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Special Issue on Northeast India



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About the e-journal

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Vision

Sociology as a discipline, like other social sciences, is passing through a transition. The developments in the contemporary world have opened up new areas of enquiry expanding the traditional frontiers of the discipline. Many sociologists are engaged in these new and emerging areas of study which is often informed by a multidisciplinary approach. Sociologists in India are also in increasing numbers engaged in such research (in areas which includes environment, minority rights, gender studies, sexuality studies, etc. to name a few). However, they have an additional challenge posed by the need to integrate the enormous regional, social and cultural multiplicities of India into the Indian sociological canvas. These diversities, especially those of the socially marginal and geographically peripheral societies, have remained somewhat out of the radar of Indian sociology. However, emerging discourses on caste, tribe, ethnicity, religion, region, nation and nation building in contemporary India have created new consciousness and imperatives to integrate the marginal regions and societies into the broad canvas of India Sociology. The journal is sensitive to such discourses and it aims to encourage scholarly publications focused on such identities and regions. While the major focus of the journal is societies, histories and cultures of India, it also welcomes publications of comparative studies with other countries as well as on societies and cultures of South Asia.

Guidelines for Authors

The journal encourages data based (both primary and secondary) quality research publications using sociological concepts and theories. It is open to both quantitative and qualitative works. Besides regular research papers, the journal includes sections such as interviews, commentaries and debates and discussions. While the journal encourages research publication of young scholars, it also welcomes contributions from senior scholars. The journal carries interviews/dialogues with eminent sociologists and social scientists who share their own experiences of teaching and research. The idea is to make the journal a platform for overall professional development of the practitioners – research scholars, teachers and researchers – of sociology, especially those without adequate access to the resources required for the purpose.

The journal follows a rigorous peer review policy for all research and review articles submitted to the journal. Other contributions (commentaries, debates and interviews) will also undergo editorial vetting. Submissions to the journal must have sociological value and interest for social scientists across India and beyond, both from the point of pure, scholarly research as well as from applied dimensions.

Categories of contributions:

The journal welcomes submissions in the following categories:

- **Articles** (6000-8000 words)

We invite contributions in the form of feature articles from sociologists. The article can be both empirical and theoretical and deal with issues that will be of interest to sociologists practicing in a variety of locales – universities, research institutes, NGOS, etc.

All articles must be accompanied by an abstract of a maximum of 150 words with 4-5 keywords.

- **Research in progress** (3500-4000 words)

Under this section, we publish research work, field-notes and ethnographic accounts which are in progress. Themes are open-ended and therefore, we welcome all kinds of research in progress.

- **Reflexive essays** (2500-3000 words)

Under this category, we publish autobiographical and biographical notes of sociologists, experiments on teaching and pedagogy, etc.

- **Conversations** (8000-10000 words)

We publish interviews/conversations with eminent sociologists/social scientists focusing on their contributions to scholarship and teaching. The contributors have to submit the audio/video recording of the interviews along with the transcriptions.

- **Commentaries** (2000-2500 words)

Contributions in the form of commentaries on any topic of relevance to national as well as international community of sociologists are published under this section.

- **Discussion Forum** (1200-2000 words)

This section publishes responses to the publications in the journal as well as other relevant issues of sociological interest.

- **Letters to the Editor** (maximum 200 words)

The journal provides space to its readers to express their opinions in the form of brief comments and insights as letters to the editor.

Guidelines for submission:

1. Structure

The manuscript should be structured as follows:

- Cover page, showing title of the paper, name of author, author's affiliation and institutional address with pin code, email id and a 100–150 word abstract. Authors' names and references should not be used in the text in order to keep authors' anonymity (e.g., 'as the author has written elsewhere' should be avoided). In case there are two or more authors, then corresponding author's name and address details must be clearly specified on the first page itself.
- The contributors should also provide 4–5 keywords for online searchability.
- Text should start on a new page, and must not contain the names of authors.

- References should come at the end of the manuscript.
- Tables and figures should be provided in editable format and should be referred to in the text by number separately (e.g., Table 1) not by placement (e.g., see Table below). They should each be submitted on a separate page following the article, numbered and arranged as per their references in the text. They will be inserted in the final text as indicated by the author. Source citations with tables and figures are required irrespective of whether or not they require permissions.
- Figures, including maps, graphs and drawings, should not be larger than page size. They should be numbered and arranged as per their references in the text. All photographs and scanned images should have a resolution of minimum 300 dpi and 1500 pixels and their format should be TIFF or JPEG. Permissions to reprint should be obtained for copyright protected photographs/images. Even for photographs/images available in the public domain, it should be clearly ascertained whether or not their reproduction requires permission for purposes of publishing (The Publisher is a profit-making endeavour). All photographs/scanned images should be provided separately in a folder along with the main article.
- Mathematical formulae, methodological details, etc. should be given separately as an appendix, unless their mention in the main body of the text becomes essential.

2. Language

- The language and spellings used should be British (U.K.), with ‘s’ variant, e.g., globalisation instead of globalization, labour instead of labor. For non-English and uncommon words and phrases, use italics only for the first time. Meaning of non-English words should be given in parenthesis just after the word when it is used for the first time.
- Articles should use non-sexist and non-racist language.
- Spell out numbers from one to ninety nine, 100 and above to remain in figures. However, for exact measurement (e.g., *China’s GDP growth rate 9.8 per cent*) use numbers. Very large round numbers, especially sums of money, may be expressed by a mixture of numerals and spelled-out numbers (*India’s population 1.2 billion*). Follow thousand, million, billion number metric system instead of lakhs and crores.

- Single quotes should be used throughout. Double quote marks are to be used within single quotes. Spellings of words in quotations should not be changed. Quotations of words or more should be separated from the text.
- Notes should be numbered serially and presented at the end of the article. Notes must contain more than a mere reference.
- Use 'per cent' instead of % in the text. In tables, graphs etc, % can be used. Use '20th century', '1990s'.
- We do not encourage frequent use of capital letters. They should be used selectively and consistently. Only the first word of title and subtitle should start with capitals. Although proper names are capitalised, many words derived from or associated with proper names, as well as the names of significant offices are lowercased. While the names of ethnic, religious and national groups are capitalised (*the Muslims, the Gorkhas, the Germans*), designations based loosely on colour (*black people*) and terms denoting socio-economic classes or groups (*the middle class, the dalits, the adivasis, the african-american*) are lowercased. All caste, tribe and community names (*the Santhals, the Jatavs*) are to be capitalised but generic terms (*the kayasthas*) are to be lower cased. Civil, military, religious, and professional titles (*the president*) and institutions (*the parliament, the united nations*) are to be put in lower case, but names of organisations (*the Labour Party, the Students Federation of India*) are to be capitalised. The names of political tendencies (*the marxists, the socialists*) should remain in lower case.
- Abbreviations are spelled out at first occurrence. Very common ones (*US, GDP, BBC*) need not be spelled out. Other commonly used abbreviations (*am, pm, cm, kg, ha*) can be used in lower case, without spaces.

3. Citations and References

Guidelines specified in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th edition, 2009) must be followed.

- References: A consolidated listing of all books, articles, essays, theses and documents referred to (including any referred to in the tables, graphs and maps) should be provided at the end of the article.
- Arrangement of references: Reference list entries should be alphabetized by the last name of the first author of each work. In each reference, authors' names are inverted (last name first) for all authors (first, second or subsequent ones); give the last name and initials for all authors of a particular work unless

the work has more than six authors. If the work has more than six authors, list the first six authors and then use et al. after the sixth author's name.

- Chronological listing: If more than one work by the same author(s) is cited, they should be listed in order by the year of publication, starting with the earliest.
- Sentence case: In references, sentence case (only the first word and any proper noun are capitalized – e.g., ‘The software industry in India’) is to be followed for the titles of papers, books, articles, etc.
- Title case: In references, Journal titles are put in title case (first letter of all words except articles and conjunctions are capitalized – e.g., Journal of Business Ethics).
- Italicize: Book and Journal titles are to be italicized.
- Citations and References should adhere to the guidelines below (based on the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition). Some examples are given below:

In-text citations:

- One work by one author: (Kessler, 2003, p. 50) or ‘Kessler (2003) found that among the epidemiological samples..’.
- One work by two authors: (Joreskog & Sorborn, 2007, pp. 50–66) or Joreskog and Sorborn (2007) found that..
- One work by three or more authors: (Basu, Banerji & Chatterjee, 2007) [first instance]; Basu et al. (2007) [Second instance onwards].
- Groups or organizations or universities: (University of Pittsburgh, 2007) or University of Pittsburgh (2007).
- Authors with same surname: Include the initials in all the in-text citations even if the year of publication differs, e.g., (I. Light, 2006; M.A. Light, 2008).
- Works with no identified author or anonymous author: Cite the first few words of the reference entry (title) and then the year, e.g., (‘Study finds’, 2007); (Anonymous, 1998).
- If abbreviations are provided, then the style to be followed is: (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2003) in the first citation and (NIMH, 2003) in subsequent citations.
- Two or more works by same author: (Gogel, 1990, 2006, in press)
- Two or more works with different authors: (Gogel, 1996; Miller, 1999)
- Secondary sources: Allport's diary (as cited in Nicholson, 2003).

- Films: (Name of the Director, Year of release)

References:

- Books:
Patnaik, U. (2007). *The republic of hunger*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective.
- Edited Books:
Amanor, K. S., & Moyo, S. (Eds.) (2008). *Land and sustainable development in Africa*. London/New York: Zed Books.
- Translated books:
Amin, S. (1976). *Unequal development* (trans. B. Pearce). London and New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Book chapters:
Chachra, S. (2011). The national question in India. In S. Moyo and P. Yeros (Eds), *Reclaiming the nation* (pp. 67–78). London and New York: Pluto Press.
- Journal articles: Foster, J. B. (2010). The financialization of accumulation. *Monthly Review*, 62(5), 1-17.
- Newsletter article, no author:
Six sites meet for comprehensive anti-gang initiative conference. (2006, November/December). *OOJDP News @ a Glance*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrjs.gov/html>
[Please do not place a period at the end of an online reference.]
- Newspaper article:
Schwartz, J. (1993, September 30). Obesity affects economic, social status. *The Washington Post*, pp. A1, A4.
- In-press article:
Briscoe, R. (in press). Egocentric spatial representation in action and perception. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Retrieved from <http://cogprints.org/5780/1/ECSRAP.F07.pdf>
- Non-English reference book, title translated into English:
Real Academia Espanola. (2001). *Diccionario de la lenguaespanola* [Dictionary of the Spanish Language] (22nd ed.). Madrid, Spain: Author.
- Special issue or section in a journal:
Haney, C., & Wiener, R. L. (Eds.) (2004). Capital punishment in the United States [Special Issue]. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 10(4), 1-17.

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From the Editor

Dear colleagues,

With the use of internet permeating every domain of the contemporary world, the emergence of electronic journals (e-journals), transcending the initial academic circumspection about it, is now widely recognised as a natural and positive outcome. That almost each leading print journal in the world today has its electronic or online version is a clear testimony to the edge the latter offers.

Indian Sociological Society (ISS) recognised this emerging trend and need by launching its e-journal in 2012, not as the e-version of the official journal of the ISS, Sociological Bulletin (SB), but as an autonomous entity. The e-journal did not continue for long. The present journal is its new version. It seeks to accommodate the publication potential of the Indian sociological community which is expanding fast with the growing footprint of the discipline in the higher educational institutions of India.

I am happy to present the first issue of *Explorations*, the new e-journal of the Indian Sociological Society. This issue is focused on the Northeast region of India, a rather unexplored and under-represented region in the Indian sociological literature. However, the region, consisting of eight states, is much diverse in terms of its society, economy, culture and geography. It is thus not possible to represent the myriad issues of the region in one number of a journal. It has to be a continuous process. With that spirit, this special number of the journal has addressed only a few issues which are considered critical to understand the social and political processes in the region.

In this issue, we present all together five essays on the region. Out of these, four essays are under the category of 'articles' and one in the category of 'research in progress'.

In the first paper titled *Ethnic Assertion and Middle Class Hegemony in a Colonial Hinterland*, Apurba K. Baruah argues that the conflicts of the middle classes of some of the smaller nationalities in Northeast India with the Indian state are often wrongly depicted as ethnic conflicts. These conflicts hardly represent the interest of these nationalities as a whole even as they often receive the support of

the other sections of the concerned nationalities. The paper contends that these conflicts are the result of middle class hegemony in a colonial hinterland.

The second paper *Land Alienation and Rural Development in Northeast India* by Walter Fernandes argues that contemporary state-driven development initiatives in the rural areas in Northeast have led to land alienation and conflicts resulting from it. It suggests some alternatives through collaboration between the state and the civil society to the dominant development practices in the region, some of which have already been attempted in some states of the region.

Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers: Ethnography about Militarised Cultures in Northeast India by Dolly Kikon focuses on the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India and presents three ethnographic accounts about experiences of human rights activists from the region. Highlighting everyday experiences of human rights activities in Northeast India, the essay describes the ethics and challenges of engaging with notions of human rights in militarised societies like Northeast India.

The paper titled *Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India* by Vijaylakshmi Brara seeks to bring forth the need to view women's issues in Northeast India through the prism of indigenous perception of femininity and masculinity. The paper argues the need to locate these issues in conjunction with the South East Asian societies and see from a broader lens the issues concerning women in the Northeast region.

The paper titled *Racial discrimination and Violence against Northeasterners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014*, which is part of an ongoing research, by Hoineilhing Sitlhou and Salah Punathil examines the racial discrimination and violence against people from Northeast in Delhi and the state's response to this in the form of the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014. It also seeks to understand the receptions and perceptions among migrants in Delhi about its implementation.

This issue of the journal also includes a comprehensive interview of Professor N. Jayaram, a noted Indian sociologist, sharing his life experiences in teaching and research, and his perspectives on them as well as on myriad issues of sociological significance.

I take this opportunity to invite your contributions for future issues of the journal. I would also like to call upon you for sending your feedback or suggestions on this issue in particular, and on the journal in general.

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April 2017

**Article: Ethnic Assertion and Middle Class Hegemony in a Colonial
Hinterland**

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Ethnic Assertion and Middle Class Hegemony in a Colonial Hinterland

--- Apurba K. Baruah

Abstract

Contemporary Northeast India is in the news for agitations, conflicts, violence and insurgencies. While some of these conflicts become violent and result in atrocities on ethnic minorities of the respective locales, others subjugate and oppress minorities depriving them of their basic rights, both in terms of citizenship rights and human rights. The conflicts of 'certain sections' of some of the smaller nationalities with the state of India manifested in the insurgent movements are often depicted as conflicts of those particular communities as wholes with the state of India, and are erroneously called ethnic conflicts. Major sections, not necessarily the majority, of those communities might often be against the ends and means of such insurgencies. The conflicts often are the result of middle class hegemony in a colonial hinterland.

Key words: Asomiya, Ethnicity, Hegemony, Middle Class

Contemporary Northeast India is in the news more for agitations, conflicts, violence and insurgencies than its remarkable bio and cultural diversities. Two most well known recent agitations of the area are the All Assam Students' Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad-led 'Assam Movement' of late 1970s and the early 1980s on the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and Nepal, and the All Bodo Student Union-led agitation for a Bodo home land (George, 1994, pp. 878-892). While some of these conflicts become violent and result in atrocities on ethnic minorities of the respective locales, others subjugate and oppress minorities depriving them of their basic rights, both in terms of citizenship rights and human rights. The conflicts of 'certain sections' of some of the smaller nationalities with the state of India manifested in the insurgent movements are often depicted as conflicts of those particular communities as wholes with the state of India, and are erroneously called ethnic conflicts. For instance, we often refer to the insurgencies in Nagaland, Mizoram or Assam as the Naga, the Mizo and the *Asomiya*¹ insurgencies without taking into consideration that those communities in whose name such insurgencies are carried

on are not undifferentiated wholes. Major sections, not necessarily the majority, of those communities might often be against the ends and means of such insurgencies. We need to, therefore, be a little more discerning when we designate those insurgencies as the insurgencies of the communities concerned.

These agitations, conflicts and insurgencies are often sought to be dealt with as law and order problems. More understanding analyses look at them in terms of alienation resulting from a sense of deprivation which in turn is explained as the result of lack of development. However, without examining those in terms of ethnic and community identity assertion, no real understanding can be arrived at. These assertions of course are related to the emergence of new elite in an area that was largely semi-feudal and tribal till recently. There indeed is a strong feeling of being exploited in colonial lines. To understand contemporary Northeast India, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind this feeling of being colonially exploited and the social forces that mobilise their respective communities to assert their identity in a manner that leads to intercommunity conflicts.

In ethnically plural societies allowing free expression of political demands, ethnic conflicts are inevitable. Authoritarian political systems may not experience such conflicts for long periods giving the appearance of a well governed society, but a coercive containment of such conflict also runs the risk, though not the certainty, of an eventual outburst, particularly when such a system begins to liberalise or lose its legitimacy. Ethnic conflicts are a regular feature of ethnically plural democracies for if different ethnic groups exist, the freedom to organise on community lines would be available. However, the fact remains that inter community conflicts often called ethnic community conflicts are an important part of the societies and polities of Northeast India.

While dealing with the issues related to assertion of ethnic identities the importance given by scholars to cultural elements conceals the nature of socio-economic structures of the populations of those communities. In the context of American Indians, Eric Wolf argued 'the condition of the Indian does not consist in a discreet list of social traits; it lies in the quality of social relationships found among communities of a certain kind and in the self-image of the individuals who identify with those communities. The Indian condition is also a distinctive historical process, since these communities originate at a given moment, grow stronger, decline again, and maintain or lose stability in the face of attacks or pressures coming from the larger society'(Wolf, 1960).

We need to take notice of the fact that despite all the weaknesses and the faults of the state of India, this state has been able to create middle classes of considerable strength and co-opt them to its citizenship, virtually in all communities, including very small ones. These middle classes have been integrated to the forces that rule India and they have been able to persuade large sections of their own respective communities to accept the idea of Indian citizenship. In 2014 general elections in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura had polling percentages of 68.16%, 69.53%, 77.14%, 64.38%, 51.8%, 89.99%, 84.45%,² respectively which proves that there has been considerable influence of the state of India on these communities and that large majorities of people of these communities have come to accept the state of India and its citizenship.

