the Northeast are far apart. I do not have an opportunity to interact with people from the Northeast very often. But once I met a Naga who told me about the situation there and when she had finished I realised that there was nothing left for me to say. This is when I first identified myself with the Naga issue and the issues in the Northeast at large. Human rights are talked about but nothing much is being done to protect them. We have reason to believe that thousands of people have been forcibly disappeared in Kashmir. There is so much pain involved in enforced disappearances. When a person is killed it is terribly difficult for the family to make peace with the fact that he is gone. But the agony is even greater for a family that does not know whether the disappeared person is dead or still alive. They simply cannot move on with their lives. If the disappeared was married his wife is called a 'half-widow'; she is neither with her husband nor legally a widow. You cannot imagine the plight and unending suffering for the family.

AFSPA is operative in Kashmir, just like in some northeastern states, along with a whole gamut of other 'black laws'. There are many habeas corpus cases pending in the J&K High Court, but there is very little follow-up. Illegal detention is rampant and people are held for years without trial in Kashmir. Even if a judge orders a detainee to be released forthwith, what happens in most cases is that he is arrested on another count before even leaving the court room or the detention centre (a detainee is rarely brought to court on the date of his case being heard which is a blatant violation of the right to fair trial). Human rights commissions are toothless tigers. They have no powers to implement their decisions which are only recommendatory in nature. And in the majority of cases the state chooses not to honour these recommendations. The whole justice delivery mechanism has been rendered almost defunct, both at the procedural and the implementation level. On that note, I would like to ask everybody here if we can identify some common ground, work out a common agenda and develop a common framework because the state institutions have failed to make a difference on the ground. We have our own specific contexts in the Northeast and in Kashmir, but maybe we can find linkages between the issues in Kashmir and the Northeast and devise a set of mechanisms to deal with these issues. That really was my motivation to come here and I would like to go home with some sort of proposal from your side, some suggestion, something.

**Radha Kumar: “The Challenge of the Northeast from a Comparative Conflict Resolution Perspective”**

Several comparative points have been made in this session thus far. Our chair began by talking about international models of solutions and from there we went to very specific discussions of the Naga and the J&K set of issues. I will begin with the domestic points of comparison that can be made. One very obvious point is that you have had negotiations between Naga representatives and the government of India for about 20 years in this phase and maybe 50 years altogether, whereas in the case of J&K there have been very few negotiations. The Azadi groups in J&K are divided on whether and what to negotiate. So there is no continuous body of talks which might lead to some conclusions, whereas in the Naga instance there is a lot of activity as well as negotiations that have taken place, over a very long period of time. Let me make it clear here that I do not use the term ‘Northeast’. I talk about the ‘northeastern states’, for lack of a more satisfactory term. The challenge I have for scholars from the northeastern states is that there is much criticism of people from mainland India for holding a centre-periphery view and lumping all North-Easterners together. We are supposed to be talking about ‘prisms of perception’ in this session and I would like to ask our colleagues from the Northeast to produce a different set of nomenclature because when I hear northeastern scholars speak I hear a repetition of the centre-periphery view. It is high time that some new creative approaches are developed.

We have heard Walter in his talk on development touch on a series of issues, such as the question of Arunachal Pradesh and the Indian government’s relationship both with China and Myanmar. In this context, I would like to emphasise that the various sets of fears that operate in these countries in relation to each other are clearly a strong constraint on ways to try and deal with local aspirations in Arunachal. On the other hand, if we look at the conflicts around the Naga self-determination claims and movements from pre-independence until today, we have baskets of different issues that need to be looked at. Namrata has talked about the very specific set of talks and negotiations between the NSCN (IM) and the Indian government. What she could not cover in the limited time at her disposal was the fallout of those negotiations on neighbouring areas, Manipur for example, where the Naga set of issues has had repercussions for a whole other set of self-determination conflicts between different groups. And the two—the negotiations with NSCN and the Manipur issue—cannot be conflated; they have to be dealt with separately. At the same time, there is a close connection to the talks being held with the Naga leadership. Now here is the number-one question for anyone who deals with conflict resolution: how is it that no one is thinking that you need parallel tracks of peace talks if you wish any one of those tracks to provide a satisfactory solution? You are not going to be successful on one track if the other track does not exist. Here we see some parallels with J&K. One of the arguments on peace-making for J&K has been that if you do not look at different tracks of parallel negotiations, it is going to be very difficult to achieve a breakthrough. If track one is to be India and Pakistan, another track



