

CONFLICT MAPPING AND PEACE PROCESSES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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Eastern Social Research Centre

The Northeast is known in the rest of India only as a region of conflict. That there is violence in the region is beyond doubt but that is not its only identity. The State views the conflicts only as a law and order issue. The authors of papers in the present book try to find out whether it is only a law and order issue or more than that. These case studies done by students and other beginners are an effort to identify the causes of the conflicts and possible solutions to them. The region experiences both nationalist and ethnic conflicts. Though some communities studied here get the support of nationalist militant organisations, the focus in this book is on ethnic conflicts. Some of them are around land and other are for protection of identity or culture. Though one of these issues predominates in each conflict, most of them combine them into one. As a result, nationalist, cultural and political demands merge in them. An understanding of these issues is required in order to find solutions to the conflicts that the region faces.

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Table of Contents

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Page</i>
<i>Dedication</i>		
<i>Acknowledgement</i>		
1. Introduction	L. Jeyaseelan	1
2. Impact of Assam-Nagaland Territorial Dispute in the District of Golaghat, Assam	C. Kindo & D. Minj	8
3. Response of the Youth to the Karbi-Kuki Conflict In Karbi Anglong	Joseph Damzen	54
4. Community's Response of the Karbi-Kuki Conflict in Karbi Anglong	Bulu Terang	94
5. Meitei-Naga Conflict with Special Reference to the Territorial Issue in Manipur	M. Dominic Maring	113
6. Kuki-Naga Conflict with Special Reference to the Chandel District of Manipur	D. Michael Haokip	145
7. Kuki-Paite Conflict in the Churchandpur District of Manipur	Rebecca C. Haokip	185
8. Youth in the Context of the Garo- Khasi Tension in Meghalaya	Amrit Sangma	209
9. The Garo-Khasi Tension: Implica- tions for the youth and Women	Sarah Maria Bang	249

Lazar Jeyaseelan

Conflicts occur because of a variety of reasons. Those who indulge in them justify them as struggles for justice. For some they are a way of life. Most ordinary people want to live in peace but are often dragged into them against their will. Those affected by them tend to see insurgency only as a law and order issue though most conflicts go beyond it. When a problem is not solved for a long time, popular resentment can result in a conflict. If it continues for a long time it can become a vested interest of those who benefit from it. They may include the community leaders, the militants, the security forces and businesspersons. The militants give expression to the resentment that is more often than not, created by social and economic processes. Many common persons resort to a conflict when they, as a nation or people feel aggrieved and none attends to their grievances. Injustice too arouses genuine anger. For example, when faced with atrocities such as rape, murder, stealth and serious crimes against humanity, particularly by the security forces whose mandate is to protect the citizens, people feel angry and frustrated. If these crimes are not dealt with, ordinary people may resort to violence to undo the evil. Violence thus becomes a spontaneous act that is justified as natural and just.

The Situation in the Northeast

All such situations seem to exist in the Northeast. The causes differ. In some cases it may be poverty, unemployment or land alienation, in other cases it is atrocities by the security forces or militants or criminal acts by anti-social elements. In many instances it is search for a new identity. Grievances build up when no steps are taken against the perpetrators of injustice. Anger and

frustration build up when grievances are not attended to. That becomes a breeding ground of violence. The Northeast needs to be analysed within this context of a search for an identity, an economy whose benefits reach all the people and its ethnic and cultural diversity. Much of India knows the region only as one of conflict. The decision-makers tend to interpret the conflicts almost exclusively as a law and order issue and ignore the causes leading to them.

That gives birth to militant organisations which take up the issues in their own manner. Their power grow because of abuses by the security forces such as pseudo-encounters and rapes and the possibility they have of impunity by hiding behind the immunity provided by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the United National Liberation Front (U.N.L.F) of Manipur, NSCN-IM and K of Nagaland are among examples of militant groups. Some of them may demand sovereignty, a few may think of a plebiscite and others may ask for a bigger territory. In every case, they give expression to some cultural, economic or social aspiration of the people. That legitimises the conflict as a struggle for a new identity, economy and political set up. Some of them succeed partially. The Mizo National Front won a Mizo State and recognition of their customary law through a struggle. The militant outfits of Nagaland won a Naga State. But they are not always satisfied with that success, so the conflict continues.

Many of these developments take the region beyond insurgency to militarisation which is much more than the all pervading presence of the security forces. When a conflict continues for a long time, violence and counter-violence become part of everyday life. Though the people pay its price, they develop a sense of helplessness and come to accept violence and other aspects such as extortion that accompany it as intrinsic to their life and develop a psyche of acceptance of violence. Anti-social

elements, the economic, the security forces and others who benefit from it develop a vested interest in ongoing conflicts. Some of them even work against those who try to bring about peace. The ordinary persons suffer. Ethnic conflicts are one of its expressions.

The ordinary people are usually ambiguous about such developments. Many of them sympathise with the cause that the militant groups uphold but not with their violent methods. Most militant groups in their turn say that no one understands them because they give expression to the grievances of the people but are rejected as terrorists. That there are grievances is beyond doubt. One can include among them lack of development, deprivation, neglect of the region, diverse ethnic communities seeking justice and identity and the refusal of the political and economic decision-makers to listen to the grievances. In the absence of a healthy dialogue, most grievances lie buried beneath the debris and find expression in acts of sabotage and violence. They are desperate attempts to call the attention of the nation but continue to be viewed only as law and order issues. The situation gets worse when criminal or extortionist elements exploit people's discontent by using the conflict as a source of illegal income.