Therefore, conflicts of this nature cannot be identified as ethnic conflicts because the ethnic conflicts are generally conflicts between ethnic identities and forces representing nation states. These are conflicts of certain political forces within those communities with the political forces representing the state of India in pursuance of their aspirations of attaining sovereign status for their particular communities. In this sense, those conflicts are political conflicts. There indeed are a large number of inter-community ethnic conflicts in this area. Among the most recent and infamous of ethnic conflicts have been the Bodo-Adivasi, Rabha-non Rabha, the Bodo-non Bodo, Karbi-non Karbi in Assam and the 'tribal'-non-tribal in Meghalaya³ and other hill tribal states of the area.

Even in states where there appear to be absence of such conflicts, the ethnic divide is rather obvious for a keen observer. Mizoram is a classic case. There have been no serious reports of ethnic conflicts in that state but the conflicts between the Mizos and the non-Mizos, particularly the non-tribals often referred to by Mizos as Bhais (or Vais), living in the state have been a major problem for democratic politics in Mizoram. The ethnic divide and the plight of the non-tribals become obvious only when we look closely at events like the 'non-tribal' curfew imposed by some Mizo youth organisations. During such programmes only non-Mizos, particularly non-tribals, are not allowed to come out. Such political actions reveal the fact that the non-tribals are second class citizens in Mizoram. But we need to take note that the mother of all ethnic conflicts in Northeast India is the conflict between the Asomiya and the Bengali residents of Assam that started during the thirties of nineteenth century over the issue of official language and the medium of instruction in British Assam. Most ethnic conflicts of Northeast have

been following the course that was actually set by the Asomiya-Bengali conflict and have become part of a politics of identity assertion.

Identity Politics as a Worldwide Phenomenon

Identity has become a widely used word in the study of societies. The currency this term has in contemporary social science literature is not only because in many parts of the world identity politics has been creating serious problems, but also because all over the world large groups of people have come to claim that their social existence is closely related to their identities. Identity formation is a chaotic process that can have no end. Cultural identity often becomes a premise of political action rather than a substitute for it (Gilroy, 1996, pp. 223-39). Assertions of new identity often contests the space, including public, private, political, social or such other spaces, occupied by powerful sections of some established communities and thus generates conflicts. Conflicts generated by such politics have become a worldwide phenomenon. Sandbrook points out that the most affected continent has been Africa. Between 1980 and 2000 more than half of Sub-Saharan Africa's forty eight countries have been buffeted by countrywide or regional civil wars or wars with neighbouring countries sparked off often by identity politics of one or the other kind. In West Africa, such conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal had caused havoc⁴. The huge loss of life and property in areas like Bosnia-Herzegovina are well known⁵. In our own region too identity based conflicts have taken their toll. But it is not that identity politics only creates problem. At times such politics lead to increased participation in democratic politics. In many countries of Africa, democratic politics received a boost as a result of assertion of identities because such assertions inevitably motivated people to participate in politics and also because as a result of such assertions more and more of communities were getting organised to make themselves heard.

Identity as reflected in the dominant discourse, of our time, refers to both the identity of the individual and the collective. The individual context has been obvious in psychological literature⁶. In India, identity as a concept has not been discussed frequently and most Indian languages do not seem to have a term that expresses the sense in which this word is used in the western world (Jayaram, 2004, p. 134). Identity politics almost invariably develops a tendency to judge the cultures of other groups by standards defined by one's own culture. It prompts people to perceive one's own way of life as superior to others and, therefore,

develops a tendency of being contemptuous of other's cultures. Such an approach to politics may lead to ethnocentrism. Any attempt at understanding ethnocentrism requires a discussion of ethnicity itself. The term ethnic was used in English from the fourteenth century to mean only pagan. In that sense *ethnic* referred to people who were irreligious or hedonistic as distinct from groups organised on the basis of 'religion', focusing on spirituality⁷. From mid-nineteenth century it began to refer to racial characteristics and as a result even the concept of ethnicity began to acquire certain characteristics, which were closer to the idea of a race. Scholars have pointed out that distinction between race and ethnicity is problematic. Ethnicity has a political context and there is very little evidence to show that race has similar context. While discussing the question of political identities, Mahmood Mamdani has argued that the debate over the question whether race is a biological identity and ethnicity is a cultural identity 'focuses on whether one can indeed speak of races biologically and whether culture should be understood as primordial or as historically constructed' and goes on to discuss race and identity as political identities, imposed through the force of colonial law⁸. The term nation too has a complex relation with the term ethnic resulting in difficulties in distinguishing ethnicity from nationality. Nationalism stresses the cultural similarities of its adherents, and by implication it draws boundaries vis-à-vis others, who thereby become outsiders. 'Ethnic' can be defined only in terms of a cultural heritage. As the history of the peoples in the world shows, ethnocentrism and bellicose nationalism are often major consequences of such a perspective. With the emergence of the nation states as major political players in the world, national identity began to dominate the idea of identity. Huntington has said that debates over national identity are a pervasive characteristic of our time. He points out that almost everywhere people have questioned, reconsidered and redefined what they have in common and what distinguishes them from other people (Huntington, 2004, p. 12). Summarising the discourse of identity Huntington argues that in trying to understand identity five points need to be taken note of: 1) both individuals and groups have identity; 2) identities are overwhelmingly constructed under varying degrees of pressure, inducements, and freedom; 3) individuals and to a lesser degree groups have multiple identities; 4) identities are defined by self but they are the products of interaction between self and others; 5) the relative salience of alternative identities is situational (ibid. pp. 21-25). These five points, particularly the second and the fourth clearly indicate the instrumentality of identities. While explaining the second point Huntington writes, '*If the basis for the defining characteristic of a group disappears perhaps because it achieves the goal it was created to achieve,*

the existence of the group is threatened, unless it can find another cause to motivate its members' (ibid. p. 22). (Emphasis added).

The term ethnic is commonly used in Northeast India in the context of movements that refer to groups of people with distinct cultural characteristics as ethnic communities. The point that needs to be made here is that some of these ethnic movements are making separatist demands and others are articulating issues that are apparently cultural, but politically ticklish. Ethnic polarisation and attendant conflicts have become a world-wide phenomenon. Kenneth Christie has rightly observed that ethnic unrest and communal strife proved fairly resilient not only in the third world but also in developed societies during the twentieth century (Christie, 1998, p. 217). The American culture is generally believed to be a political and cultural identity emerging from common language, memories, intentions and above all new procedures and institution motivated mainly by the 'business of getting and spending, and also of governing and developing'. The mainstream Americans take pride in the 'achievement' of the melting pot. In a penetrating study of the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of the city, Glazier and Moynihan conclude that, 'ethnicity was more than an influence on events; it was commonly the source of events. Social and political institutions did not merely respond to ethnic interests; a great number of institutions existed for the specific purpose of serving ethnic interests. This in turn tended to perpetuate them. In many ways, the atmosphere of New York City was found hospitable to ethnic groupings: it recognised them, and to that extent encouraged them'⁹ (Glazier & Moynihan, 1976, p. 310). Articulation of grievances and mobilisation of peoples on ethnic lines have acquired such proportions that ethno nationalism has become almost an ideology.

In its contemporary sense ethnicity has come to acquire its current importance only in the context of the project of nation state building, which emphasizes the homogeneity of the politico cultural entity called nation. From early nineteenth century, this term began to be used to mean a whole people of a country¹⁰. When states came to be organised in national terms, the national communities were contrasted with other groups within the states, who had cultural traits that distinguished them from the mainstream. These cultural groups are often identified as ethnic communities or groups and their projects perceived as ethno-nationalist. The phenomenon of ethnicity can therefore be understood only in the context of the multi-cultural civic societies and the existence of small groups with, what Naroll calls, 'a predominantly archaic character' (Narol, 1964, as cited

by Phadnis, 1989, p. 13) within them. It is necessary that while we try to understand the identity discourse and the identity based movements in Northeast India we keep this aspect of identity politics in mind. This is because there is enough evidence to show that the elites of the many of the assertive communities are using the issue of identities to pursue their sectarian political goals, though they swear by community interest and desire to protect and promote their cultural traditions.

Identity and Communalism

For Indians, identity seems to refer more to community identity than identity in the individual context. Community identities motivate people to mobilise themselves on communal lines. While pursuing their stated identity based goals they often come into conflicts with other communities, particularly ones that seem to have interests conflicting with their own community. More important, ethnic conflict is no longer limited to armed groups. Not to speak of political parties and their organisations, even the non-party students and youth organisations of the region today are organised mainly on ethnic or 'communal' lines¹¹. Many movements launched by these organisations raise issues of identity. One of the most famous of such movement was the 'Assam agitation' of the late 1970s and early 1980s led by All Assam Students' Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad that lasted for six long years and shook the government of India leading to an accord with its leaders. While the leaders of the movement tried to project their goal as protecting the Assamese community that was threatened by illegal immigration from Bangladesh, the history of the movement and the main concerns, as reflected in the 'Assam accord', show that the movement aimed at enabling the Asomiya middle class to establish its control over land, jobs and trade¹². Illegal immigration and influx are two issues repeatedly raised by organisations of different communities as part of their perception of threat to identity, which very often leads to hate campaigns, communal violence and hate crime¹³. Inter-community hatred, conflicts and violence in the region could be understood only if we understand the forces that generate such conflicts, the interests such forces pursue and also the social values they propagate. While identity politics appears to be a major problem in the context of Northeast India, identity discourses in India as a whole have certain commonalities.

Social science literature in India has been using the term community in a very loose manner referring to castes, religious and linguistic communities, tribes¹⁴ and

nationalities. K. S. Singh says, '[T]he communities generally identify themselves as such and are identified as such by others in terms of occupation, endogamy, identity etc' (Singh, 1992, p. 42). According to the estimates made by Singh, Northeast India, comprising the states of Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, has 382 culturally and locationally distinct communities of various sizes and at various stages of development (ibid, p.44). A look at the movements launched by many of these communities shows that they also practice a communalism of dangerous kind, which is not an unfamiliar idea in social sciences, because in some countries such discriminations are referred to as communalism or racism (Guibemau & Rex, 1999, p. 35). But in any attempt at understanding this aspect of the issue, we need to understand the discourse of communalism in India.

The discourse of communalism in India is rather peculiar. Pramod Kumar argues, '(S)ocial Science literature in the global context attributes a positive meaning to the term communal. In India this term has been used to denote a negative phenomenon' (Kumar, 1992, p. 22). Despite mentioning caste and communities in the context of communalism, even Pramod Kumar has not been able to come out of the dominant Indian discourse on the phenomenon of communalism. This discourse seems to take cognisance only of religious communalism, often contextualised in terms of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India. Bipan Chandra, one of the most prominent historians of India, identified communalism '... as the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social political and economic interests' (Chandra, 1984, p. 1). A close look at Bipan Chandra's idea of communalism indicates that it is not the belief of having common interests but rather the refusal or inability to recognise the differences of social, political and economic peculiarities of different categories of people within a particular community that signifies communalism. Indian social science literature and political activists have been using the term communalism in the context of religious communities only because communalism and secularism are generally juxtaposed in the socio-political discourse of identity politics in India, the former referring to religious intolerance and the latter to equal treatment of all religions. It is often forgotten that the belief that a community necessarily has common social, political, and economic interests, could be present in communities other than religious, be that linguistic, racial, cultural or ethnic. This discourse obviously has its implication for identity politics in Northeast India. Many 'insurgent' situations, separatist demands articulated in terms of autonomy, controversies over linguistic and religious issues are rooted in

failure of the state to fulfill aspirations of the competing ethnic communities¹⁵. The ethnic map of India is complex and the hackneyed phrase ‘unity in diversity’ does not really represent the ethnic heterogeneity of the country. The history of the Indian nation state is a history of integration of diverse ethnic groups through various methods of assimilation. The existence of various ethno-cultural geographical personalities in India is so prominent that it is rather difficult to think of India as a nation in the cultural sense, unless one is a mainstream Indian chauvinist. India has innumerable geo-cultural personalities¹⁶. Because of the fact that the mainstream Indian nationalists accept a state-centred definition of nationalism and conceptualises this nationalism in terms of a Hindi-Hindu Brahmanical tradition, the communities not belonging to this tradition fail to identify with the Indian state-centred nationalism. Some of these smaller communities are nationalities in their own rights and others are ethnic groups with nationality potentialities (Baruah, 1994, p. 247).

Paul Brass argues that nationality formation involves passing through three stages of ethnicity, community awareness and nationality formation. The first stage implies existence of cultural markers recognised easily but their political significance unnoticed. The second is about evolution of political consciousness based on cultural identity and the urge to employ it for furthering community interests. And the third involves right to self-determination. In this sense, many so-called ethnic groups of Northeast India have already crossed the stage of ethnicity and have entered the stage of community awareness and others have entered the stage of nationality formation. Peoples like the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Khasis, the Bodos, the Mizos, the Nagas, and recently even the Karbis appear to have become nationalities, demanding the political right to control their own affairs¹⁷. Only sections of the Nagas, the Mizos, and the Asomiyas are demanding secession from the state of India. Even among these communities large majorities exist which accept the reality of the Indian state and the benefits associated with this arrangement. The insurgent movements of the most advanced communities of the region can be called bargaining insurgencies because insurgent sections do talk of arriving at negotiated settlements.

In India’s Northeast when various ethnic groups raise the issues of identity say, Khasi identity, Naga identity or the Asomiya identity, and claim that such identities have common social, political and economic interests of their own, then they are adhering to the ideology that is strikingly close to the definition of communalism offered by Bipan Chandra. The leaders of such community

identities propagate values and interests that are claimed and made to appear to be universal to their respective communities. Then, the members of the respective communities begin an exclusivist and discriminatory politics against all those who in their perception are enemies of such interests. Such trends are clearly visible in case of the movements launched by organisations like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), Khasi Students' Union (KSU), and Mizo Students' Union (MSU), etc¹⁸. There is evidence to show that even community based political parties, often called regional parties, pursue such communal politics¹⁹.

The movements launched by the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Mizos the Bodos, the Karbis, etc. are now well known. Many smaller groups with somewhat blurred cultural markers are also now beginning to assert their identities; some are even busy inventing separate identities. For example, the Ahoms, Koch-Rajbangshis, Matakas, Rabhas and Tiwas of Assam for a long time have been a part of the Asomiya community that emerged during the six hundred years of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra valley. The most striking of these efforts is the one made by the Ahoms. Under the rule of the Ahom kings that began with the coming of Sukapha into the Brahmaputra plains in the thirteenth century and ended only in 1826 when the British came to the country after the treaty of Yandaboo, the Asomiya emerged as a result of the integration of numerous small communities of the region. In fact, Sukapha is credited with the integration of twenty odd small chiefships to form his kingdom.

The Ahom kings conquered the small communities and brought those under one kingdom. It was under this kingdom and under the patronage of the Ahom kings that various dialects of the communities of the conquered principalities got assimilated and the Assamese language developed. Development of this language made the emergence of the Asomiya community possible. The Ahom kings patronised the new linguistic community and encouraged assimilation of all others into this larger identity. In fact, many scholars of the Ahom community assert that it is the Ahom rulers, who during their rule of six hundred years in the Brahmaputra valley brought the small communities of the area together and gave birth to a new 'jati' (nationality) (Buragohain, 1995, p. 153). In the process of playing the role of integrators the Ahoms themselves adopted the newly emerging Asomiya language and culture. Their original language, customs, religion and generally the way of life fell into disuse. One of the reasons for this, as was claimed by some historians of Assam, was that the Ahoms brought only a few women with them and began marrying women of local residents. The Ahom kings

eventually became Hindus and became Asomiya. Very small aspects of their cultural practices, particularly, those that did not conflict with the Asomiya culture still continue. For a long time now the mother tongue of the average Ahom has been Asomiya. Even the royal chronicles of the Ahoms gradually came to be written in Asomiya. Large numbers of the Ahoms have become followers of Shankardeva, the 15th-16th century Neo-vaishnavite saint of Assam who became one of the pillars of the Asomiya culture. The Bihu, the national festival of the Asomiya nationality, the celebration of which has come to be the most visible aspect of Asomiya cultural life are dominated in upper Assam by the Ahom singers, dancers and *dhulias* (drummers). Litterateurs of this community have been occupying important positions in the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the acknowledged guardian of Asomiya literary culture. Today some Ahom intellectuals are exhorting their community to revive its culture and to assert its identity distinct from the Asomiya. The community has formed distinct organisations of their own that raise issues and make demands that help articulate interests that suit the Tai identity that is sought to be revived. The role of the Ahom elite in this revival is very clear. Some Ahom scholars have now founded an Institute of Tai Studies that brings out the *Indian Journal of Tai Studies*. Ahoms and such other communities have formed their own student and youth organisations that have been playing important role in agitational politics in the civil society of Assam. Some of these organisations are now claiming that their communities be declared Scheduled Tribes under the Indian constitution.

It is not difficult to understand that the educated middle class, that stands to gain the most if the community is declared a Scheduled Tribe by exploiting the opportunities accompanying such a status, would try its best to mobilise support for such a demand. In various forms this process is evident in most of the cases of identity assertions in Northeast India. At times such assertions emerge as a result of political strategies for national and state level elections²⁰. In these communities nationality consciousness exists and their urge to self-determination is reflected in the articulation of demands which amount to demands for homelands, though within the state of India²¹. Others like the Misings, the Koches, various tribes in Tripura, Nagaland and many others are at the stage of community awareness. Some small tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Jaintia of Meghalaya and a whole range of small groups are today aware of their ethnic identities. Though all these identities are seen to be involved in ethnic or community conflicts, it is clear that the politics involved in this conflict vary from community to community according to the stage of development of the community concerned. Any attempts

at understanding this politics require going back to the politics of the administrative reorganisation of the area.