will have to be Delhi-Srinagar and Muzaffarabad-Islamabad. A third set of tracks is Ladakh, Jammu and the Valley. These three sets of tracks are absolutely essential if you want the India-Pakistan, and the Azad Kashmir and J&K tracks to work. Of course nobody ever talks about Aksai Chin, which is controlled by China, and the Northern Areas that are held by Pakistan, partly because they are not heavily populated. But strategically these are extremely significant areas, which is why India objects to dropping either Aksai Chin or the Northern Areas from the peace process. All this is to show that if you have a set of tracks which addresses one part of a problem without looking at the ancillary or other parts of the problem, your chances of getting to a satisfactory solution are going to be relatively limited.

The overall lack of tracks of course cannot be allowed to serve as a justification to impede progress that you might be able to make on a track on which there is a possibility for development or a breakthrough. It happens just the same that parties to a conflict, especially powerful communities that are unwilling perhaps to enter into a peace process knowing that something will have to be given up, use the absence of other opportunities or other tracks as an excuse to stall progress on the one track they are having a chance to move on with. But keep in mind that if we are talking progress only on one track then it is always going to have to be limited progress. It does not mean that you should not try your best anyway; it just means that you need to be clear on the goal that you can achieve and then work towards that. Don't think that you are going to be able to achieve a comprehensive set of solutions when this is beyond your reach!

Another point that I would like to stress is that we tend to be rather impatient. We demand far more from peacemaking than we expect from war. Whether we support or don't support wars, we say 'ok, the war should end'. Yes, it would be good if it ended in victory, that is to say if there was a clear ending to a war, but even if you don't get a clear ending, it would be good if the war ended. That is the general approach. When it comes to peace-making we don't say that. What we say is, 'This party is being selfish, why are they considering their self interest, they should be considering the greater good of humanity'. But why should you put so much onus and responsibility on peacemakers and not on war mongers? This strikes me as a very strange approach. History shows that it requires 20 to 25 years to bring a peace process to a successful conclusion. The only successful outcome that we have had in post-Cold War history is the peace process in Northern Ireland which has actually taken 25 years to come to fruition and is entering only now into a phase of successful implementation. Only now do we see the political dividend beginning to be reaped. The process is not over yet, but at this point it is very unlikely to unravel. That is certainly something we cannot say about the peace processes we are discussing in this session. However, in comparison to J&K, the Naga peace process draws enormous strength from the fact that there has been a ceasefire now for ten years, which has been renewed over and over again. Violations have occurred—as is the case with all long-term ceasefires—but there have been relatively few. That should have given a solid base for

political negotiations to arrive at more than what we have been able to get thus far.

The obstacle to overcome in Nagaland is twofold. One is the sovereignty issue, which was partially solved through the creation of Nagaland and the other is the reunification issue, which has gained salience, ironically, as a result of the creation of Nagaland. As far as the question of reunification is concerned, several states in the Northeast of India are involved but very little formal effort has been made to launch a consultative process with the states neighbouring Nagaland. The notion has been that the North-Eastern Council will handle it one way or another. But this is clearly a stillborn idea. You do not ask a bureaucracy that has been set up for one purpose to address a completely different, much more political set of issues. It is not going to succeed. On the other hand, it remains an interesting question as to why, in a region where you have had the perhaps strongest civil society initiatives in the whole of India, it has not been possible to bring together the civil societies from all the areas that are affected by the Naga demands to discuss how this peace process can be moved forward in a way that the issue of reunification can be dealt with without creating more vulnerability and conflict for diaspora groups in the neighbouring areas.