The Background of This Volume

The present book deals with some of these issues. The focus in this volume is less on the nationalist struggles and more on the ethnic conflicts in three States of the region. Lack of development, encroachment on their land and other events cause shortages that add to the massive unemployment from which the people of the region suffer. They also feel that those who control the economy devalue their culture and attack their identity. Every ethnic group begins to feel that its identity and culture are under attack. As a result, economic, cultural and political issues merge into one. Conflicts follow from it.

The region has witnessed many such conflicts and this

volume brings some of them together. The chapters are based on field studies done by students and young persons, all of them beginners who tried to understand the issues and suggest possible peace initiatives. Their analysis may be inadequate but it helps one to identify the main concerns that these conflicts express. They also mention possible conditions for peace building. The studies on which these chapters are based, are an outcome of the realisation by many civil society groups that charity and relief work cannot solve the problems of the region. The situation has to be understood first hand. To make a meaningful intervention, one has to have an understanding of the roots of the conflicts confronting the region as a whole. That was the effort in these studies.

Ethnic Conflicts

The focus in the case studies is on ethnic conflicts. We begin with the Assam-Nagaland border dispute. When Nagaland was formed in 1963, the borders were defined on paper but one is not certain that they were marked clearly on the ground. As a result, tension has prevailed between Assam and Nagaland for more than four decades. There have been armed clashes between the police forces as well as between ordinary people. Political elements have used the conflict and uncertainty to create their own vote banks. Militant outfits have exploited the situation to their own advantage. Both the States seem to view control over this oil-bearing land as a source of future revenue and ignore the good of the people. The "neutral" security forces that are brought to the region to keep peace seem to have developed a vested interest in the conflict by turning it into a source of income. Thus the conflict continues. Minj and Kindo try to understand the forces behind it.

Damzen looks at the Karbi-Kuki conflict that is mainly identity-related. Can two ethnic groups live in peace in the same district without introducing the domination-dependency syndrome?

The district is named after the Karbis who are considered indigenous to it. A section of the Kukis tries to find a new identity through an autonomous council within the district. The threat perception that results from it is accentuated by the militant groups that claim to represent and protect their own communities. Extortion adds to the problem. Terang continues the same theme and tries to find out the response of the community. Outsiders may initiate processes of reconciliation but ultimately genuine peace can come only from the communities involved.

In Manipur the extension of the Naga-Centre ceasefire caused a major conflagration between the Meiteis and Nagas. Maring identifies the processes that led to it. The Naga nationalist struggle has been in existence for decades. The ceasefire of 1997 began a possible peace process. A condition of the militant outfits was greater Nagaland. Instead of seeing the issue in an overall North Eastern perspective, the Centre extended the ceasefire to all the Naga-inhabited areas. The Nagas found a new identity in Nagalim but it was a threat to the Meiteis who have also had an eye on tribal land. They consider territorial integrity basic to their power and identity. The protests that followed led to bloodshed and greater polarisation than in the past. June 18, 2001 marked the death of many persons and it has since then been commemorated as Martyrs' Day. The Centre withdrew ceasefire extension with the same speed with which it had introduced it thus further polarising the communities. The researchers try to understand the issues involved and search for steps towards peace.

Manipur is representative of the diversity of ethnic groups in the Northeast. It has also witnessed many conflicts between them. Two of them are studied in this volume. Michael Haokip studies the Kuki-Naga conflict. Both the Nagas and Kukis are alliances of many tribes. Loyalties have changed at times. Thus, there was a foundation of conflicts but a balance was kept for many centuries because of their interdependent economies. The

colonial divide and rule policy changed this situation since they used one set of tribes to control the rest. Participation in the World Wars changed the alliances. The formation of militant groups among both of them intensified the rivalry which had begun with their quest for land. A series of incidents exploded into a crisis.

In her study of the Kuki-Paite conflict, Rebecca Haokip shows how religion becomes a source of power and of alliances. One tribe took control of the original Christian denomination to which they were converted. Leaders of that tribe dominated the Church as well as tribal organisations. When new alliances emerged out of what was originally considered a Kuki conglomeration because of dissatisfaction with this structure, those who broke away from it joined both another tribe and a new Christian denomination. Thus both religious and tribal division intensified their rivalry.

After Manipur comes Meghalaya that is inhabited by three major tribes viz. the Garo, Jaintia and Khasi. The Garo being less educated, when the State was formed they were granted 40% reservations in education and jobs. Today, the Khasi-Jaintia alliance feels that they have been wronged because they are around two thirds of the State's population. That has become the bone of contention. The Garos feel neglected and demand a Garo State made up of the territories with a substantial Garo population in the Garo Hills as well as in the Khasi Hills and Assam. Cultural and ethnic difference add to this divide. The militant outfits accentuate the divisions and add to the conflicts. Amrit Sangma studies the issue from the point of view of the youth and Sarah Maria Bang looks at the conflict from women's point of view.

CONCLUSION

The present volume is thus an effort to understand the conflicts in the Northeast and take them beyond the law and order or militant-centred interpretation to their social, cultural and economic origins. Suggestions are made for conflict resolution. some of them

may sound simplistic or idealistic. Amid such simplicity, the focus is on the youth and women, two groups without whose support peace with justice is not possible. By focusing on these groups one attempts to introduce an element of hope. The thinking behind the suggestions is that peace is not merely absence of arms. It is primarily a search for a new and just society that can instil hope but has in reality become a source of division. The Church and civil society groups, particularly women's organisations, seem to be the best groups to bring about unity. They need to study some traditional conflict management systems and update them. They need training in many techniques. Women's organisations, for example, have done much for peace but they need a better analytical outlook than what they have. The Churches run institutions that bring all the tribes together under one roof. But they have used them primarily for education and spiritual formation, not for peace building processes. Church leaders need to be trained in this direction. The civil society groups can supplement this effort.

Thus, the focus of the studies is a new society. Some suggest a new economy and others speak of a new identity. Their common thrust is peace with justice.