Some social scientists, journalists and political activists have often tried to explain the ethnic assertions, the attendant political turmoil and the consequent administrative reorganisations, often called the dismemberment of the composite state of Assam, in terms of the expansionist tendencies of the most advanced section of the populace of the region, the Asomiya middle class. The All Party Hill Leaders Conference, for instance, categorically stated that the Assam official Language Act was responsible for dismemberment of Assam (Sengupta, 1998). It is true that a section of the Asomiya middle class has been nurturing expansionist tendencies (Sharma, 1997). But to explain all ethnic conflicts of the region in terms of that expansionism is to ignore the fact that ethnic or community assertions manifest themselves only when social forces requiring such manifestations emerge or dominant sections come to acquire values conducive to such assertions. It is not difficult to see that even without the adoption of Assamese as the official language the geo-cultural personalities, which were not aware of their identities, would have asserted themselves when they arrived at the relevant stage of social development, particularly in a situation of underdevelopment and scarcity (Baruah, 1997, pp. 292-296) generated by internal colonial exploitation (Baruah, 1984, pp. 94-98).

The first stirrings of community and ethnic assertions in the region began in Assam when a section of the elites of the Ahoms organised the All Assam Ahom Association to fight against the 'injustices' done to the community by the British (Lahon, 1990, pp. 22-23) followed by other organisations articulating ethnic interests of various communities. The elites of the materially advanced communities often exercise or at least aspire to exercise hegemony in the entire region and, of course, within their own communities. In this connection, it is necessary to keep in mind that the concept of hegemony cannot be used to analyse the situation of these ethnic conflicts in the orthodox Gramscian sense. It needs to be modified to become a useful tool of analysis for the relevant social reality²², so as to reflect the process of organising intellectual and moral leadership, not in the sphere of body politic but in the sphere of community specific civil societies of Northeast India. Such an approach should be able to locate the sources of ethnic conflicts of the region and eventually enable us to arrive at long-term solutions (Baruah, 2000, pp. 32-56).

Ethnic movements are threatening to destabilise the existing social and political arrangements. Many of these are taking recourse to extra-constitutional methods and in certain well-known cases, like those of the Asomiya, the Naga, the Mizo, the Borok, the Khasi, the Garo, the Bodo and even the small communities like the Hmar, some sections are resorting to violent means. Previously unheard of ethnic identities are emerging in the region. Three Naga tribes – Chakrii, Keza and Sangtang – got together to form a new tribe called Chakesang²³. Relatively advanced sections of some backward communities at times create new ethnic identities, apparently articulating the interests of the community included in the new group, but actually furthering the interests of the relevant dominant elite.

The cases of tribal communities in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh present us with a different picture. Initially more than one tribal community come together to ask for a political-administrative unit with the avowed objective of protecting the interests of the concerned communities but soon realise that they have conflicting interests. When Meghalaya was formed, it was expected that the new state would facilitate the fulfilment of the aspirations of the Khasi, the Garo and the Jaintia. But now after three decades of the existence of the state, a section of the Garo has started arguing that their interests can be protected only if they have a separate Garo state²⁴. The small tribes of what is now known as Arunachal Pradesh appear to have arrived at a holistic identity of the *Arunachali* in the state created out of the erstwhile Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). This was reflected in emergence of organisations like the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU). But recently eighteen organisations of various tribal communities in the Tirap area had asked for an autonomous politico-administrative area for themselves²⁵. If the politics and society of Northeast India is to be understood then the phenomenon of community and ethnic assertions in the North-east, at times with extremist propensities, must be examined in its proper perspective and dealt with carefully.

Middle Class Hegemony and Identity Politics

In the absence of powerful feudal or bourgeois classes, the educated elites of the various communities in the Northeastern region have come to occupy hegemonic positions in their respective communities and have started competing with the relatively advanced sections of their nearest rival communities for material gains. And that in most cases the question of cultural identity has become a means of mass mobilisation for the dominant sections of the relatively backward

communities to pursue their sectarian interests (Baruah, 1988). In Meghalaya, since 1979 exactly seven years after the creation of the state for the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, hate crimes became a part of the politics during agitations launched by ethnic organisation of the tribal communities demanding protective measures like Inner Line Permit (ILP)²⁶.

No effective resistance against such crime can be organised by the non-tribal residents because the political power is fully secured in the hands of the elites of the tribal communities. The complete disempowerment of the non-tribal population has been possible because under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, the traditional political institutions and the Autonomous District Councils entrusted with the responsibility of protecting tribal traditions and interests have been able to establish effective control over land, trade and also job opportunities. In some cases, this control is breached by corrupt practice resorted to by some unscrupulous non-tribals with the aid and abetment of unscrupulous local tribals. However, such practices are not rampant. Traditional communities, in the tribal areas of Northeast India remain kinship based, kin protection remains a major value and therefore there is not much of outcry against the unscrupulous tribals facilitating anti-tribal practices. The newly emerging elites of the local communities of the urban areas campaign against the non-tribals. Such opportunism of the tribal elite is confined mostly to the urban areas where sizable non-tribal populations with considerable economic resources exist. The rural tribal masses do not seem to participate in the hate politics and the hate crimes are aimed mostly against the lower and middle rung of the non-tribal; population like the small property owners, petty traders and government employees and students and not against the non-tribals who are big business persons and big land owners. The fact remains that the hate crimes that take place and strident voices against the non-tribals threatening identity are urban phenomena. And the constant efforts at monopolising job opportunities and small trade is reflective of the fact that these movements carried on in the name of protection of identity are actually movements catering to the needs of the educated middle classes.

This competition acquires additional edge from the natural concern of the educated middle classes for protection and development of cultural identities. We have argued above that unlike the bourgeoisie the educated middle class does not have capital as base of its power. It also does not have the numerical strength of the proletariat or the peasantry. Therefore it has to use emotive issues to establish hegemony. The essential qualifications necessary for successful participation in

liberal democratic practices make the educated middle classes of the ethnic communities the obvious candidates for such hegemony. However, emergence and growth of working classes and generation of resources useful for fulfilling aspirations of educated elite might considerably improve the situation. It is, however, important to note that these competing middle classes aspire to exercise hegemony in their own areas and at the same time accept the reality of the Indian state. The most important student and youth organisations of the region like the All Assam Students' Union, the Khasi Students' Association, the Mizo Students' Union, which lead movements that often result in very serious ethnic conflicts in the region, have not been demanding secession. They have been asking for policies and decisions that could protect the interest of their respective communities.

A look at the movements and resulting conflicts should make it clear that emergence of inter-community conflicts is directly related to the emergence of educated middle classes in the various communities of the region because in most of these cases the identities of the communities concerned have been articulated either by students' organisations or by literary associations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, etc.

Inter-community conflicts of the above kind have been bothering the students of Indian politics and society for quite some time²⁷ but the contemporary literature on the theme uses the term community intermittently with other terms like ethnic group²⁸, people²⁹ and nation/nationality³⁰. The issues raised in the liberal-communitarian controversy³¹, assertion of cultural or ethnic identities³² by a large number of communities with resultant social conflicts have contributed substantially to the importance acquired by communities and their politics.

The question that cannot be avoided is what kind of communities has gained importance? Citing works of authors like Michael Walzer and David Miller (Walzer, 1983; Miller, (1989), Partha Chatterjee argued that during the 1980s when the intense liberal-communitarian debate was carried on in social science literature of the Anglo- American world, the 'nation' in the political sense of the term³³, appeared to be the only form of community which received a large measure of approval (Chatterjee, 1998). Reflecting upon the ideas of community in the Western and the Eastern parts of the world, Chatterjee asserts that contemporary scholarship views community as the relic of the pre-modern and considers larger impersonal political identities as the hallmark of modernity (Ibid,

p. 278). But when we look at the situation in contemporary Northeast India it is not possible to hold that community is associated with 'premodern'. In fact, in the historical literature of the region there is enough evidence to show that the period referred to here as the beginning of modern history is often the period when consciousness about communities grew among peoples, leading to emergence of distinct community identities. These community identities do not have the nuances of the large identities of the liberal kind, particularly those of the nation. In fact, modern political consciousness in Northeast India seems to accompany community consciousness, or at least the social vehicles of 'modernity' seem to have been carriers of community identities and consciousness. The same social forces also have been active here in spreading the identities of what the western scholarship called the relics of the pre-modern, and also what it called the larger impersonal identities, the hallmark of modernity. In Assam, for instance, organisations like the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha, and Sarbojonik Sabha consolidated the Asomiya community and at the same time spread the values that facilitated spread of liberal democratic ideas³⁴. In view of this, it is important to examine the consequences of emergence of community politics for democracy in the region.

Ascendance of 'Community' in the realm of politics seemed to have affected democracy positively so far as the question of participation is concerned. The emergence and the proliferation of the community-based organisations and the popular movements generated by the issues raised by them, have been drawing large number of people of the relatively backward communities to active politics³⁵. The major movements led by these organisations have infused some life into the civil societies of the region. It is important to note that the organisations like All Assam Students' Union, All Bodo Students' Union, Khasi Students' Union and All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union have on many occasions been able to mobilise public opinion successfully to make the concerned state governments and the union government concede to demands generally perceived to be popular in their respective communities but ignored by powers that be.

For democratic politics, individual and his/her rights remain central, and, ideals of liberty and equality are interpreted as freedom to compete with others on equal terms in pursuit of one's private interests. The question – we need to examine in this context is – does community based politics facilitate the exercise of these rights and freedoms? Ascendance of community in the realm of politics seems to adversely affect this concept of freedom because the community in such case

acquires precedence over individuals and therefore interferes with the latter's rights in pursuit of its own goals and values. Contemporary politics of Northeast India is replete with such interference. The ethnocentrism of the organisations mobilising the communities, specially within the areas identified by such a community as their homeland, often makes it impossible for members of communities other than the most numerous and dominant ones in a particular area to freely participate in political activities. While evidence of such intolerance is available in the case of almost all communities of the Northeast, a recent controversy over bandh calls given by an organisation called the Non-tribal Youth Union in Meghalaya reflected this reality in a vivid way. Some young men of non-tribal population in Shillong formed an organisation of their own, called Non-Tribal Youth Union. In pursuance of some demands this organisation called for a bandh, which was opposed by the Khasi Students' Union. The latter claimed that non-Khasi communities had no right to carry on oppositional political activities in the Khasi Hills³⁶. In such situations the freedom of expression of an entire community is sought to be suppressed by the dominant sections of the indigenous communities in an organised and visible manner, and the rights of the individual members of the non-indigenous communities are violated with impunity. The treatment meted out to the non-Naga immigrant labourers in Nagaland by the Naga Students' Federation also reflects this trend. Other student bodies of the region organised on ethnic or community lines too show similar intolerance in their respective perceived homelands.

This should not lead us to the conclusion that the rights of only those viewed as others by a community are violated by community politics. In situations of inter-community conflicts, communities in their efforts at closing the ranks of their respective communities trample upon the individual rights of the members of their own communities. Critiquing or opposing activities of any of the organisations claiming to represent ethnic or community interests by a member of the community concerned is declared as an act of a renegade. Scanning the local newspapers of some of the states of the Northeast in British India would show that even while dealing with criminal activities most communities tend to display a parochial attitude, purely on communal considerations as kin protection remains an important characteristic of tribal societies. It is clear that under such circumstances some of the most important political values of constitutional democracy like the rule of law, equality before the eye of law, freedom of thought and expression with reasonable restrictions, etc. will be seriously undermined.

Attempts at strengthening democratic politics in the region therefore require a thorough critique of the contemporary conception of community in the region.

Most of these communities live in a situation of scarcity and socio-economic underdevelopment in the sense that there has been no scope for emergence of powerful social forces like feudal lords and bourgeoisie. Amalendu Guha had shown in *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977) that at the time of the advent of the British, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, even Assam proper, meaning the Ahom kingdom, was so underdeveloped that there was no monetisation, no significant generation of surplus and virtual absence of technology. The situation in the tribal societies of both hills and plains was worse than that. Many of those societies were pre-literate tribal chiefdoms with loose systems of self-governing arrangements. Those were egalitarian, unstratified communities in which land was communally held and shifting cultivation was the order of the day. Private property was almost unheard of. They were governed by traditions in which the community controlled the life of the individuals. The chiefs governed on the basis of legitimacy derived from rank. His words and decisions were the law though in certain situations efforts were made to arrive at a consensus among the villagers. The Khasi Dorbar was such an example³⁷. The ideas like individual freedom and rule of law, the essentials of the constitutional democracy were alien to those communities. Capital formation in this area has started only recently. The traditional tribal leadership of the chiefdoms have not been able to cope up with the changes brought about by British and post-British administration. A new educated middle class began emerging under the British rule as a result of the changes introduced by the colonial administration. Introduction of western education, liberal constitutional democracy and the capitalist path of development adopted by the state of India and imposed from above in Northeast India have created a situation in which the traditional elites lost power to this newly emerging western educated middle class. In today's Northeast India this class has established hegemony. There is no doubt this class has the intellectual and moral leadership. It is interesting that in most communities the organisation of this class, like the literary association and student organisation have come to occupy the most important position in the public space. This trend indicates the hegemony of the middle classes of various communities. Many of the movements led by the educated middle classes of various communities raise issues like reservation of jobs for the youth of the respective communities and the indigenous communities control over land and trade in their perceived home lands. This class whose roots can be traced to the British era had

only one means to pursue its interest - education. This class has neither the economic resources of the capitalist nor the numbers of the peasantry or the proletariat to be able to exercise political power. Bereft of other resources they employ the slogan of national or community identity to mobilise masses of the respective communities. The large masses accept their hegemony because the middle classes articulate some of the grievances of the lower classes within the compass of national identity³⁸. This is a common practice in the politics of ascendance to hegemony of the middle classes in Northeast India. For instance, when the AASU gave the slogan of 'Joi Aai Asom' (glory to mother Assam) and called people to chase away the foreigners in 1980s, the Asomiya peasantry seemed to believe that once the 'foreigners' were gone the land would be theirs. But as the Assam Accord and the consequences of the Assam movement showed that it was the Asomiya middle class that benefited from the movement. Ever since the advent of the British and till the 'Assam agitation' the skilled and unskilled jobs in Assam both in public and private sectors and also the trade and business were in the hands of non-Asomiya. It is true that because in the pre-British Assam there was hardly any formal schooling and also because the Bengalis, exposed to the western education, English language and the procedures of British administrations much before, had an advantage in many occupations that began in Assam with the introduction of the colonial administration. This led initially to a situation where the Bengalis came to dominate the bureaucracy and also the professions. When marketisation began under British, outsiders like the Marwaris, who had both the capital and the acumen, began to dominate trade and business. Despite some initiatives of the emerging Assamese elites of the time in tea industry and emergence of an organised voice of the newly educated middle class, the local population remained marginalised in British bureaucracy, professions and trade and business. When the local population began to develop competence through spread of education, they started competing in the area of professions and bureaucracy. The organised voices of the new Asomiya middle class expressed through organisations like the Jorhat Sarbajanic Sabha, Asom Chatra Sanmilani, Asom Sahitya Sabha and others, the doors of bureaucracy and professions began to open but very slowly. Because of lack of capital the new Asomiya middle class, which was the most influential class within the community, however failed to make a significant dent in trade and business. With small capital in hand they could not hope to seriously challenge the big business but the education and small capital in their possession created aspirations of becoming dominant in the non-capital intensive sector. This led to slogans of protecting language, culture, and land for the Asomiya, and the middle class

began organizing the community in the name of national culture. The clamour for Assamese as the official language and medium of instruction that began in 1873 and continued till 1972 when the goal was achieved was indeed an attempt at hegemonising Assam. This pattern is clearly visible in other communities of the region too. The agenda of the movements launched by the youth organisations, identity politics in this region and the issues raised by them show that the assertion of identity is as vehicle of middle class interests. These movements clearly are the result of competition for monopoly over land, jobs and trade among the educated middle classes of various communities. Unless enough opportunities for development are created to make serious cut throat competitions not compulsive, these forces will pursue aggressive identity politics and the conflicts will only worsen. However, there is no reason to believe that development will automatically bring an end to identity politics. Along with development, the raising of democratic consciousness in its true sense is necessary to build an atmosphere of tolerance and inclusive politics.

Notes:

¹ *Asomiya*, as distinguished from the Assamese meaning all those who reside permanently in Assam, is a nationality that considers the Assamese language and the culture that grew around it under the patronage of Ahom monarchy that ruled most parts of Brahmaputra valley from 1226 to 1826, as their own.

² Source, “*Voter Turnout Highlights of Lok Sabha Election 2014*“, Election Commission of India, http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/SVEEP/VoterTurnoutHighlightsLokSabha2014.pdf accessed on 6.4.17

³ There is raging debate going on in *The Shillong Times* about the violence perpetrated on the non-tribal residents of Meghalaya, particularly in Shillong. A large number of local residents have condemned the ethnic divide and violence that have been accompanying the agitation carried on by some of the ethnic organisations of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo. The most prominent of the commentators are Patricia Mukhim, Toki Blah, H.H Mohrmen, and Jennifer Dkhar. There indeed are others who are participating in this debate. See, articles in *The Shillong Times* of October 2013 onwards.

⁴ For information of these and political issues related to such conflicts in Africa see, Sandbrook, (2000).

⁵ For a description, see Jones, (2006).

⁶ Manorama Sharma has shown this in a discussion of identity in the context of India’s Northeast. See, Phukan. & Dutta (Eds). (1995).

⁷ For a discussion of some of the issues see, Piper, (2011). See also, Fowden, (1988).

⁸ For some discussion see, Mamdani, (1996)

⁹ For a discussion see, Rossiter, (1973). See also, Mye & Morpurgo, (1964).

¹⁰ For various meanings and history of this term, see Williams, (1976), p. 178.

¹¹ For a detailed report and analysis of such organisations, see Baruah, (2000a). In the North Eastern Hill University, the oldest Central University, all major tribes and linguistic groups of the region have separate students associations. The University does not officially recognise these but the tacit consent of the authorities to functioning of these organisations is reflected by the fact that university officials grace the celebrations organised by such associations.

¹² Some of the best statements that documented the issues raised and the politics involved are to be found in Abbi (ed) (1984).

¹³ See Patricia Mukhim's writing on such problems in Meghalaya. She has been writing almost every Friday on these issues in the context of the Khasi community.

¹⁴ The term tribe has also acquired a peculiar meaning in India. For a discussion see, Pusa, (1996).

¹⁵ A good collection of article as on the problems related to such relation found in Basu & kohli (Eds.) (1998).

¹⁶ See, Khan, (1992). See, also Ray, (1973), pp.28-29.