All deficiencies notwithstanding, however, we can say that people engaged in peace processes in India have been able to have a greater impact on formal negotiations than in peace talks abroad, whether you take Israel and Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo or even Ireland. There can be no doubt, for instance, that if there have been continuous talks between Mr. Padmanabhaiah and the NSCN (IM) it is because of the strength of Naga civil society groups. They have pushed at every point for peaceful resolution of the conflict. In the case of J&K, there would have been very little reason for the governments of India and Pakistan to engage in negotiations had it not been for two factors. One is the nuclear tests, which brought international pressure on both governments as well as dissident groups in J&K. The second reason is Indian and Pakistani civil society, which began lobbying and working at a consistent pace about ten years before the present phase of composite dialogue, continuous talks and back channel efforts began. The Jammu-Srinagar bus was an old idea that was revived by civil society groups in India and Kashmir. The Pakistani government was extremely reluctant to even consider the project, but changed their position within a few weeks because the Azad Kashmiri leadership, all of whom had been appointed by the Pakistani authorities, mainly the army, went to President Musharraf and told him that there was no way they could sell a refusal to do the bus in Azad Kashmir. This is how President Musharraf came to back the bus. Such a straight, clear civil society impact we have not been able to see either in the Oslo peace talks or in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Oslo peace talks actually started from back channel civil society initiatives. But the minute they reached the formal stage, the civil society element disappeared and there was very little pressure from Israeli civil society brought to bear on the Israeli government to implement the Oslo deadlines. In

Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, civil society was the critical element for keeping alive the notions of pluralism, shared space, what you may want to call the good ways of finding a solution. But when it came to peace negotiations and an agreement all those groups were marginalised. They no longer had any input to make. I will conclude on the counter-intuitive note that while you might be tempted to judge our societies and our governments as being perhaps the most impervious, in fact empirical and historical information on the ground would suggest quite the opposite. In South Asia, we have more flexibility and ability than elsewhere to handle things if there are proper inputs being made, but that's a big qualifier.

## **Panel Discussion**

### **The Northeast and the Bigger Picture**

**Ram Narayan Kumar**

My first proposition is that India which was born in 1947 actually imbibed the character of the conquest state and the values it represented. My proposition is that the form that India took included its notions of mission and conquest, both of course learnt from the European imperialist experience. It is the same whether you talk of Westphalia, the legitimacy of force by the state, the Arms Act or whether you talk about development in wider terms. It includes it all and connected with this notion is exceptionalism—India can get away with it just as the British could get away with it. I believe India represents that exceptionalism in the way it looks at notions of democracy and development, the way it privileges state power over people's rights.

Secondly, I maintain that the Indian state in its dealings with the people of the Northeast, in war as well as in peace, has consistently acted on the conviction that it carries the burden of 'spreading civilisation' and has to assist, reform and if need be chastise the assorted 'backwards' peopling India's periphery or, for that matter, its interior. What I see in the Northeast are clusters of people moulding their identities through historical experiences and making assertions against the state, and in that I see continuities of peoples' struggles, which India and Indian people today have subsumed under the state vaguely represented in history, in fragmented ways. What do I mean by that? When the Naga representatives signed the Hydari Agreement (also known as Nine-Point-Agreement) in 1947 they did so in a climate of uncertainty. The agreement—a negotiated space to think about the future of Nagaland and decide at a later stage—was signed before India had a constitution. Sarvepalli Gopal, the well-known historian, explained that the one thing certain about the Indian state in 1947 was its state of uncertainty. What is federalism? What are the armed forces? What kind of laws? But if India did not have clarity how could the Nagas negotiating with then Governor of Assam Akbar Hydari have had that clarity? Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru talked about ten years of space to rethink the terms of further negotiations. But what did India do? It questioned that. It destroyed that. A signed agreement was rebutted almost completely by the Bardoloi Committee and whatever the Bardoloi Committee said was further diluted by a parliament being manipulated by bigwigs the likes of Ambedkar, Patel and Nehru.

Now it is being said that short of secession India has left everything on the table for talks. But India was not willing to talk and respect the terms even of the 1947 Hydari agreement, which did not mention secession at all. I

think the same is true for Kashmir or for Punjab. As a civilisational proposition, I hold that India represents faith in itself, exceptionalism in its capacity to transgress laws, its own laws, while the people—Nagas, Kashmiris, Sikhs or others—represent doubtfulness, civilisation as scepticism about this model of power, this notion of exceptionalism, this finality about the idea of development, this pragmatism, which undermines the norms underlying the law. Pragmatism is the value of the market. You bargain, you negotiate and you don't talk continuously about ethics and norms. That pragmatism is inherent in exceptionalism.

Thirdly, I would argue that the Naga interlocutors have made their position weaker by failing to insist on transparency, accountability and adequate respect for human rights. The ceasefire agreement signed in 1997 made no provisions of accountability for a five decades long history of violent conflict and attendant human rights atrocities. The agreement did not even contain any clause to protect the civilian population from abuse of authority by the armed forces and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, which as an armed force retained several privileges, including the right to bear arms within certain areas and conditions. My fear is that solutions are becoming possible now, because just as India ceased to be anti-colonial in thinking after it became a state, so also I feel that Nagas, Kashmiris, Sikhs and other people who are talking in terms of their urge to change what the state dispenses in its exceptionalism, its faith in power, its faith in a civilisational mission, are getting remoulded. I believe that Nagas today are less sure of their identity, political and entrepreneurial paradigms than they had been during the last round of peace talks inaugurated in 1964 and led by more honest and competent leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, B. P. Chaliha and Michael Scott than the bureaucrats who have been leading the peace process since 1997. I think the Nagas of the 1960s when they negotiated with the government of India were a little bit more 'Naga' in their practice of democracy than they are today. Of course this is a little provocative to say but Nagas are today more 'Indian', just as the Sikhs of Punjab are more 'Indian' when they are asking for radical decentralisation of power, in the same terms which they rejected very violently in 1946-47, while also demanding the pre-eminence of Sikhs in Punjab. I think what we have here is some kind of 'Indianisation' of thinking, 'Indianisation' in a civilisational sense.

If you are talking in terms of practices of democracy, the spirit of the Sixth Schedule, if you are talking about questioning exceptionalism, applying fundamental rights and the primacy of fundamental rights, then I think the Nagas have failed, the Kashmiris have failed, and the Punjabis have failed, because when the chance was given to Sikhs, they talked about political settlement, when the chance was given to Nagas, they are talking about political settlements, and these settlements inevitably will be power-sharing settlements. I am not making an argument against pragmatic settlements that end bloody conflicts through power-sharing arrangements and through negotiations if they can effectively pacify political angers of an agitated community, as the government of India seems to have done with the Mizo insurgency. They are better than pacification through repression and subterfuge

as it happened in Punjab and Kashmir. I am merely reflecting on travails of history and the need for accountability and for respect towards the idealism of those who have perished in the course of the long war as well as the aspirations of the current and the future generations through more honesty in the discourse than has been in evidence.

In conclusion, when I look at the scenario of wars and peace juxtaposing indigenous groups of people and conquest states I cannot help reflecting over a stanza in Mahabharat, an old India war epic, which says: “To those who fall in war, victory or defeat makes no difference. All the good people—the courageous, the upright, the humble and the compassionate—die first. The unscrupulous survive. Victory becomes the defeat of the good.” I hope that peace processes underway in India’s Northeast would at least partially attenuate this ancient wisdom on war. So I think the point for reflection should be whereas we all change and engage in political processes of implementing our civilisational missions, whatever they may be, and question the practices of abuse of power, are we going to be a little bit more reflective about what we are actually asking for, fighting for? While willing to make compromises are we going to keep some space for asking fundamental questions about what these struggles are all for? And how can we possibly not talk about primacy of fundamental rights, human dignity, restoration and reparation, how can we keep the civilians out and privately talk for ten years, 15 years? If you want to do just that I wish you success but I do not think anything meaningful is going to come out of it.

### **Sanjib Baruah**

The title of this session is ‘The Big Picture’ and the big picture cannot but be speculative. As a teacher, I tell my students to start their theses by asking the big questions that bother them, then the main part of a thesis—the nuts-and-bolts part need to be backed by solid evidence—but as they come to the conclusion of their theses they can be speculative again. In that spirit I will speculate during this session. When you look at the world as a whole, you will find that many conflicts never get resolved. They simply disappear, they stop becoming news. It will probably be fair to say that we do not think about particular conflicts very much once they cease to be news, except of course the way a historian would do. So the question I have been asking myself is whether that could happen to the conflicts in the Northeast, whether they might cease to be interesting for people to talk about, without necessarily getting resolved. My hypothesis is that it is possible.