¹⁷ For a discussion of some of the issues involved and a description of the emerging community and ethnic assertion see, Phukan & Dutta (Eds.) (1995), pp. 25-34.

¹⁸ For proof of this in the case of All Assam Students' Union, see Baruah, (1991) and for Khasi Students' Union see, Baruah (Ed.). (2002). Most other community based students and youth organisations of the region have been pursuing this line of politics.

¹⁹ Some evidence of this is available in the discussion of regional political parties of Meghalaya in Sengupta, (1998).

²⁰ For an analysis of election strategies of this sort in Assam see, Baruah, (1996).

²¹ For a discussion of the politics of the Asomiya militant outfit ULFA see Das (1994). Also see, 'ULFA National question in Assam', in *Symphony of Freedom, Papers on nationality question*, Hyderabad, India Peoples Resistance Forum, 1996.

²² For a detailed discussion, see, Sharma, (1990).

²³ See, Pusa, A. (1996).

²⁴ For over a decade now the Garo National Council has been demanding a separate state for the Garos.

²⁵ *Amar Asom*, April 24, 1998.

²⁶ See editorial in *The Shillong Times*, "Hate Crimes on the Rise" November 18, 2013. As the inner line permit issue has clearly demonstrated such demands are actually used by the educated middle classes to pursue other goals. The debate over the ILP agitation in Meghalaya carried out in the pages of *The Shillong Times* proves conclusively that though the pro ILP agitators are trying to claim that there is a threat to the identity of the indigenous tribes from infiltrators, implying that their target group is the illegal immigrants yet, they give away their real interest when the same group of activist begin attacking non-tribal labourers or give tacit support to policies advocated by some traditional leaders that non-tribals should not be allowed to rent houses. It is clear that ILP cannot prevent illegal immigrants because they do not seek permission to come to Meghalaya. ILP cannot stop illegal immigrants. Obviously ILP is aimed at restricting Indian citizens from settling in Meghalaya. It is of course well-known that most of the non-tribal settlers in Meghalaya, particularly in Shillong, which was the capital of British Assam, are

government employees, petty traders and professionals like Doctors, Lawyers and petty traders. There indeed are some big businesspersons and also small land owners. There were some labourers who came with the British but labourers continue to come even now because all developmental activities require them. There now a large number of Nepali and Bangladeshi labourers in the coal mines owned by Khasi-Jaintia mine owners. There are news reports of regular atrocities committed on them by local youth.

²⁷ For a major effort in understanding such conflicts see, Basu & Kohli (Eds.). (1998).

²⁸ Referring often to small groups with primordial loyalties.

²⁹ Referring to large communities with cultural, political, ethnographic or geographical distinctions.

³⁰ With strong actual or aspired right to self-determination.

³¹ For some of the issues raised in this controversy see, Avinery & de-Shalit (Eds.). (1992). Also see; Young (1993).

³² For a discussion on ethnicity see Phadnis, (1989).

³³ For a discussion on the two major approaches to the concept of nation and its application for Indian politics see, Baruah (1992).

³⁴ For a discussion on *Jorhat Sarbojonik Sabha*, see Goswami, (1985).

³⁵ For discussions on the issues raised by the major youth movements of the region, see articles included in Baruah (Ed.). (2002).

³⁶ See the debate carried out in the Letters to the Editor Column in *The Shillong Times* in August 1998.

³⁷ But it is not possible to ascertain as to how old this tradition was. For the Austric rooted Khasi language Dorbar appears to be a loan word. Therefore, whether it is a really traditional institution, claimed by many Khasi intellectuals as existing from 'time immemorial' is rather doubtful.

³⁸ Gramsci had explained that intellectual and moral leadership is often obtained by ruling or dominant classes by articulating the some of the interests of the classes below them.

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Article: Land Alienation and Rural Development in Northeast India

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Land Alienation and Rural Development in Northeast India*

--- Walter Fernandes

Abstract

While Northeast India experiences the rural crisis as the rest of India does, it has not had farmer suicides. Specific to the region is land alienation and conflicts resulting from it. Much investment has been made in education and health but the best institutions are located in Guwahati and Shillong. One of its results is land alienation and the conflicts resulting from it because that is the only resource the tribes have. When a family needs money it sells its land to send children to colleges away from their home or to address a medical emergency. Because of these needs much of the land alienation today is within the tribe. Some rich individuals buy land from members of their own tribe. Strengthening of patriarchy, class formation, internal conflicts and rural impoverishment are among its consequences.

Amid this apparent crisis some State governments and voluntary agencies have attempted alternatives to the dominant development practices in the region. The paper analyses these alternatives in Nagaland and Meghalaya and the issue of cross border trade. It is based on the belief that the alternatives can be revived and that the civil society-run educational and health institutions can be turned into private-public partnership (PPP) between the State and the NGOs, in order to build this infrastructure in the rural areas.

Key words: Civil Society, Communitisation, Development, Land alienation

Northeast India (NEI) does experience a rural crisis but it is different from that in the rest of India. The region has not had farmer suicides but has witnessed land loss and conflicts resulting from it. Much investment has been made in education and health but most good quality institutions are in Guwahati and Shillong and very few of them are located in the district headquarters or even in the remaining

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State capitals. As a result, many families in the hill areas and even in the plains are forced to sell their land which is their only resource, to send children to colleges or take the sick to health care institutions. Thus, much of the land alienation is within the tribe. Some rich individuals buy it from other members. Among its consequences are class formation, rural impoverishment, and conflicts.

Some States and civil society groups have attempted alternatives to counter this apparent crisis. From the 1980s Nagaland encouraged village development boards (VDB). Communitisation, one more experiment, involves handing supervision of schools, water supply and electricity over to the village council. Despite shortcomings, they are steps in the right direction. Many civil society-led self-help groups (SHGs) have successfully brought women together for alternatives. There are voluntary sector and Churches run schools and health centres, but they get no support from the State. In Meghalaya, on the contrary, rich individuals and private entrepreneurs are involved in uncontrolled coal mining that provides jobs and income to many families but also destroys its land and affects food security. Villages on the Indo-Myanmar border have lived on barter trade with their counterparts but the Centre does not recognise it though official trade which is why it is moribund.

The first hypothesis of this paper is that these and other efforts can become alternatives in rural development. Its second assumption is that the civil society-run educational and health institutions can be turned into private-public partnership (PPP) between the State and the NGOs, in order to build the infrastructure in the rural areas, and prevent land alienation. In Meghalaya, restoring land destroyed by mining can be its basis. SHGs are basic to this transition. Barter trade which is beneficial to both sides can be revived in the border areas.

Nature of Rural Development in NEI

Planned development in India is based on the principle of modernisation that requires freedom from tradition and superstition (Planning Commission, 1956, p. 236). The plan was implemented through industries in the urban areas and modern agriculture in the villages. Initially agriculture was identified with rural development to such an extent that till the 1970s there was a single ministry known as the *Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Community Development and Cooperation*. Agriculture is obviously basic to rural development but to be

beneficial to all the communities it has to go hand in hand with other components. But as a study of agricultural research shows, its focus is on higher production that favours big farmers and does not reach the small farmers (Chandy, 1993, pp. 313-316) or communities beyond settled agriculture. This approach ignores the fact that most Indian villages are not homogeneous communities but are alliances of many castes with unequal power. Ignoring it can result in caste-based inequality in land and other asset ownership and in access to education and other services. There are indications that the failure of planned development to deal with this system has resulted in growing inequalities between dominant and subaltern castes and the rich and the poor (Kurien, 1997, pp. 134-135).

It is, however, not fully true of NEI where the tribes do not have a caste system and it is weak among the rest except the immigrants. The difference is reflected in land ownership and forms of agriculture. Even Assam with only 12.94 percent tribal population, shows a community trend that is a leftover both of its tribal past and of tenancy emanating from the Tai Ahom tradition and the colonial *zamindari* and *ryotwari*. One does not have accurate data on land ownership in Assam but according to estimates only a third of the land has *pattas*, a third is under *eksonia* (annual) patta and the rest is predominantly community managed by the tribes or fishing and other backward groups (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005, pp. 10-11). Patta land prevails in Tripura since Hindu peasants from the erstwhile East Pakistan who came in search of land have occupied much of it. The law was changed in 1960 to recognise only individual ownership and deny the tribes right over much of their community land (Bhattacharyya 1988). In Manipur, the tribes who are 34 percent of the population live on 90 percent of its land and that is a major cause of tension in the State. Amid these differences common to the tribes is land management under the community based customary law. Each tribe has its own law but most of them combine individual family cultivation with clan or village management. Even family land is managed under the community based customary law (Nongkynrih, 2009, pp. 16-37). The formal law, on the contrary, is individual based. Modernisation results in the formal-customary law interface which often facilitates land alienation because of lack of preparation for the interface.

Process of Land Alienation

Official schemes are the first cause of land alienation as one witnesses in the experience of the Garo, Jaintia and Khasi, the main tribes of Meghalaya, all three

of whom are matrilineal but patriarchal. Succession is through women but men control society and political power from the village council to the State level. Most Central and State institutions do not respect their community based system but impose individual ownership on them through official schemes. For example, in the 1980s the Rubber Board encouraged rubber plantation in the East Garo Hills district. Individual land ownership in the name of heads of families understood as men in their matrilineal tribe was a condition for subsidies and bank loans. Transfer of much community land to individual men resulted from it, thus weakening both the community and women who had limited power in their tribe. A study done two decades later found that 30 percent of families in the district had become landless (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005, pp. 113-115). Similar encouragement given to coffee plantation among the Karbis (Bathari, 2009, pp. 142-159) and to tea plantation among the Dimasas of Assam (Barbora, 2002, pp. 1285-1292) has resulted in monopoly of much common land by a few powerful individuals thus depriving the majority of this livelihood resource.

The individual orientation of the formal law and the ambiguity resulting from its interface with the customary law are basic to internal land alienation. Some individuals use this ambiguity to alienate land for themselves. For example, in some Khasi villages men who control the village council use the formal-customary law interface to transfer the village commons to their own individual name (Mukhim, 2009, pp. 38-52). Among the community based Dimasa tribe, a family is allowed to treat some clan land as its own for some time in order to grow trees on it. Because of the encouragement given by the State to commercial crops, some of them grow long-term crops like oranges, tea and coffee, and turn it into almost permanent individual land (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005, pp. 192-193). Traditionally the Akas of West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, who are shifting cultivators, lacked even the concept of individual ownership. They get usufruct rights over community land for a season but individuals can cultivate land on the river banks as their own during a year. Some powerful individuals among them cultivate it every year and in practice turn it into their permanent property. The formal law supports this abuse (Fernandes, Pereira & Khatso, 2007, pp. 37-38).

This change marks the transition of the view of land as sustenance in their shifting cultivation based subsistence economy to its commercial value as a commodity. The customary-formal interface pushes them into the new system with no preparation for it. A few like the Khasi leaders who transfer land to themselves,

internalise the commercial value. Even then some of such leaders do not get its benefits. For example, those who grow commercial crops like tea, coffee and rubber lack control over their marketing because the market is controlled by outsiders who do not give them a fair price. Thus many of them lose out because of it, but the community loses much more since its sustainable management system comes under attack. One does not state that their tradition should remain unchanged. It has changed in the past and will change in the future. The problem is caused by the system changing without the people being prepared for it. When change is imposed on them with no preparation for it, a few individuals use it to their own advantage, though they too may not get its benefits.

Land Alienation to Development Projects

Development projects are the third mode of land alienation. An example is minerals in Meghalaya. They have become major sources of profit for the private sector. A study of development-induced displacement in Meghalaya 1947-2010 found only 586 acres used for mining till 2000. More might have been used but it could not be identified. It would not have been more than two or three thousand acres. But 25,747.53 acres used for coal, uranium and limestone mining were identified during the 2001-10 decade, 21,151.76 acres of it forest land (Fernandes et al. 2016, p.358). Deforestation by mining began in the 1970s and 56 sq. km of dense forests and 28.9 sq. km of open forests were lost to mining and to related schemes like settlements between 1975 and 2005 (Sarma & Kushwaha, 2007). Much of the coal mining land is not counted in this total because in Meghalaya coal is mined under the customary land holding pattern. The community allots plots to individuals some of whom also take private land on lease. No official records are kept. Mining is done with no safety measures, through "rat holes" (D'Souza et al. 2013). That land is uncultivable when it is returned to the original owner. It raises questions about the economy of NEI in which some 70 percent of the population depends on the primary sector and over 20 percent on the tertiary sector. The secondary sector is weak. Total land alienated in the name of development is not less than 2.4 lakh acres in Meghalaya, 54,000 acres in Nagaland 1947-2010, 52,000 in Mizoram, 2.1 lakh in Tripura, and 14.1 lakh acres in Assam 1947-2000. Land used in the name of national development has deprived more than 30 lakhs people of their livelihood in these States but has not replaced the jobs lost in the primary sector. Rehabilitation is all but non-existent in the region (ibid: 24-28). Even many schemes that are part of rural development

add to rural poverty. The combination of possible land loss and neglect of the productive sector shows the need for a people-centred development paradigm.

Land Loss to Immigrants

Migration to the region too results in land loss because the ambiguity in the formal law can encourage the immigrants to encroach on common land. For example, both common and eksonia patta land in Assam are considered State property. It is easy for immigrants to encroach on it and then bribe officials to give them a patta. As interviews with many of them show, they as well as immigrants from Bihar are landless agricultural labourers living in poverty and low wages in their feudal society, and come in search of land (Majumdar, 2002, pp. 91-101). Their poverty is the push factor. The pull factor is fertile land in the Brahmaputra valley, lax laws governing it, and the possibility of getting pattas by bribing officials. Being agricultural labourers they have skills required to prosper by cultivating that land. Most of them grow three crops, including the best commercial varieties like ginger while the local tradition is of a single crop in shifting cultivation or as a consequence of the share cropper system. Land loss to the immigrants is a major cause of conflicts between the local communities and the immigrants (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005).

It may be noted that this ambiguity with regard to the common land in the formal law is an important cause of high migration to the region. Assam, for example, had 19,44,444 direct migrants during 1951-2001 which is the difference between what would have been its population if its growth had followed the national average and the excess population counted in each decade. With natural growth the number of immigrants had grown to some 40 lakhs in 2001, around 17 lakhs of them Bengali speaking Muslims and 23 lakhs Hindi, Nepali or Bengali speaking Hindus (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2001, pp. 108-109). Also the remaining States of NEI experienced high growth. It began in the 1890s when the British regime encouraged East Bengal peasants (90% of them Muslim) to cultivate land in Assam in order to grow more food on what they called wasteland and also raise higher revenue for the administration (Roy 1995: 64). Bihari and Nepali Hindus were encouraged to join their ranks from the 1930s (Zehol, 2008, p.60). That trend continued after 1947. As a result, against the all India growth of 178.1 percent 1901-2001, it was 771.2 percent in Meghalaya and was similar in the rest of the region (Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2001, pp. 123-128; census CDs 2011).

Land Loss for Education and Health

The poor health and education infrastructure in the rural areas, particularly in the hills, causes land alienation within the tribe or community. The region has some good quality educational and health institutions, but, most of them are in cities like Guwahati and Shillong. Hardly any good institution exists in the hill areas or in the rural areas of the plains. As a result, parents have no choice but to send their wards to colleges in these cities or outside the region. Some civil society and church groups are running good institutions in small towns and even in some rural areas but with no aid from the State. So they have to charge fees which many parents find difficult to pay. For example, when a school opened in the 1970s in the Southern Angami area of Nagaland, many families went beyond their single paddy crop in their terraces and vegetables in the *jhum* fields, and grew a second crop of potatoes to earn money for school fees. That amount was inadequate to send their children for higher studies outside the State, so they began to cut forests that they had protected till then (D'Souza, 2001, p.38).

In most other areas sale of land to richer members of the community is the common way of paying for higher education or for medical emergencies. The sellers may be able to negotiate its price to some extent while selling it for children's college education. But to rush a patient to a city they have no choice but to sell their best land at a throwaway price. Land is their only resource and its sale sets the process of conflicts in motion (Kekhrieseno, 2009, pp. 207-209). Rural impoverishment, class formation and internal conflicts are among its consequences. It thus shows that there is a close link between the absence of a rural infrastructure and land alienation.

Some Alternatives

What has been discussed till now shows that one cannot impose on NEI the type of rural development that is not in consonance with its economy and society. Far from resulting in development, it can take its people towards land alienation and an economy that does not create productive jobs. The individual value superimposed on their communities with no preparation for the change is basic to the processes that lay the foundation of conflicts, most of them land related (Vanderkherkhove, 2010, pp. 110-111). That picture looks bleak. But on the other side, some governments and civil society groups in the region have attempted grassroots level alternatives. In Nagaland, they are the Village Development

Boards (VDB) established in 1980 and communitisation of 2002. During their 35 years of existence, VDBs have played a role in rural development and have functioned as financial intermediaries. For over a decade, communitisation has attempted to deliver services like education, health, power and water supply at the village level. They have some shortcomings but have also met with success.

As conceptualised by Mr A. M. Gokhale, the then Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Phek District, the VDBs formed under the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978 were an attempt at bridging the gap between the State and the people. The VDBs were to be a body different from the Village Council, the powerful traditional self-governing institution consisting of the Village Chief, clan elders and *Gaonburas* (officials appointed by the British), but working in close collaboration with it in order to look after development of the village by formulating and implementing its development programmes (Borthakur, 2008). Later, as Secretary, Rural Development in 1980-81, Gokhale introduced VDBs in all 918 recognised villages of the State.

[\(http://villagedevelopmentboardnagaland.blogspot.in/\)](http://villagedevelopmentboardnagaland.blogspot.in/).

All permanent residents of a village are its members and the DC is its ex-officio chairperson. It is to have a 5 to 25 member management committee chosen by the Village Council, 25 percent of them women who are otherwise excluded from the male controlled council. In practice, each ward is represented in this committee normally for a term of 3 years. The Department of Rural Development controls its funds and guides the VDB through the DC and the District Rural Development Agency. The BDO has to visit the village and supervise its work, prepare and submit a tentative village Plan and the report of the project to the Chairperson. A major function of the VDBs is proper use of funds allotted to the village as grant-in-aid and of matching cash grants. In most villages, the Village Council and VDB work together with the former as the supreme body that maintains law and order, administers justice and is the customary law court under Art 371(A) of the Constitution. The VDB is accountable to it. There has been tension between the two in some villages. Some allege that because of corruption the quality of bridges and roads of some VDBs construct is poor. Among other problems is their failure to stop the migration of educated unemployed youth to the urban areas by helping them start income generation alternatives in the village. Poor gender representation is one more concern. But the VDBs have also shown signs of success (Pereira, 2016).