One thing that occurred to me when I heard Ms. Qadri saying that in Kashmir there is no development story was that in the Northeast the development story is real—but I mean this in a particular sense. Until a few years ago it would have been fair to talk about ‘neglect’ as a main feature of the discourse on the Northeast. It is very hard to talk about neglect now, when the

region is being flooded with money—many in the government now see development as the magic bullet. I am not saying that is a good or bad thing, but something serious is happening. And I will present some evidence, but circumstantial evidence, to be sure. For example, try to fly to most Indian cities, apart from the big metros. To get from Guwahati to Trivandrum, for instance, I recently took the following itinerary: Guwahati-Kolkata, Kolkata-Hyderabad, Hyderabad-Bangalore and then Bangalore-Trivandrum. Well, to Guwahati from Delhi now you have about 15 direct flights a day and counting. I take some of those flights and when I talk to my fellow passengers I find that many of the new kind of travellers to the Northeast are Indian businessmen with the Northeast as a relatively new part of their portfolio. My impression from talking to them is that now it economically makes sense to produce certain things in the Northeast, in a way that it did not a few years ago. The products are not necessarily for the local market, but for the pan-Indian market. Recently I was talking to somebody who produces mosquito repellants in the Northeast, and very little of it is being used there—not that we don't need it—but its being marketed to the rest of the country. So whatever else may be going on in the Northeast over the last few years, the tax incentives for investing in the region are attractive and they may be showing real results. There is a huge investment in infrastructure and even though four-lane highways may be a thing of the future, road connectivity to certain parts of the region may have improved to make the transportation infrastructure good enough for investments to become economically viable, given the tax incentives.

For a long time my position has been that what goes on in the name of development in the Northeast is mostly an insurgency dividend because clearly a huge amount of money is being spent in the Northeast just to deal with insurgency. I am not sure one can argue that anymore. At least that would not encompass all that is happening on the economic front. What is being done in the name of development of the Northeast has taken a life of its own and we have not really begun to understand or analyse it. Let me take a few examples without quoting figures. Just look at the department of the Development of the Northeastern Region (DONER)—which other part of the country has an entire central government department focused on its development? Then consider the announcements that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made during his recent visit to Arunachal Pradesh. Consider the dams in Arunachal that are being built. When the Indian environmental movement opposes dams, displacement typically becomes the primary focus in the mobilisation of opposition. But displacement would be an unconvincing argument to make in Arunachal because it is such a sparsely populated state. Most of the negative effects of the dams being built in Arunachal will be downstream in Assam. One can argue that dams are needed for India's power requirements, but my fear is that very little thinking is devoted to what happens downstream, and in Arunachal itself there is significant support for these dams because the state's small population—at least those with rights to permanent residence there—could benefit significantly from its share of gains from power generation. But the fact that the repercussions downstream are not a part of the debate is one of the long-term effects of the reorganisation of the region into states with small populations. Anyway the point I am trying to make is that something real is

happening and it is possible that many of the big projects might disappoint the great expectations of the locals and may even have serious negative consequences, but that does not mean they could not marginalise the conflict story. It is a hypothesis. So how might this happen?

Consider some examples from the recent history of conflict in the region. If you are my generation you will remember Mizoram as a place where the Indian government used the re-grouping of villages, Vietnam style, to deal with the Mizo insurgency. In those days human rights groups were very upset about the forced re-grouping of villages. But now if you talk to the young generation they refer to Mizoram as the region's most urbanised state. But urbanisation in Mizoram is not the product of anything that would conventionally be called development, but it is the result of re-grouping villages. Yet nobody thinks of Mizoram's urbanisation as being the by-product of counter-insurgency. That we have had counter-insurgency induced urbanisation in Mizoram has slipped from our public consciousness. Let me take another example. Living in Guwahati I have seen dramatic changes in the city over the last few years. When I observe the workers in all sorts of new fast food outlets, new car dealerships and numerous such new businesses and also in occupations like car driving, I am surprised how many are from areas that had gone through serious insurgency and counter-insurgency operations in recent years. Not long ago, there were reports from those areas of young men running to the cities to escape the Indian army's counter-insurgency operations. Is it possible that many of them are now part of Guwahati's new working class? If that is the case, this may be another example of an aspect of urbanisation being a by-product of counter-insurgency.

Another example may be illustrative. As many of you know there are huge numbers of IDPs in camps in the Bodoland area and many of us thought that it was time to dissolve the camps now that the Bodo conflict was over. But the camps continued for a long time, until about two years ago when the government began giving money to people in the camps, not under any scheme of rehabilitation or for returning to their villages, but simply to leave the camps. The displaced apparently can get Rs. 10,000 or some such amount simply to disappear from the camp. The IDPs indeed began deserting the camps. No one knows where they went—probably toward Kolkata, toward Guwahati—but most likely somewhere urban, but certainly not to their pre-displacement lives. So I think many such interesting and unanticipated changes are happening—they have nothing to do with conflict resolution and or peace studies formulas. I have given a few examples of population movements that may show up as urbanisation, but they have in them the traces of either unresolved conflicts or of conflicts that ended but have unresolved dimensions. So with these examples, mostly circumstantial evidence, I leave you with the hypothesis that many conflicts in the Northeast will not get resolved—but their story could just cease to be important.



## Sanjoy Hazarika

I would like to tell you a brief story. When I was a member of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act Review Committee, we visited Manipur a number of times. And it was the first and the only time in my life that I had security, which was really obnoxious because they would follow you everywhere. So when I wanted to go for a walk in the morning they said, “Sir, you cannot go for a walk, Sir”. I said, “Why can’t I go for a walk?” and I was told that there is a threat to the Committee that they will be kidnapped. They just would not let me go. The next day I left at five in the morning, everybody was asleep. So I walked to the most wonderful place in Imphal, the war cemetery. It is actually very poignant that the only place in Imphal where you can have some sort of mental peace is a cemetery, dedicated to people who gave their lives, more than 50 years ago, in a war that they perhaps could not comprehend.

I think that little story tells you something about the importance of space because all the contests in the Northeast—whether it is development or the Naga issue—are about negotiating political space. And to create that space, one of the primary recommendations of our Committee was the revocation of an obnoxious piece of legislation which is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. We thought there needs to be space for people to converse without this mechanism of oppression hanging over their heads. Give people a chance to speak freely and openly. The Prime Minister I think did a decent, a very fine thing by appointing the Committee and it was the first time that a central government had been responding to a public demand for the removal of a National Security Act. We cannot forget that. They have failed to make the report public but you can read it on the website of ‘The Hindu’ and it’s in circulation all over the place. I believe that if we see this process really as part of a campaign to create political space for negotiation, where multiple identities can coexist and multiple demands—and people—can live side by side, we will perhaps be getting somewhere.

Talking about negotiating space, one of the major issues that has troubled the Northeast deeply, especially Assam, is the problem of illegal migration from Bangladesh. According to estimates based on fertility rates and increase of population along the borders and elsewhere, there are at least about 1.5 million Bangladeshis who came to Assam post 1971. India as a whole has perhaps 18-20 million. But the thing in Assam and the Northeast is that if you speak of anybody coming from Dhubri or the border areas, the immediate reaction you are getting is that these are places populated by Bangladeshis. You will hear that the Bangladeshis are over there, working only in that area. But how many Bangladeshis are really there? People tend to forget that there are substantial numbers of Indians who live there who just happen to speak a different language and have a faith which is not Hindu. And to me the demonisation of people is of great concern because it cuts at the very root of what we should all believe in, which is democratic space.

I am not saying that Bangladeshis should come and be allowed to settle in India or Assam at will. What I am saying is that by stigmatising and

stereotyping people we have actually created a new front within our borders. How many of us know that the areas which are populated largely by people of Bengali origin and Muslim faith have the poorest human development indices in Assam and perhaps in the Northeast? Literacy levels are abysmally low, while maternal and infant mortality rates are high. This is why I think it is extremely important to understand that by stereotyping groups we are creating actually new security and social problems for the region and for the country. I am flagging this issue because I believe we need to deal with the problem of migration. There are ways of dealing with it, beginning with multiple purpose identity cards and work permits.