Communitisation is State-community partnership for managing education, health services and electricity. These public resources are transferred to the community for service delivery through decentralisation and delegation. It requires trust in the community, and its training and capacity building to manage the services. It has shown signs of success. Before communitisation government schools were known for their poor infrastructure and maintenance, teacher absenteeism and poor attendance of students. The community-based Village Education Committees (VEC) has overcome many of these problems. Three months' advance salary of teachers is drawn and kept in the VEC account and disbursed to the teachers on the first of the month. The VEC oversees the attendance of staff and students, maintains buildings, furniture and other assets and implements the Mid-day Meal Scheme. As a result, most villages have witnessed a reduction in dropout rates, improvement in teacher attendance, in academic results, and shift of students from private to government schools. There is similar improvement in health care, attendance of the medical personnel and maintenance of the health as well as the electricity infrastructure and of payments (Pandey, 2008).

Some civil society groups (voluntary agencies) also provide alternatives in much of NEI. Among them are SHGs many of which have successfully brought women together. The voluntary sector and church bodies also provide good schools and health services but without any support from the State. They keep their school fees low but even that small amount is too high for the poor so they are excluded from their schools. Poor roads in the district and between villages further limit access to the schools, health centres and markets. Because of the low fees the schools are unable to pay the teachers the type of salaries that the State pays. Because of low salaries, staff turnover is high since teachers tend to move to government schools and college where they get a much higher salary. The health care of their institutions reaches the poor but they have to depend on charity or foreign aid since they get no grants from the State.

Cross Border Initiatives

A recent study of the present author and his colleagues on communities separated by the Indo-Myanmar border found similar initiatives across the borders (Fernandes et al. 2015). It showed that schools and medical institutions in Myanmar's Chin State bordering Mizoram and the Sagaing Region bordering Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, are not different from those in the villages of NEI. Many institutions exist on paper but do not function properly.

Access to those that function is limited by the hilly terrain and lack of transport between villages. Because of poor communication links between their region and the rest of Myanmar, the Konyak, Tangkhul and Thangshang tribes living in the Naga Autonomous Area of Sagaing Region depend on the Indian side for trade, education and health care. Some children of the Thadou-Kuki tribes attend schools through legally recognised channels. They have a hostel at Tamu on the border and go daily to a school in Moreh in Manipur. The immigration rules allow them to enter India daily and return to Tamu in the evening. But most Nagas studying in Arunachal, Nagaland and Manipur are not legally registered. The rules governing the entry permit allow them to enter India on a few days in a month for trade and to visit relatives. Their stay in India is limited to three days which is inadequate for students. Most of them, therefore, enter and live in India 'illegally'. Their families do not consider their stay illegal because they think of the tribe on two sides of the border as one. So they pay no attention to the international boundary. Respecting legalities would not allow them to come to the Indian side for health emergencies since they cannot wait for the day set aside for entry permits. So they come through 'illegal' routes. Moreover, exactly as families in NEI do, also their counterparts in the Sagaing region sell some of their land in order to invest in the future of their children or for medical emergencies.

Even that possibility is non-existent in the Chin State bordering Mizoram and Manipur. Its infertile land with very few springs is losing its fertility further because of deforestation and environmental degradation. Families that can't afford it, send their children "illegally" to schools in India. Some families are involved in trade with Mizoram but many Mizos allege that they monopolise trade in their part of the State. Even that possibility is available only to a few. The solution for the rest is migration to India and Southeast Asia. Mizoram has an estimated 100,000 Chin migrants doing the lowest paid unskilled work in exploitive conditions and Delhi has around 10,000 of them (Xavier & Moraes, 201, p. 2). Their migration is also a cause of much tension.

Mutual dependence in trade is stronger between most tribes separated by the border but official decisions are rarely supportive of it. For example, the 22 items recognised for exchange at the border by the 1997 Indo-Myanmar trade agreement do not include those in which the tribes trade on a daily basis since formal trade gets priority. The rules on entry permits do not recognise their mutual dependence. Recently, the Government has decided to stop barter trade though official trade is declining. In 2011-12, it was only USD 13 million, i.e. a

little over one percent of the Indo-Myanmar trade of 1.28 billion, most of which is in favour of Myanmar (Ghosal, 2014, p. 23). Official circles ignore the fact that these people-to-people contacts are their contribution to the economy of the region and should be included in the Look East Policy. Policy makers limit themselves to a corporate sector oriented infrastructure that can turn NEI into a corridor to reach ASEAN but does not create the conditions required for people oriented rural development. The infrastructure created by the state does not reach the rural areas.

Towards an Alternative

It is clear that an understanding of the processes of land alienation is crucial for rural development in NEI. Another factor which should be borne in mind is the relations of the tribes with their counterparts in Myanmar. Study shows that when the soil is fertile and has many springs, some tribes like the Angami and Tangkhul practise terrace cultivation or combine it with jhum and even wet rice cultivation (Shimray 2009). Some like the Tangsa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh also practise both wet cultivation and jhum, and have a system of the community recognising individually owned land (Nongkynrih, 2009). But most tribes of the region as well as across the border depend on jhum, land for which is managed as a common property resource (CPR) of the clan over which the individual family has usufruct rights. Health care too is conditioned by poor transport and environmental degradation.

Alternatives have, therefore, to be found to the processes of land alienation. In education and health one needs to go beyond high status urban institutions. Sustainable development involves making the services inclusive and accessible to the villages, particularly to the rural poor. The big institutions may be needed as specialised centres but basic to the approach is respect for every citizen's right to a life with dignity which is how the Supreme Court has interpreted Article 21 of the Constitution on right to life (Vaswani, 1992, p. 158). Education can be a tool to protect this right, for example, by countering the causes of land alienation, impoverishment and ethnic conflicts. One has to go beyond prestigious colleges and cater to villages and small towns. As long as their population lacks access to good colleges in each district, families will be forced to sell their land in order to send their children or the sick to cities.

That is where PPP can provide a solution. Today it is limited to industries and big institutions. It can be made real in villages and small towns. In NEI, free education is limited to mostly poor quality State-run schools. Communitisation, however, has made a beginning in the direction of an alternative. The State can establish a similar partnership with the voluntary sector and Church bodies that provide quality education in villages and small towns. Grant-in-aid is a possible alternative to provide access to poor children to their good institutions and to make Article 21 and the right to education real to the poor. The State can pay the salaries and maintain all the schools coming under the State Board.

The grant-in-aid scheme is not a dream. It has been implemented in the Southern States, Maharashtra and a few others since the 1960s. The State pays teacher salaries and pension and even funds for the maintenance of the buildings of private institutions coming under the State Board. Liberalisation, basic to which is privatisation of services, has started destroying this scheme. Private schools founded after 1992 are not entitled to the grants. If it is adapted to the region it can become a model to the entire NEI too. Its first step is a commitment to inclusive education and to the imperative of preventing land alienation and the conflicts that follow from it. PPP with agencies that impart good quality education can be its tool. The State needs to pay teacher salaries, fund the maintenance of the buildings and other facilities run by them and for mid-day meals. The objective of this approach is to protect the right to education of children who are unable to buy education. The VDBs and communitisation can be models of cooperation between the State and the civil society.

PPP can be a tool also of making health services accessible in the rural areas, particularly to the poor. City based health institutions can provide specialised services but priority has to go to the villages where most health centres exist only in name. PPP with private agencies providing good services can respond to the human right of health care. Besides, transport is also equally important. Focus today is on six lane roads and Asian and National highways. They are required but for the poor to gain access to the market and to the centres of education and health care, it has to give priority to the rural areas. To be inclusive, rural development has thus to go beyond its present form whose benefits tend to remain with 'Shining India'. It has to steer education, health care and transport towards small towns and villages particularly their poor inhabitants. This approach can prevent land alienation and the conflicts that result from it.

One cannot stop at it because education, health and transport can only provide the social and physical infrastructure that the people require. Economic changes beginning with agriculture have to support this process. Today priority in agriculture is accorded to settled cultivation on the assumption that it is the only acceptable form and that shifting cultivation is destructive of nature. One cannot deny that because of causes like deforestation it has become destructive today but in the past it was environmentally the best method for that terrain (Ramakrishnan, 2001). Because of this assumption the trend is to ban it and impose commercial crops on the people over which they have no control. Instead, ways have to be found of modernising their tradition by introducing crops that are within their control and training them to process and market them. Technology has to be invented that takes work in agriculture beyond drudgery. In Meghalaya, food security demands that the land that has become uncultivable is restored. It can provide the employment that the people need in one season till the productivity of that land is restored.

Conclusion

The paper suggests that the type of modernisation of the tribal societies of the NEI on which the present form of rural development is based, results in land alienation and conflicts. Alternatives have to be developed that make it possible for the people to own their development. It has to include not merely agriculture in its limited form but also education, health care and a rural infrastructure and ensure that they go hand in hand in order to make the right to a life with dignity under Article 21 real to every rural inhabitant in the region. It requires a people-centred, not a corporate sector centred understanding of development.

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**Article: Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers:
Ethnography about Militarised Cultures in Northeast India**

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Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers: Ethnography about Militarised Cultures in Northeast India

--- Dolly Kikon

Abstract

In this article, I focus on the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India and present three ethnographic accounts about experiences of human rights from the region. Often engagements about human rights and engage with different audiences – from policy makers, activists, academics, and grassroots organisations – quickly fall into two categories. Those who look out draw from international institutions like the United Nations and similar rights policies and regulations. While the second group, those who look in, connects with social and political movements in their local contexts. However, no categories are neat. Highlighting everyday experiences of human rights activities in Northeast India, this essay describes the ethics and challenges of engaging with notions of human rights in militarised societies like Northeast India.

Key words: Armed forces, Human rights, Insurgency, MASS

Introduction

During the summer of 1998, I was in Dimapur for my summer break. I was studying law in Delhi University and as a member of a human rights organisation in Nagaland, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR),¹ some friends and I organised a human rights workshop. Such exercises were routine for many of us. During this particular summer, we organised a three-day workshop that started in the morning and ended with dinner. As one of the organisers, I would wake up in the morning and rush off after informing my mother that I was going for an NPMHR meeting. One evening my mother asked me, ‘So how much did your boss pay you for your work?’ Confused I replied, ‘Which boss?’ And she reminded me, ‘Your boss Mr. M.P. Mishra?’ I told her, ‘Mom. I am not working for Mr. M.P. Mishra’, and explained that NPMHR was an acronym for an organisation, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights.

I was introduced to the world of human rights through organisations with comprehensive aims, objectives, and acronyms. Today, as an anthropologist working in an armed conflict region like Northeast India, I frequently come across instruments, mechanisms, regulations, resolutions, declarations, and charters that appear in various human rights documents. Yet, for my mother's generation – the notion of human rights was seldom linked to a structured organisation like the NPMHR, but more to nameless political collectives in the villages where friends and neighbours volunteered their time, produce – grains, cattle, labour among other things – for the Naga movement. My mother was born before the Second World War and her childhood memories of the fierce battle that raged in the Naga Hills is a mixture of sounds and smells: the gun shots, the ambulances rushing to the military hospitals, and the whispers of her siblings in the underground shelter when the battle intensified around them. Moving on, she lived through the Second World War, the India- China War of 1962, the formation of Nagaland in 1963, and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Her generation became the first batch of casualty of India's counter insurgency operations in postcolonial India. She told me how the Indian security forces set up check gates outside her village and stamped the wrists of the cultivators with red ink as they went to the paddy fields. In the evening, the villagers were required to show the red inscriptions in order to re-enter the village. This was one of the countless counter insurgency tactics besides rape, torture, and disappearances that have taken place in the long armed conflict in Northeast India. My mother's generation also lived to witness the most violent phases of the fratricidal killings among the Nagas and other ethnic groups.

In this article, I focus on the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India and present three ethnographic accounts about experiences of human rights from the region. Often engagements about human rights and engagement with different audiences – from policy makers, activists, academics, and grassroots organisations – quickly fall into two categories. Those who look out draw from international institutions like the United Nations and similar rights policies and regulations. While the second group, those who look in, connects with social and political movements in their local contexts. However, no categories are neat. This article highlights how everyday experiences of human rights activities in Northeast India might help us to understand the practices,

ethics, and challenges of engaging with notions of human rights in militarised societies like Northeast India and beyond.

Here, it is important to contextualise the political history of Northeast India briefly. The region has seen numerous armed conflicts since Indian's independence and is considered as the hub of the longest running insurgency movement in South Asia, the Indo-Naga armed conflict. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) presents that the entire region has approximately close to a hundred insurgency/terrorism movement². Within this backdrop, the standard of human rights in Northeast India has been deplorable given the imposition of extra constitutional regulations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958). However, in the early 1990s, human rights became an official state project in India. The Human Rights Protection Act was passed in 1993. Within this act, Section 2 Clause (d) of Act defines 'human rights' as, '...the rights relating to life, liberty, equality, and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the international Covenants and enforceable by courts in India.'³ Soon, even though the armed conflict and counter insurgency operations in Northeast India carried on, the Manipur Human Rights Commission was set up in 1998 and the Assam Human Rights Commission came up in 1996 as a consequence of the establishment of the Human Rights Protection Act of 1993. However, the formation of the Manipur and Assam Human Rights Commissions played a marginal role for the militarised societies in Northeast⁴. These state human rights commissions were not authorised to take up cases relating to the Indian security forces, which magnified the disjuncture between the everyday experiences and understandings about what constitutes human rights on the ground and the dysfunctional and defunct procedures that were laid down by state authorities. In these state commissions, certain practices were recognised as human rights violation and therefore necessary to be addressed, while those outside the ambit of the rights commissions were excluded and left out⁵.

In the backdrop of this political history about the contestations over what constitutes human rights in Northeast India, the following section of the article is divided into three sections. First, I describe a picnic trip with a human rights activist from Ukhrul and his encounters with various actors – both state and non-state – as he explains his social and political world. The second section of the paper is presented as an interview with a former human rights activist from Assam. His reflections about his arrests and what constituted human rights from

‘the ground’ offers understandings about the fragile lives of rights activists. The final section of the paper presents conversations during a road trip with an activist from Imphal. Conversations about family, landscape, and hobbies such as gardening offer the diverse and complex world of people in militarised zones. Emphasizing on the practice of everyday life as an important site to tease important social histories of human society, this article focuses on the everyday lives of people and reiterates what, Michel de Certeau notes as, ‘the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible.’ (de Certeau, 1988, p. 93). The experiences of human rights activists I present in the following section of this article is highly ethnographic, but is founded on a theoretical framework of human rights, justice, and violence.

Picnics, Death, and Terror

In the summer of 2013 I visited the home of James and the trip left an impression on my mind. As my stay came to an end in James’s hometown, we trekked up a mountain one morning with a group of friends. As we climbed higher, he told us that he had attended an international workshop on human rights in a South Asian country recently. He shared his experiences about the different simulation exercises they had to carry out. Initially, he found it amusing but said that he enjoyed the interaction with other participants from Thailand and Cambodia. As we were talking about his trip, the fog began to roll in. Apart from the scattered cattle grazing on the foggy mountain that morning, we did not come across anyone. ‘This is an ideal place for a picnic!’ James announced, abandoning his reflections about the human rights workshop and told us how picnics were important occasions when he was growing up. As teenagers in the 1980s, picnics were an opportunity to invite their classmates – particularly girls they fancied. James’s memory lingered on the cassettes. The tape recorder was the device that controlled the mood of the picnic. In order to save the battery life of the recorder during these social outings, James and his friends took turn to rewind and forward the cassettes by inserting their fingers, twigs, and pens in the spools. ‘We exactly knew where to stop. We had memorised the spot where our favorite song would start’, he told us.

Throughout the year, the fog is part of the landscape in James’s hometown. Irrespective of what residents are doing – going to school, eating their meals, or working in their paddy fields – within minutes the fog takes over this town. I

imagined James and his friends as a band of teenagers appearing from a mountain of fog carrying a tape recorder booming their favorite number. Then inserting pens and fingers to manually rewind and forward the cassettes. Was it not an ideal place to fall in love I asked James, half teasing him but serious at the same time. 'Not quite', he responded. James's hometown located in Ukhrul district, a Naga inhabited area located in the hills of Manipur witnessed some of the most brutal accounts of the India-Naga conflict since the 1950s. The trauma and structural violence is still visible in James' hometown and among the community in the neighboring villages as well⁶.

Like several towns located on the international border between India and Burma, James's district became the transit point for drug trafficking. By the 1980s, along with the presence of the Indian forces and the Naga insurgents, the availability of heroin and drug peddlers swallowed the residents into a deeper hole of violence and nightmare. The most vulnerable group was the teenagers who began to experiment with drugs – particularly heroin. Many of them became addicted to the substance. James said that he also began to experiment with heroin but discovered that he was allergic to the substance. At the period of time he thought 'what an unfortunate thing'. He could not join his friends, but began to sell it to his neighbours and friends. James was in middle school when he sold his first stash of drugs.

James described his teenage life in the following manner, 'Money was falling out of my pockets. I had so much money with me. I was handling hundred thousand rupees but I was so young, so I spent buying candies, giving treats to my friends, and blowing it up every day.' One day, the Naga insurgents posted in his town started a clean-up operation.

During that period a fresh consignment of heroin arrived for him. Excited to sell this new stock, he went to look for his best friend. As he walked towards the best friend's house, he came upon a crowd. When he walked up to the center of the human circle, he saw a terrifying sight. The body of his best friend lay on the ground. There was a bullet wound on his forehead that has created a gaping hold. 'His hands and legs were still trembling and blood was coming out of his mouth and ears', James said. It was part of the clean-up operation that the Naga insurgents had started in the town. The Naga armed group declared to impose a capital punishment on the drug peddling community and did not distinguish

between children and adults. Everyone they caught during that phase of the clean-up was executed publically.