I will close with one thought about the birthplace of the first challenge to the idea of India. It is a little village called Khonoma, in Nagaland, the village of Angami Zapu Phizo, who launched the campaign for Naga independence. That village was destroyed by the British, it was destroyed by the Indian Army, but the Angamis of Khonoma have rebuilt their village and it stands proud and tall on a beautiful hillock overlooking terraced rice fields. On the way there are memorials in honour of those who fought the Indian army and died; and in the village there is a memorial in the national colours of the Naga flag, which commemorates the 52 people from that village who died fighting the British and the Indian army. And in this I take hope because in no other part of the country perhaps will you show that much respect for your 'enemy' even if you are in negotiations with him. The Indian state, by mistake or deliberately, has recognised that here is something to honour, something that merits great dignity and respect. And I think an unspoken reality which exists in the Northeast and which many of us often ignore is that these symbols are extremely important to the larger concept of India and the Naga national cause.

## **Discussion**

In the session on peace and perceptions, Sanjoy Hazarika drew attention to a major event on investment that had taken place in Guwahati in January 2008. A map distributed at the meet, he said, showed the 'Northeast' as comprising, apart from the eight sister states, the state of West Bengal, in its entirety. He expressed the concern that the 'Look East' policy of the Indian government would ultimately "be cornered by extremely powerful industrial and political groups from outside the Northeast". He said that West Bengal and the Chief Minister of Bengal had more power and more people than all the states and all the Chief Ministers of the Northeast together. Acknowledging "surplus capital in West Bengal" and maybe "larger interests" in the region, Partha Ghosh cautioned that the state of West Bengal was "more powerful politically, not otherwise". Responding to questions and comments in the panel discussion, Ram Narayan Kumar underscored that "narrative building or narrative construction" were part of a "contest" between the state and the people. He was not surprised, he said, that "effects of state atrocities" and "exceptionalism as part of the state's behaviour" had not been "sufficiently debated". He

contended that “when we talk about the problems and the conflicts we are not sufficiently analysing the fallout of those conflicts, fallouts of the notion of development”. Sanjoy Hazarika emphasised that he had raised the issue of migration “because it affects all of us in India”. He said that the issue of “marginalisation of communities who are Indian but stigmatised” had to be placed in the broader context of immigration. On the culture of debating, he expressed doubts as to whether “there are too many in Assam who will say some of the things we are saying here because the discourse is so controlled.” Pointing to the difference between tolerating other opinions, “which means you don’t really care what the other thinks, he’s just there”, and embracing dissent, he concluded by saying that “we must not only tolerate other points of view, we must respect them.”

## Participants

**Sunita Akoijam** is a journalist who has worked as a staff reporter for the “Imphal Free Press”, a daily newspaper published from Manipur. She has been writing extensively on women, children and health issues in conflict situations.

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**Walter Fernandes** is Director of the North Eastern Social Research Centre in Guwahati. The Centre has published numerous studies of relevance for the understanding of the situation in the Northeast, many of which would not have seen the light of day without Walter’s stewardship. Walter is also a regular contributor to magazines and journals, covering a broad range of issues from development to social injustice and communalism.

**Partha Ghosh** is Professor at the Centre for South, Central, Southeast Asian and Southwest Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He has many publications to his credit, including “The Politics of Personal Law in South Asia: Identity, Nationalism and the Uniform Civil Code (Routledge, 2007).

**Namrata Goswami** is Associate Fellow with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Her areas of interest include international relations theory, ethnic and intra-state conflict as well as conflict prevention, management and resolution. Namrata is co-editor of “India’s North East: New Vistas for Peace” (Manas, 2008) and has authored “Twilight over Guerilla Zone: Retracing the Naga Peace Process”, in Jaideep Saika, ed., “Frontier in Flames: Northeast India in Turmoil” (Penguin, 2007).

**Sanjoy Hazarika** is Managing Trustee of the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research based in Guwahati and Delhi. He is also author, journalist, filmmaker and policy analyst.

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**Ram Narayan Kumar** is Director of a research project titled “Understanding Impunity: Failures and Possibilities of Rights to Truth, Justice and Reparation”, housed by the South Asia Forum for Human Rights, Kathmandu. He is the author of several books on human rights and Punjab, including “Terror in Punjab: Narratives, Knowledge and Truth” (Shipra, 2008) and “Reduced to Ashes: The Insurgency and Human Rights in Punjab” (SAFHR, 2003).

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