Traumatized and shaken, James buried the consignment of heroin outside the town and ran away. He travelled to the next district and joined the same insurgent unit that had killed his best friend. His stint as a guerrilla soldier did not last long. Just out of high school and the eldest child in the family, his mother went to the commander general of the insurgent unit and requested the insurgent organisation to release James of his duties on compassionate grounds. A few weeks later, James was escorted out of the guerrilla training camp and made to board a bus that was headed to his hometown.

Not long after that, James said he went off to a theological seminary in South India. A few years later, armed with a theological degree he returned to his hometown. Given the heightened conflict situation and the violence he witnessed, he began to organise meetings and fact-finding trips across his district and beyond. Gradually he began to devote more time for civil and political rights activities than for his local church where he had begun to work in a youth ministry. I asked him, 'So how is it to be a human rights activist now?' Looking embarrassed, he said he did not see himself as a human rights activist. Instead, he said that he was someone who was just 'running around constantly'. As I listened to James's stories of growing up all the way to his trauma and returning back to his hilltop town, his past and the present realities he negotiated everyday served as a reminder about the limitations of conventional notions of human rights activists. The label of activism was only part of a label that James embraced when he attended workshops I had noted earlier. By defining himself as someone who was 'running around constantly,' James seemed to capture the relation that connected his activities with his bodily movement. Considering the number of tasks he carried out and the various social and political positions he held, he was actually always on the move. The asymmetries that exist between the official definition of rights and ethics and the experiences of practitioners like James drew my attention towards the everyday political lives of human rights in violent and militarised places like Northeast India. James listed out some of his everyday activities as follows:

- (a) Organising relief measures such as malaria medicines, soaps, and cultural concerts for villages between the India and Burma international borders.

- (b) Negotiating with different insurgent factions in the hills and valleys whenever residents are abducted for political vengeance.
- (c) Attending inter-ethnic student union meetings to negotiate for peace during inter-ethnic tensions, and mobilise them to collaborate on various campaigns and protests.
- (d) Volunteering as a guide and informant for civil and political rights groups who visit his district and arranging their accommodation and travel itinerary.
- (e) Always available to fill up a spot anytime a member from his human rights organisation is unable to make it for a meeting or a fact-finding trip.
- (f) Attending the various 'martyrs' day' observed by his ethnic community in his district and across the neighbouring states.
- (g) Carrying out small contracts and projects to help out the household.
- (h) Working as a negotiator whenever there are conflict between vernacular journalists and insurgent groups regarding reports in the local newspapers.
- (i) Documenting and filing human rights violation reports.
- (j) Sending out human rights press release to different newspapers and organisations.

James's life presented the complex and entangled social worlds of human rights practitioners. The fact-finding reports and campaigns that James and his colleagues organised were often contested by state agencies, be it the state police or the Indian security forces. He said that at times, competing ethnic insurgents summon James to 'clarify' or 'apologise' for their position, reports or publications.

The social world that James inhabits presents the challenges of offering a neutral or a cleaned up description of the place and its human rights culture. By this I mean a clean narrative that separates the place as militarised and ravaged by war and terror and its inhabitants as either victims or accomplice of forces that state authorities are hunting down. In the case of the Naga people, the Indo-Naga armed conflict have presented two distinct enemy camps – the Indian state and the Naga people – yet in reality these lines and boundaries are not distinctly drawn. For several decades as the armed conflict waged, a section of Naga tribal elites emerged as the managers of the Indian state. Equipped with power, money, and authority, it was the rise of the Naga elites that also gave rise to the emergence of the Naga poor. Therefore, as the extreme poles of who constitutes the enemy camps (Nagas *versus* Indian state) important political issues such as cases of

sexual violence and domestic abuse within the community were treated as non-issues⁷.

Although this kind of activism is often left behind with the neat structured language of human rights, James's everyday engagements with hostile groups, insurgents, and the community at large captures the very foundations of what constitutes the vernacular human rights culture. The essence of civil and political rights movement across the world lies in engaging with the troubling disjuncture between citizenship, justice, and equality. Thus, James's experiences and his transformation from a traumatised teenager, missionary, and eventually to a rights practitioner are deeply connected with the political and social cosmology of militarisation and violence. In places like Manipur, human rights exist within a political world that is deeply fractured and contentious. While rights practitioners like James cultivate solidarities between antagonistic ethnic groups, negotiate with insurgents to maintain peace, and protest against the extraction of resources and construction of big dams, they often face threats, arrests, and are constantly under state surveillance⁸.

Since the 1990s, the Indian armed forces operating in militarised zones across India have increasingly promoted human rights awareness workshops, set up medical camps and scholarships. Increasingly, the language of rights and justice that James and his colleagues practiced remained unintelligible to the state, while Indian security forces were authorised to bestow human rights culture and practices.

In this context, human rights is a charged political and moral field for state agencies and human rights practitioners alike. What did it take to understand 'human rights' without getting into the cycle of debates about taking sides in favour of the state or non-state actors? During our conversation, James said that paramilitary forces and the Indian intelligence wings listened to their phone conversations, scanned their emails, or raided their mailboxes. His friends had been picked up for interrogation as well. These activities were legitimised by state authorities and carried out in the name of maintaining law and order. Yes, this story was not an exceptional case restricted to Manipur as the following section shows.

A Vernacular History of Human Rights

Tezpur, Hailakadni, Golaghat, Sibsagar, Morigaon, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Nagaon, Guwahati, Nalbari, Boko, Barpeta, Dhemaji. These are names of towns, cities and village in the state of Assam. These are also names of places where Lachit Bordoloi has been arrested. 'I have been arrested twenty one times starting from the 1980s', he told me one evening as he reflected on his past as a human rights activist. Like James's accounts of 'running around constantly', Lachi also said that he started his activism in his youth, but began to engage closely with 'human rights issues' when he joined the *Manab Adhikari Sangram Samiti* (MASS) a human rights organisation in Assam in 1991. During our conversation in 2014, Lachit had resigned from MASS to devote his time for other social and political matters.

In the last decade or so, human rights have become an important language for activists and state agencies as well across Northeast India. Today, the Indian armed forces and the state police, and state institutions with a history of violence, extra-judicial killings and torture have adopted the language of human rights as I noted earlier in this article. However, it is important to examine how the language of rights was defined by grassroots activists and vernacular associations as a political principle. For many young activists in the 1990s, what started as a concept that defined cases of extra-judicial killings and violence gradually began to include issues of land acquisition and natural resources too.

Today, the notions and principles of human rights for many communities in Assam is intertwined with ethnic politics, resource management, and demands for land rights. However, in the following interview with Lachit Bordoloi he explains how human rights and how their meanings can be organically traced to the vernacular life of politics.

DK: What is your reflection about the history of human rights in Northeast India?

LB: Long before the formation of the national or state human rights commissions in Manipur and Assam, or the Protection of Human Rights Act of 1993, there was violation of human rights in Assam and other parts of Northeast India. In Manipur and Nagaland, there was large-scale violation of human rights since the 1950s, but in Assam it started after the requisition of the Indian army and the imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958). Before that, during the Assam

Agitation in the 1980s, there was large scale human rights violation, but the concept of human rights was absent. The whole movement was more focused on the foreigner's issue that is why the human rights view was missing. We were talking about atrocities and access use of force as a violation of democratic rights, but the whole concept of human rights was missing during this time. Then the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)⁹ came up and the imposition of army and imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (in Assam) created large scale violation of human rights. There was no human rights organisation in Assam at that time to take up the issue. So in 1991, *Manab Adhikari Sangram Samiti* (MASS) was formed in Assam and we realised the norms and the procedures of human rights; how in our daily lives, in every step, there was human rights violation.

DK: How did the formation of MASS help you to connect with the language of rights?

LB: Actually when we realised what constituted human rights violation, we saw that there were no human rights in Assam. We were not treated as humans by the Indian armed forces because there was a conflict. In conflict, the state agencies only give importance to combat. So human rights violation was normalised – both the urban and the rural people accepted the day-to-day violation of human rights as their fate. If an individual was picked up by the armed forces, beaten up, and released, the person felt lucky because he was alive. People were getting killed and there was a large-scale crime against women as well. In that situation, if someone survived even after a serious torture, he considered himself as lucky. After MASS started documenting the human rights issues and educating people (particularly in rural Assam) about human rights, people slowly started talking about human rights. They realised and came to know about the international standards of human rights or the question of human rights.

DK: What was your experience with the human rights culture in Northeast India after establishment of the state human rights commissions in Assam and Manipur?

LB: Even after the adoption of the National Human Rights Protection Act of 1993, the question of the state human rights commission was absent in Assam. But representing MASS (the human rights organisation), we went to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (in Geneva) and presented the case of human rights violation in Assam. The government representative (of India) assured us

that they would form a state human rights commission in Assam to look into the cases of violation. But by the virtue of the act, the state human rights commissions were ineffective in a situation of armed conflict. As you know, the human rights commission cannot take up cases related to armed forces, so the large part of the human rights violation were left out by the state human rights commission(s).

DK: How about cases that falls within the ambit of the state human rights commissions? What happened to them?

LB: Even for cases of domestic violence and other violations, the human rights commissions were not serious because you have to realise the political atmosphere at that time (in the 1990s). In a conflict situation, the conflict influences the courts, the human rights organisations, and even the society. Particularly, we have seen that armed conflict influences the court to a great extent. Earlier, the court took a very strong reaction towards each and every case of human rights violation, but slowly it went down and we witnessed that the court had become insensitive to all cases of human rights violation. In a similar manner, the human rights commission(s) also intentionally or under the influence of the government – because they are dependent on the government for their salary and budget – became insensitive to other cases of human rights violation, which were outside the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that included the police.

We (MASS) had submitted many cases, hundreds of them, to the State Human Rights Commission of Assam. In many cases, the human rights commission sought a letter from the Superintendent of Police (SP) in the district. You know if the police are involved in a human rights violation case, their report will support and justify the case of violence. In such cases, after the human rights commissions got letters from the SP, the commission would send it across for your comment. After taking your comment, or even if they fail to get any comment from the complainer involved in the cases, they (the police) will dispose off the case. In 2000 the police fired on tea workers when they were protesting in Darrang (in Assam). The police killed 3-4 tea workers and we (MASS) lodged a complaint. A retired police officer who was appointed as a member of the state human rights commission (Assam) went there. He enjoyed the hospitality of the tea workers and afterwards submitted a report justifying the police firing. In another case, in 1998-99, MASS members protested against crime against women. In front of the DC's office in Bongaigaon the Indian armed forces assaulted a group of women

protesters. During the protest, the police beat up a woman member of the central executive committee of MASS, Ms. Dhira Chaudhary. The police also tore her clothes during the physical assault. We complained and the police took statement from the victim, but they (the human rights commission report) justified the action and the police booked her under the National Security Act (NSA).

We have seen that in every case, the state human rights commission took the side of the perpetrators. They cannot look into the case as a neutral body. Even in domestic violence cases, they do not take a position for the victim. This is because the ground reality is very different from the internationally recognised human rights standards. For example, if one woman or man is beaten up by the army, tortured, and is kept for several days in the camp, after he/she is released he/she will not file any complaint because he is grateful to be alive and survive the ordeal. In one case I remember in the border of Darrang district a place named Goreswar Line, an old man was picked up from his hotel by the Indian army and tortured to death in the army camp. We (MASS) petitioned about this case in the High Court. The court took up the case and sanctioned a compensation for the victim's family. After that, the army took revenge. They picked up his son and killed him too. So if the victim files a complaint to the Deputy Commissioner of police, or to the State Human Rights Commission of Assam, the army will take revenge.

No one can prevent the Indian army from taking revenge because they are the supreme authority here in Northeast India. In Manipur also we saw how the army beat up the judges. So if judges are beaten up, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) and Superintendent of Police (SP) kept in army custody and threatened, how will the common people hope for justice from the DC or the SP? I have seen with my own eyes how a DC was standing before an army captain. When an India army captain enters an SP or a DC office (In Assam), the officials stand up and wait for an order from the army captain. The ground reality is different. The common people want to survive – no one can save them from the army, not the DC or the SP or any other institution.

Illegal detention is a big issue in the international conventions to maintain the standard for human rights. No army or police can detain you illegally for long time. But here in Northeast India, illegal detention is so common that no one considers it as a human rights violation. Assaulting a woman or torturing a

woman in public is not considered as human rights violation. Where will they go with their complaints? MASS was the only human rights organisation in Assam documenting human rights violations and eight of our central executive committee members were killed by the Indian armed forces. The founder general secretary was killed, the founder chairman escaped an assassination and we had to request for security and protection. How can people expect redressal from the human rights commission, court, or the authority? In this situation, people accepted the human rights violation and consider themselves as lucky ones (when they survived the torture and interrogation).

DK: What are your reflections and the ways in which the ground reality connect with the international rights conventions?

LB: See, the United Nations human rights conventions and all other international conventions are all very fine, but they are far away from the ground reality (in Assam). The big human rights organisations are not aware of the ground reality here.

We have also worked with Amnesty International (AI) and other organisations. They know the international standards but they are less aware of the ground reality (in Assam). For these organisations, there are procedures. If a human rights violation takes place, then you can go to court, you can go to international organisations etc. But we have already done all that! We have gone to court and to international organisations. What happened? Many persons disappeared in army custody. We submitted those cases to the United Nations, to Amnesty International (AI) and the World Organisation Against Torture (WOAT); we physically went to their offices and enquired about the cases. The whole procedure is a recommendatory process. They are not binding on the government. Even the United Nations bodies took up our cases but they could not ask the government of India to locate the bodies or say something to the people. They (the Indian armed forces) simply refuted the cases about the disappeared persons and that is the result of the whole procedure. So there are standards, but in practice how can you get redressal? How can you get justice?

See international human rights organisation wants neutrality; they want to work with institutions. Many of us know that there is no neutral position. However, one does not have to support an armed group or a political movement, but one has to be more concerned about violation of human rights. What bothers me is that

international organisations do not give any relief to the victims of human rights violations. This whole exercise of the human rights procedure should focus on giving relief to the victims. It should be able to protect them.

DK: So you mean to say there has been no change at all?

LB: The only transformation is this. The Indian armed forces are taking more care in carrying out the human rights violations in Assam. They will not leave witnesses. Earlier they indiscriminately picked up people, but now they follow a target-oriented approach. So if you ask me about the result, I will say that they are more careful in their operation and make sure there are no of witnesses to prove they (armed forces) are guilty of human rights violation. There is no procedure that can make any army official or a district administrator or a police to directly give justice to any victim. If you cannot protect the victim after all these procedures, how will the victim assess your (human rights bodies) activities?

From a victim's point of view, everything is useless. Okay. You are doing so much; Organising workshops, presenting papers, and taking cases to United Nations or to international body, but for a grass-root level activist, there is no justice. So if the international organisations start working on the ground then it will make some sense. Otherwise, in a superficial way, you are doing some good work but the victim is not getting any support.

DK: Tell me about local organisations like MASS and other new human rights organisations we see nowadays in Assam?

LB: From 1990 onwards MASS was everything. It provided intellectual support for human rights education, a moral ground to say that this is a politics (the armed conflict and violence) we do not want. It was also a peace constituency when the conflict became out of our control. So we were so many things. After the Bhutan War in 2003 (when the United Liberation Forces of Assam camps were destroyed and there were series of counterinsurgency operations throughout Assam), it was very clear that we needed a peace constituency in Assam – particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. There was no peace constituency besides local organisations like MASS in Assam or the Naga human rights group, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights. We said 'no' you have to talk about peace (to the armed groups).

Elsewhere in the world, peace keeping is the role of the churches and other civil society organisations. Here in Northeast India, we do not have civil societies, so the local human rights organisations were compelled to take up the issue of peace. The political situation compelled us to take up peace. Brokering for peace (between insurgents and the state) is not an agenda of human rights organisations, but the situation and time dictated the agenda of human rights during that period of time.

So human rights were just one of the things we did among many other things. We were not a professional human rights group. None of us took home a salary or got stipends for attending workshops. We were not on any fellowship. I survived, but many of my friends were killed. It was a mission for us and we focused on establishing mass based activities.

There was no one to help us or stand behind us except the local organisations from the neighbouring states. We tried to form an opinion and resistance against the human rights violations – for example, in Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur there were human rights movements – so we tried to reach out and create solidarity and alliances.

The big international United Nation bodies and others were not of much help to protect and give justice to the victims during the worst phase of the armed conflict in Northeast India. We tried to bridge the gap but it was not of much help. Even on the national stage in other parts of India, we joined hands with others and raised human rights issues. The solidarity and alliances was because of the persistence of the local grassroots human rights activities. Eventually, the international organisations also started looking towards the issues and the region (Northeast India). Today, at least you will see that there is a paragraph devoted to the region in the international reports. It was all due to the efforts of the local organisations.

DK: What is the biggest achievement of the local human rights organisations in Northeast India today?

LB: I feel that the biggest achievement of the local human rights movement was the local solidarities that were formed among different human rights groups. Okay, there are international human rights groups and national bodies in India, but the human rights education to the grassroots was missing. Only because of the

local organisations like MASS in Assam and other similar organisations in the neighboring states, people were educated and made aware of the concept of human rights.

The biggest achievement is that today people know about human rights and are vocal about it. Today, if any national or international rights based organisation start a campaign here, they get a good response from the grassroots because they (the people) know about human rights now. Human rights education is the biggest achievement of local human rights bodies like MASS. During the Assam agitation in the late 1970's and the early 1980's, the police and paramilitary forces killed more than 800 people, but we were not aware of the concept at that time.

DK: Where do you learn about human rights?

LB: Let me make this clear. We learnt about human rights on the ground. We did not go to Geneva or New Delhi to learn about human rights. We started MASS without getting any connection with any national or international organisation. We realised that we need a human rights organisation to protect human rights and give assistance and support the victims. Of course, the international human rights conventions were useful later as we tried to connect with other parts of the world to understand social movements and the history of human rights.

Lachit Bordoloi's reflections about the history of human rights captured how particular human rights histories of certain geographical region come to life. Everyday experiences of loss or memories of violence are embedded and identified with people who live in the villages, towns, and cities across Assam. Like many other aspects that emerge from social and political relations, notions of inequality and ethics are pressing issues that human rights activists encounter in their daily lives. Without denying the pressure and anxiety of working in militarised places, conversations with vernacular human rights practitioners across the years revealed one thing. Initially, they appeared 'out of place' in serious conversations about international conventions and instruments of rights. However, their life stories and the violence they had witnessed and social movements they devoted their lives to indicated the importance of proposing new ways to engage with the language of rights. Perhaps lives of human rights activists like Lachit Bordoloi and his memories about a particular phase of political life in contemporary Assam should invoke for framing a history about vernacular human rights in Assam based on empathy and care. What do I mean by

that? The last section of the article captures this connection between human rights and empathy that is founded on a politics of accountability and responsibility.

Cosmos Flowers

Some people are destined to travel. ‘I have to come down to the valley tomorrow,’ Rose told me as we traveled up to the hills in Manipur one morning in 2013. There is constant traffic between Imphal valley and the adjoining districts in Manipur, a vibrant multi-ethnic state in Northeast India. Some travel for pleasure, others for trade and work, but it was difficult to define Rose’s frequent travels between the hill and the valley. It appeared that the road that connects Imphal and Ukhrul, which takes approximately 4 hours, was her home as our conversation progressed during the course of our journey. Her solidarity and sense of belonging was neither fixed in Ukhrul (the hills) nor in Imphal (the heart of the valley). Growing up in an inter-ethnic household where her parents came from communities that were perceived as hostile towards one another, Rose’s sensibilities about what constitutes human rights in places like Manipur was an important lens to understand everyday lives and politics. Manipur is a place where the pressure to fix one’s political beliefs and ethnic ideology is immense. This political reality became intelligible as Rose described the history of the hamlets and landscapes we passed during our journey.

Earlier that morning, as we approached the foothills after we left Imphal, Rose described the history of each village, stream, paddy field, and hillock we were crossing. The physical features of the landscape functioned as natural boundaries for the diverse ethnic communities who lived here and the conflicts that erupted due to overlapping claims.

Ethnic boundaries are particularly significant in states like Manipur where there are multiple demands for ethnic homelands and concessions. Every ethnic group today emphasizes on a pristine and unique history to demand for greater political and administrative power. Therefore, in the quest for a timeless and pure history to assert one’s identity, the notion of what constitutes rights and boundaries among each ethnic group plays an important role to maintain the fragile alliance and peace of the competing groups. The everyday practices of carving out various boundaries – moral, social, and physical ones – transformed the contours of the landscape. How did Rose connect the vocabulary of human rights as someone who spent a considerable amount of time on the road traveling round Manipur?

The lives of the Border Road Organisation (BRO) work force entered our conversation through Raju, a disabled boy we saw sitting outside his plastic tent beside the road. Raju's house is located on a precarious ridge beside the state highway; a narrow road where two vehicles delicately squeeze through. Raju and his parents came from Jharkhand, a state in eastern India. Raju's parents arrived here as BRO workers and he was born inside the plastic tent beside the road that connects Imphal and Ukhrul. Raju's father abandoned his family when he realised that his son was unable to walk. When his mother remarried, Raju's stepfather tried to kill him. He smashed Raju's kneecaps and cut his body. 'From head to toe' Rose told me, but I was unable to comprehend this horrible act until I realised that the stepfather had systematically made multiple incisions on Raju's body – his shoulders, back, thighs, arms, calves and stomach – in order to bleed him to death. It was a coincidence that Rose's shared taxi stopped beside Raju's tent later that day. She called the medical team in Imphal, the state administration, the BRO officials, and the volunteers working for the national children's project. After Raju was discharged from the hospital, his grandparents, who were also BRO workers, became his legal guardians. Rose continues to look out for Raju by giving him food, medicines, and offering help whenever he has needs medical attention.

The idioms of kinship and ethnic alliances are integral in the social world that Rose inhabits. Politicians, cultural associations, and student bodies often call upon their respective 'people' to build their political constituencies in an ethnically diverse state like Manipur. In a state where political and ethnic boundaries are distinctly maintained, the BRO workers who come from states like Jharkhand seldom enters into the discourse on rights. They remain outside the ambit of community rights and justice framework. Particularly, for rights practitioners like Rose who are often overwhelmed by the conflict situation and the urgency to attend to matters around them, they often find themselves confronting everyday ethical questions about one's limitations and responsibilities. Yet, the questions that Rose struggles with everyday highlight how human relations are formed and sustained in difficult places. As we ascended to a particular point, she declared that this slope overlooking a hamlet was her favorite spot. Symmetrical terraced rice fields and a multitude of fruit trees stood on the undulating slopes. She paused the stories of ethnic conflicts and the political situation and described how her favorite spot was a romantic landscape.

Many who visit politically volatile places like Manipur talk about their experiences of survival and the risks to travel across the hills and valleys. Journalists and researchers have often presented their distressing encounters with informants, insurgent leaders, and political leaders. For example, a few years ago I met a doctoral research student who told me that she had to undergo psychotherapy for two years after her traumatic fieldwork in Northeast India. Recently, a research associate from a policy research institute in India described her apprehensions of being molested, raped, and killed by insurgents during her research trip to Guwahati. While such insights continue to perpetuate Northeast India as a dangerous place, Rose's description of a romantic spot at heart of a hamlet that had witnessed a grim ethnic conflict unsettles these dominant imaginations.

Miniature ponds dotted the landscape as the road forked away from the terraced rice fields. A village located below Rose's romantic picnic spot was the site of an ethnic conflict between the Nagas and the Kuki community around two decades ago. After the conflict, a Kuki couple adopted thirteen children who were orphaned during the conflict. These children came from different ethnic backgrounds including that of the warring groups. In 2012, a man arrived in the village. He claimed that he had a charitable boarding school in Sikkim and promised to educate the children. He took away seven children. When the couple tried to locate the address the man had left behind, they could not locate the man or the address. 'The couple are trying to locate the children', Rose told me. It was registered as a child trafficking case.

Rose had not prepared to share with me the chronology of her experiences or point out her favorite spots and hamlets as we traveled on the road that connected Imphal and Ukhrul. But her reflections underlined the social worlds that rights practitioners like her traverse every day and humanised the people and places they came across. I also learnt that Rose's favorite romantic spot was intimately attached to her childhood memory when her family traveled to the hills to visit her extended kin groups during the holidays.

Beneath the cloudy blue skies where the BRO workers repaired and cleaned the roads, Rose unlocked a precious memory that kept her together on days she wanted to give up everything - her activism, work, and remain committed to

causes around her. Working in a conflict zone at times appears as though the responsibility to attend to everyday concerns of human rights and justice is the task of the victim while the state agencies continue to mutate their violent actions with stronger laws, impunity, and institutional safeguards. Perhaps, that is why I was mesmerised with Rose's story of the Cosmos flowers.

I learnt that the highway between Imphal and Ukhrul used to be lined with Cosmos flowers. Growing abundantly especially along her romantic spot, the flowers became a screen between the paddy fields and the tarred roads in this mountainous road. Rose began to explain how the Cosmos flowers along this stretch of the highway had almost vanished during the heights of counter-insurgency operations in Manipur. She said, 'It is the timing. The flowers were in full bloom but before they could produce the seeds that would fall on the ground and germinate for the next season, the BRO workers chopped down the flowers and burnt them up'. The periods prior to the Indo-Naga ceasefire agreement of 1997, a treaty that was signed between a Naga insurgent group and the government of India, the hills of Manipur – especially the road between Imphal and Ukhrul – was a regular site for ambushes and battles between the Naga insurgents on the India forces. As part of a counter-insurgency measure, the security forces ordered the Border Road Organisation to clear the tracks parallel to the highway. The BRO workers began to routinely chop down anything that grew on the vicinity of the road. Rose told me that in the last few years youth clubs, school students, and church members has organised tree planting activities to beautify the roads, but none of these trees were able to survive the diligent road clearing projects of the BRO workers.

The disappearance of the Cosmos flowers was an unexpected casualty of the counter-insurgency measure in the hills of Manipur, yet Rose had developed a personal project. As an avid gardener whose knowledge of plants and flowers was exceptional, she collected different kinds of Cosmos seeds around Imphal and Ukhrul. During the appropriate season every year, she paid no attention to the means of transportation – bus, shared taxi, mini bus, or an official jeep – that was carrying her to the next destination. She requested the driver to stop at designated locations along the highway. Standing beside the road, she scattered the seeds of the Cosmos flower she carried along with her during her travels between Imphal and Ukhrul. She laughed and said, 'Often when I am scattering the seeds, security

forces patrolling the highways become suspicious. They suspect that I am planting a bomb and come over to interrogate me or investigate the seeds I am carrying’.

Conclusion

Northeast India is an extremely militarised region with a disturbing record of human rights violations. The ethnographic accounts about James, Lachit, and Rose captures how everyday experiences about what constitutes violence and trauma deeply shapes one’s understanding of human rights. As I have highlighted in this article, understanding the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India is not solely about citing provisions and international conventions. Instead, the ability of rights practitioners to reflect, articulate, and more importantly practice what they perceive to be injustice and violence constitutes the everyday meaning of human rights. While invoking the official definition of ‘human rights’ takes places in different temporal and spatial locations, the core of its meaning resides in the lived experiences that people encounter in different scales. For instance, while James attends workshops and meeting as a human rights activist in South Asia, he prefers some other designation when he returns to his hometown. For Lachit, the differences and challenges of international human rights organisations is the inability to connect with the local ground reality. While, Rose’s life as a mobile human rights practitioner shows how connections and feelings are often not situated in a designated territorial location, but tends to be based in social relations that are nurtured by extending empathy and solidarity. Ultimately, the meaning and concept of human rights, as this article has highlighted, will be enriched when voices and experiences of people from militarised and violent societies are recognised as important foundations for justice, reconciliation, and freedom.

Notes:

¹ Refer to this report to follow the advocacy work on the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights. The campaign for the demilitarisation of the Naga areas continues to be an important human rights issue.

<http://www.nagalandpost.com/ChannelNews/State/StateNews.aspx?news=TkVXUzEwMDA5OTk1MQ%3D%3D> (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

²Refer to http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/index.html (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

³ For a pdf copy of the act refer to http://nhrc.nic.in/documents/Publications/TheProtectionofHumanRightsAct1993_Eng.pdf (last accessed on 20 September, 2016)

⁴ The situation of the state human rights commission in Manipur is deteriorating. Since 2010, the seat of the chairperson for the state human rights commission has been lying vacant. This commission is defunct and victims of human rights in the state have no recourse to appeal for justice and demand security. For a detailed report refer to <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/imphal/Despite-assurance-by-CM-Manipur-Human-Rights-Commission-yet-to-be-revived/articleshow/51613555.cms> (last accessed on 22 September, 2016)

⁵ Official definitions and international conventions on human rights still play a significant role in Northeast India. Thus, a cursory glance at several preambles of regional human rights organisations like the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) or the Manab Adhikari Sangram Samiti (MASS) translated as the Forum for Struggle of Human Rights, carefully lays down how the aim of the respective organisation is to promote and address the issues of human rights.

⁶ The everyday militarisation and violence of the place was captured when a peaceful people's rally was attacked by security forces killing two protesters. This event was not the an exceptional case and like other similar events, the entire town was shut down as security forces burnt down vehicles, shops, and picked up people from the streets and tortured them. Refer to this report for details <http://ifp.co.in/page/items/22857/mass-peace-rally-turns-violent-in-ukhrul-end-peaceful-elsewhere> (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

⁷ This point I make is not to dismiss the history of human rights abuses and state violence that Naga society experienced. Refer to human rights report titled, 'India: Operation Bluebird: A case Study of Torture and Extrajudicial Executions in Manipur' by Amnesty International to refer to the human rights abuses by Indian security forces and the toll that villagers had to face during counter-insurgency operation (AI Index: ASA 20/17/90. DISTR:SC/CO/GR).

⁸ Well known human rights activist Babloo Loitongbam described the last decade of civil and political violence in Manipur as follows: 'From 2004 to 2007, following mothers' protest, there were series of military operations in Manipur including Operation Tornado, Operation Somtal-I & II, and Operation Loktak. The period of 2007, 2008 and 2009 was particularly bad because the Army and Manipur Police commandos were following Punjab model of annihilation. Extra-judicial killings were rampant. Every day people died and innocent civilians were killed. Worse still, incentives were given for such murders. In other words, there was a well-placed environment or a vicious cycle, under which innocents were targeted. In 2009, the Home Minister P Chidambaram came to Manipur but we were not given a chance to meet him. Thus, we went to media and said that the approach of the Government worked to maintain trouble and conflict in the region instead of resolving the issue'. It is important to note that human rights activists have been arrested, tortured, and in certain cases killed. In order to follow the full interview, refer to the link <http://www.countercurrents.org/babloo220315.htm> (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

⁹The ULFA is an insurgent outfit in Assam who demands a sovereign Assam. This armed group started in 1979. Refer to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Liberation_Front_of_Assam (last accessed on 22 September, 2016)

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Article: Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India

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Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India

--- Vijaylakshmi Brara

Abstract

Visibility, entrepreneurship, sense of justice, collectivity and indigeneity are some of the markers in the colouring of the picture of women in Northeast India. They are out fending for their families and they were out defending their state from colonial forces. Making their mark in the field of sports, theatre, weaving, education etc., they are at the same time in the cudgels of domesticity with the sense of ethnic identity overarching their individual idea of being a woman.

This paper seeks to bring in some of the frames of the women in Northeast India. The idea of Northeast is too contested, and at the same time constitutes a very large area, to bring into the ambit of this paper. Therefore, what it attempts to do is to take a view from afar and see from a broader lens touching a few of the issues concerning women in the region.

Key words: Culture, Customary laws, Meira Paibi, Naga Mothers' Association, Reservation

Introduction

Culture is the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. This was remarked by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his book *Interpretation of Culture*. Drawing from Max Weber who said that Man is an animal suspended in the web of significance he himself has spun, Geertz took culture to be those webs. The world of women in the Northeast is woven with their cultural matrix. Therefore, their rootedness in their culture and seeing themselves from the indigenous discourse is the way they would perhaps like to tell their stories. Although we will realise that few do the actual spinning. The rest are simply caught.

On the question of indigeneity, Marcos Sylvia writes, indigenous religions are characteristically based on oral traditions – ‘the transmission of beliefs, rules, customs, and rituals by word of mouth’ – rather than on written law and sacred

texts. In these systems, indigenous women 'preside over rituals, preserve but also re-create traditions'. Indigenous religions are not monotheistic, but tend to view the cosmos as made up of the living and the dead, each essential to the whole. Nature must, therefore, be nurtured. This is in stark contrast to the Western hierarchies of (masculine) intellect and (feminine) intuition or emotion, of objective and subjective, material and imagined reality. Such hierarchies may provide a basis for the view that the natural environment and 'inferior beasts' are there for humankind to explore and exploit (Sylvia, 2010). This belief in nature, and, as we shall see later, in the fertility cult gives the identity to the women as the generative principles of their societies. But, the assimilation of the major religions have somehow diluted their role as well as the belief in the generative processes.

Whenever I want to picture the women from the Northeast region, I picture a jigsaw puzzle. Like every small part of the puzzle, women also constitute the small parts to enable the society to make a composite whole. But every part of the puzzle has to have that curve and that angle to fit and fix in the puzzle, the traditions and customs, otherwise that part is simply not needed. Similarly, the women of this region do have a place in the picture, in their society, unless it is framed, specified and angled to fix.

Then comes the issue of yard sticks. It is a research methodological fallacy to compare the status of women in Northeast taking the parameters like sati, bride burning, female infanticide, purdah etc. and the absences of them being indicator of high status of women in Northeast India. To say that they are different from their counterparts elsewhere is correct, but that does not necessarily mean that they are better and have a very high status. They have now started measuring their situation and their position with their own yardsticks. Today they are questioning the customary laws through which their life is guided. The Naga Mothers' Association is one such organisation which will be discussed later in the paper.

The phrase 'Sisterhood is *Loce*', appeared on the cover of the Philippine newsletter *Womenews* (Mitchel, 1996, pp. 3-7). According to Mitchel, there is a lot of literature, generated particularly since past ten years giving us an overview of the South East Asian Women. They have been recognised as the protagonists in their own households who can take the responsibility of running their family as workers in the various sectors of economy, as leaders, and as performers etc.

Women in Northeast India too, are producing and selling their kitchen garden produce and their intricate weaves. They may not be big entrepreneurs but are economically self-sufficient. Every household in the villages has a loom, a small or big kitchen garden and a pond with plenty of fishes. This being the conflict region for a long time, women here have learnt to sustain their families in the absence of the men, who are taken to insurgency or led to drugs or drunkenness. Today, one sees the growing enterprise among them. The younger women have taken to designing the traditional weaves as well as creating processed food. They are now seeking market outside their region.

Hence there is a need to expand the geo-matrix of the concept, 'sisterhood is local' to include the women in the Northeast with their sisters in South East Asia.

The Visible Colours of Women in Northeast India

There is this peculiar South East Asian trajectory, which also envelopes the Northeast Indian ethos. It is the way we look at the women collectives. In most of the South East Asian societies, specially the Burmese, the Javanese and the Malaysian as well as in Northeast India, the collective strength of women offers material self sufficiency and ensures a degree of co-operation with men in the social sphere. A woman's self-image in Northeast, just like her counterparts in the Javanese and the Burmese societies generally speaking, is very much influenced by her role as a mother, which provides her a superior status and stable security compared to her wifely role. And not individual mothers, but in collectives. The roles are institutionalised.

One such institution is the *Ima Keithel*, women's market in Manipur. Women of Manipur are particularly very visible. They are also expected to earn. Any woman who is not economically productive is considered lazy. In Ima Keithel no male is allowed to own a shop there. These market vendors also have a very strong organisation. The police are afraid to hassle them. If one goes through the history of Manipur it was the Ima Keithel, which was the launching pad of the two-epoch making *Nupilans* (women's fight) against the British, one in 1904 and the other in 1936. It was here where they organised and pursued their movement and fought against the colonial forces. It is not only an economic base of the *Imas*, but also their political base. This Nupilan (an exclusive women's movement) also marked the first people's organised protest against the British. The traditions set by the two Nupilan(s) live on. Mass women's protests by the *Meira Paibis* (the torch

bearing pressure groups) against the atrocities of the armed groups still goes on and after 53 years it again made history. The naked protest of the women after the killing of Manorama has gone down in the history of Manipur as the third Nupilan.¹

The Ima Keithel is the largest market exclusively run by women in Asia. Nobody complains if your fish is measured in small tin boxes, or your cloth is measured with the arm's length. Women here most often do not use formal weights and measures. Another striking feature of this market is that the stalls are generally passed from mother in law to the daughter in law; not only does it not follow the formal inheritance law among the male agnates but also does not go through the matrilineal inheritance from mother to daughter. The women who sit there are those who have been married, brought up their children and can spill out, as their domestic roles have been taken care of by the younger affine, usually their daughter in law. They are generally between 50-70 years of age. But recent studies have shown that women with a much younger age group, between 35-45, are entering Ima Keithel. They are generally the sole bread earners for their children as their husbands have either died due to drugs and AIDS or due to the conflict between the state and the non-state actors. But nevertheless, those who have earning husbands, about 50-60 percent are able to earn more than them. In other states too women are visible in the market relations in a more informal manner.

Another institutional base for women is their role as pressure groups and peace builders. In Manipur, as mentioned above, they are called the Meira Paibi (fire torch bearing). Although now the fire torches have given way to mobile torches, but this technology has not been able to change their style of mobilising and gathering for protests. For any issue the immediate messenger is the clanking on the electric pole. The effectiveness of this communication can be seen when within a matter of minutes one can witness hundreds coming together. Among the hill tribes of Manipur, the Naga Women's Association and the Kuki Women's Association have undertaken strenuous journeys to meet their respective underground organisations so as to stop the killings and roam in the interiors to make people aware of their rights and duties. In Nagaland, there is Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) which has recently come into the limelight by starting to think out of the cultural exigencies. They have demanded their right to stand for Municipal Council elections by granting 33 percent reservation which is their constitutional right, to which the men are not allowing them. Recently, they won

the case in Supreme Court. But in spite of the apex court verdict, the Naga Hoho (composed of all men) is still denying their right. Is it because patriarchy is subsuming and patronising the native cultural expressions? We did have traditions which barred women in social spaces, while in other places there was a tradition of Sati. So do we continue with the traditions as something sacrosanct? Traditions also change with changing times. Secondly who decides? This selective epistemological understanding is what is problematic and is being attempted to be deconstructed by the NMA.

Among the Tangkhuls there is a traditional institution of women as peace negotiator called by the term *Pukhrelas*. Even though some of the tribes may claim that women have no place in the village councils, there are incidents of women chieftains and women warriors among them. According to Baruah, there is a historical legacy of women occupying a seat of power among the Nagas (Baruah, 2007, p. 45). She writes that in times of war a woman named *Maram Harkhosita* was the supreme commander; village *Kangpot* and *Thowai* had a woman chief; and *Tolloi* village council members were also women. Women were given the responsibility of the village granary. There seems to be penetration of hegemonic patriarchal notions of major religion seeping in over a period of time among these communities. In the present scenario, barring the ritual importance given to women over the protection and decision over the granary, they have not been recognised as chiefs or commanders of their villages.

Hence there are women's associations in every tribe and every community. Some are the result of colonial rule and some are the product of post modern era. Many of them especially among the tribes are church based and many are ethnic oriented, which nevertheless give them a strong institutional grounding. The indigenous women of Arunachal are mobilising to bring reforms in their customary laws, especially in the field of polygamy, child marriage and even forced marriages. Visibility therefore is an essential colour in the prism of seeing women in Northeast India.

We have to understand that no societies in the world are gender neutral. The Northeast Indian women are visible in socio-economic spheres. They are also visible in informal political domains as pressure groups. And, unlike their other Indian counter parts, don't have to face the veil systems and other systems of exclusions. But they are also bound by the customary laws, which are held to be

sacrosanct as well as linked to the identity issues. To come out of these laws is perhaps more difficult than the norms laid down by the rest of the Indian society.

There are major issues when it comes to property ownership rights, land rights, political participation, and a very strong and rigid glass ceiling. To explain and justify these elements in the whole gamut towards marginalisation of women, the existence of customary laws and the promulgation of it as well other patriarchal notions are a major point of dissention. These and various other factors, therefore are creating hinderance towards women to enter into the policy initiatives, governance and the use of natural resources.

There is another very interesting aspect, and that is while certain, predominant traditions are serving as great hinderance to the involvment of women, there are certain cultural and traditional practices which have also enabled them to be 'out there', so to say. They were present in the social space in the form of traditional priestesses. There are stories of royal women in Assam, Manipur and Tripura who were warriors, promoted education and also peace negotiators. Women have been traditional story tellers, performers in proscenium theaters, etc. And the conflict in the post modern era have compelled the women to come out to earn their livelihood. According to Devaki Jain, 'feminisation of work' connotes low-quality, lowly-paid work. Jain argues that 'feminisation' devalues the increased presence of women². Therefore Northeast women did not have the rigidities of domesticity; they were visible. Although later this was more out of compulsion than due to their individual choice, yet this has made them distinct from their counterparts in the rest of India.

Women in Cultural Landscape

In many cultural and religious traditions, particularly in Northeast India, women have had primary responsibility for transmitting cultural and spiritual knowledge and practices, as well as group identity, to succeeding generations. Because culture exists through, and is generated by, the lived experiences of people, the role of women in transmitting culture also situates them as bearers of culture. For this reason, people across a diverse range of communities view women's adherence to and promulgation of cultural norms as integral to cultural survival.

This bandwagon of culture is also used as a basis for justifying violations of women's human rights. For example, in many cultures, religions, and states, the

rights of individual women are subordinated to upholding women's role as the carriers of group identity, as we have seen above while discussing the Naga Mothers' Association. This is made necessary to ensure cultural preservation with the result that women are often denied the right to make autonomous decisions regarding their own sexuality, childbearing, and marriage; and their children's nationality, religion, and citizenship. These violations of basic rights are rationalised identities, which women are thought to embody.

But lately in the indigenous discourses, especially of South East Asia, the feminist expressions are a new wave which is finally questioning the social norms of their societies giving rise to a sisterhood which has a local fervor. Observers point out that the reason for this upsurge in expressing themselves was given impetus during the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. At the Conference, indigenous women argued for the goal of self-determinism rather than gender equity, stating that the empowerment of native women could not occur outside the context of decolonisation (Grey, 2004, p. 35).

The indigenous women, as the Northeast women with nationalistic cultural bandwagon, see themselves as a microcosm of the bigger social system encompassing them. This makes us understand the fact that why people living in this region have never had any feminist movement the way we have witnessed in Europe, America and even Indian heartland. Why, what is the reason behind it? This is in spite of the fact that we have proud histories of women's movements against tyrannical rulers, colonialism as well as present injustices of the state apparatuses. The discourse has been surrounding along the notions of nationalism and nation building by women and everybody else; a desire to see their Nations based on freedom and justice. The age old injustices meted out to their people during colonial regimes and later in the tyrannical times of self-governing states have embroiled our women in the overall turmoil in their society. They have not been able to think about the gender disparities within. Secondly, when the issue predominantly encircles identities, it en-cultures around the pride of belonging to one's group. Critiquing one's culture then skirts around the charge of being anti-national.

Melissa Lukashenko (Lukashenko, 1994, p. 21), an Australian writer of mixed European and Murri (Aboriginal), claims that '... while feminism is a global movement with potential global applicability, political, regional and ethno-cultural factors can mean that feminist ideology is not appropriate for indigenous

women.’ With the common colonised history, their focus has been on decolonisation as the central political project; hence assertions on identity and concentration on nation building. Women are also said to take the part of ‘motherists’, militant mothers fighting for the survival of their children. This happens when conflict and chaos makes the traditional role in native society difficult to perform (Udel as cited in Grey, 2004, p. 10). Jaimes Guerrero employs the term ‘Native Womanism’ to describe a struggle aimed at ‘restoring the female principle to challenge the prevailing colonist and patriarchal denigration of women and nature’ (as cited in Grey, 2004, p. 10).

Following this line of argument one also sees a contrast whereby the western feminists are bent upon throwing away their patriarchies and the social system which perpetuates female subordination, while the indigenous women in turn seek a negotiated renewal of native cultural values and systems.

Ironically this rootedness in the cultural histories is making women further marginalised. Within their traditional systems they have no say in the village councils. This is so even in matrilineal communities like Meghalaya, where women are excluded from the village councils. When natural disasters and environmental changes happen, women and men are affected differently because of increased stress of traditions, the planning of resource distribution, and gender specific roles and responsibilities. In the situation of total denudation of resources, women still carry the inevitable burden of running the household and looking after the food security. This gendered responsibility forces women to look for any means whatsoever to feed her children and become susceptible to violence and human trafficking. She ignores her own health and also gets prone to various illnesses.

Interestingly, in spite of such gendered marginalisation women still want to adhere to their indigenous discourse in this part of the region. Northeast India has seen major religious conversions like no other part in the rest of India. Being predominantly a tribal society, most societies were traditional nature worshippers. The cosmos was built around the father sky, the mother earth and all the paraphernalia structured around them, like the mountains, the rivers, the forests, the clouds, the thunder and other natural phenomena. Therefore, the regeneration cycle, or the ‘fertility principle’ was the dominant belief system. And it was only natural that the messengers of our gods on the earth, the priestesses, enact and symbolise this fertility cult time and again. One can see the sexual exigencies in

the dance form of the *maibis* (the Manipuri priestesses of traditional faith) during the *laiharaoba* festival and the gestures during the Bihu dance of Assam. In this sense, sexuality was seen as a totem, a symbol, on which depended our prosperity. But no sooner did we turn into mainstream religion such as Vaishnavism in Manipur, for instance, first thing it tried to do was to marginalise the existing indigenous belief system and bring forth the male Brahmins. Sexuality, which was a totem, then became a taboo after the advent of Hinduism, although, how much this ancient order was really fractured and broken is for everybody to see. Incidents such as Sati and concepts such as *Pativrata* (devoted to husband) though initiated could not continue for long. But a shift had taken place without doubt, whereby the women's hegemony on religion was replaced by men.

There are various studies presently going on which are trying to understand the role of the elderly women as heads of their clan among the Native Americans. These clan mothers of the Iroquois Nations were revered and held sacred by the communities. One of their prominent roles was to preserve seeds, decision on growing and cutting parts of vegetation and also the choice of crops. The preservation of wildlife, marine animals and river and water sources was also based on their thorough planning³. But with the rise of industries, private property and patriarchy, and the growing marginalisation of indigenous people, the institutions of clan mothers have also disappeared. There is a trend by the state towards centralising patriarchy in all its various documents of planning and implementation. Today even though the buzz word in the government corridors is inclusive growth and inclusive planning, somehow somewhere this inclusiveness does not include the carrier of traditional knowledge systems, the women. Even today this region is filled with stories of medicine women from Northeast India having oral knowledge of herbs confident in curing incurable illnesses. But unlike the pressure groups and the women's markets, these knowledge sources do not have an institutional base.

Some Contemporary Reflections

A lot has been said about the Meira Paibi of Manipur. They have been in the forefront since their fight with the colonial forces and their use of their body to protest the rape and killing of Manorama. But it has been a concern for social scientists to see that in the table for negotiations and policy intervention their absence goes unnoticed. The informality given to the bodies of women is good for

their instinctive actions but it also pushes them in the area of non-seriousness barring them from serious negotiations.

In Sikkim, according to B.B. Ray of Voluntary Health Organisation of India (VHAI), the lens to analyse gender has to be different. But to our understanding he was only resonating the perspective of Northeast per se as well. Here as elsewhere in Northeast India, women are seen boldly moving on the streets with no threat perception. Nevertheless, like the dichotomy everywhere else, in the Northeast, a woman is expected to take care of her family, not speak in front of elders, follow the rigid sexual division of labour and at the same time be enterprising with visionary ideas. I call these women the two faced Janus of our society. Sikkim also boasts of 50 percent reservation for the women in the grass root governance called the Panchayats. But the all-encompassing patriarchal notions and specific gender roles prevents the women elected representatives to take active part in the meetings and air their views. Alienation from land due to climate change as well as due to development induced displacement is bringing in vices like drunkenness resulting in wife beating and other violence against women.

In Nagaland and the other hill women traditionally even today bear the major responsibilities of working in the paddy and jhum fields, preparation of fields, sowing, weeding, harvesting, storing the grain and produce and above all managing the genetic utilisation and balance of the crops. Today many of the womenfolk as an extension of their traditional roles are engaged in secondary income for the household through commercial weaving and the sale of forest and agricultural products.

Most of the states in the Northeast have been in the troubled waters of insurgencies since more than 60 years. The issue of independence from the Indian state has overshadowed all the issues of societal development. It is these identity issues which are also impeding the equity growth of its women folk. They are still asked to adhere to their tribe's customs and not challenge for equal rights. Therefore, in this whole gamut of discourses on the deconstruction of the state and re-construction of nationhood, the collaboration of tradition, religion, and culture re-enforces the notions of identity, patriarchy and the ideologies behind the sons of the soil theory. Here the justification is the customary laws.

Meghalaya is a very peculiar situation when it comes to the discourse on gender dynamics. It is a matrilineal society, where the descent is seen from the female line. Here the immediate cognitive group is mother's brother, sister's children and the sister⁴. According to TiplutNongbri, the ideal Khasi woman is '...the repository of family honour. Daughters in particular should be chaste, obedient, polite and virtuous because family honour...depends on them...' (Uberoi, 1994, p.179). This expected role of women from a matrilineal society is exactly the same as the expected role of women in patrilineal society. The village level institutions called the *durbars* also exclude women in their official capacity. Women intelligentsias here too are voicing concerns over their customary laws.

Women in the Northeast in general did not have to break the shackles of home. They have been visible in the public sphere as farmers, vegetable vendors, weavers, traditional healers and presently as government employees, doctors, teachers and the like. There have never been issues of preserving modesty of the women through veils and other social sanctions. In the states where there have been inter-ethnic conflict and the 'liberation struggles', women in the Northeast have come in forefront as protestors as well as peace makers. But there seem to be a glass ceiling concept, whereby they are told their limits. In spite of their commitment to the socio-economic causes they have never been included in policy initiatives, in the decision making bodies. The glass ceiling comes in the form of customary laws, revolving around ownership issues, inheritance laws, land ownership and the exclusion from all kinds of decision making bodies in the village level, barring the states which has Panchayat system⁵ which ensures 33 percent and in case of Sikkim and Tripura 50 percent reservation for women.

Women and Politics

Naga society is deeply entrenched in patriarchal values and while these do not necessarily mimic the Indian model, they are all pervasive and do not give women their rightful space in society and politics. Since its inception, Nagaland has not had a single woman legislator. The only woman Member of Parliament, Rano Shaiza, was nominated and came from an affluent political background. If Nagaland has not, in four decades, produced a single woman legislator, then a gender analysis of politics and political participation is urgently called for. Naga women are still fighting for their right to be represented in urban bodies but they are facing stiff resistance from men who have dominated the social, political, economic and religious space for ages.

Traditionally, a Naga village was an independent entity having its own governance systems and laws, with varying traditions across villages and tribes. Given that such functional traditional systems existed in each Naga village, the government built upon it and enacted the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act 1978 to give it legitimacy and recognition as a local self-governance institute. Every recognised village in Nagaland is required to have a Village Council (VC). The Village Councils are empowered for carrying out administration, and administration of justice as per local customs and traditions. VC Members are chosen by villagers in accordance with the prevailing customary practices and usages and as approved by the State Government. Hereditary village chiefs, *Anghs* and *Gaonburas* (GB) as per usage and customary practices of the community are to be ex-officio members with voting rights of the VCs. The VC is required to meet at least once every three months or as and when the situation requires. It is also required to form the Village Development Board (VDB) for the overall development of the village. The VDBs are involved in all phases of developmental activities as a part of their responsibilities. These include receipt of allocation of funds, selection of beneficiaries or schemes, monitoring of progress of works and expenditure and completion of schemes. This is the only body which has a woman representative.

According to a woman civil society member in Shillong, the argument that women in Meghalaya are free to participate in politics is neither here nor there. Women everywhere in India are free to take part in electoral politics. But there are some well-defined gender roles that society has cut out for them which make it difficult for women to become active participants in electoral politics. The well-defined gender roles, more than their reproductive ones, make it difficult for women in Meghalaya, as it does for women in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, to contest elections. Politics in India is very much a male domain. The resistance that the Women's Reservation Bill has encountered from those very states that have the worst sex ratios is not surprising. But the irony is that when Meghalaya was asked to give its opinion on the Women's Bill, the state government shot down the idea of reservation of seats for women on the plea that this was a matrilineal society and women here were already empowered. A rather large section of people in Meghalaya are led to believe that this state is a beautiful island, safely cocooned from the sea of devastating patriarchal societies around them. But just because a myth is repeated it cannot become a reality. Curiously, it is the men in a matriliney who always proudly showcase women as liberated and empowered but who

ostensibly 'choose' not to get involved in the murky world of politics. Men continue to believe women are happy with their domestic roles.

The recent general elections in Meghalaya to the state legislatures turned the tables, may be not upside down but tilted it a bit when four women got elected, one of them acquiring the so called masculine portfolio of home ministry. Appreciating the emerging trend of more women coming forward to actively participate in the politics in Meghalaya, legislator Ampareen Lyndoh said, 'Brave women who stand by their own principles and believe in themselves can perform much better than male representatives in serving the public, as they have more passion to work.'⁶ 'We have to think a hundred times before taking up the responsibility as public representatives,' the first-time MLA and minister said. 'Women are mothers and they are the ones who run and look after the welfare of the house,' she pointed out.

The gender involvement in politics in Meghalaya is going through a phase when we can probably say that matrilineality has probably given a spring board to the women. Education and awareness has gone a long way in helping them to enter the political arena. Yet it's a wait and watch situation, as this participation level has to reach the areas beyond Shillong. During one of my study, a member of ECOSS NGO in Sikkim told me about the *CheliMorcha*, which is women's wing of political parties. They are very strong bodies, but not feminist groups the way we understand in the rest of India. Their present agenda is to fight for 'Sikkim subject', for those women who marry outside. Right now whoever marries men from outside lose their citizenship rights as Sikkimese. They are insisting that the names of such women also be included in the 'Sikkimese register'. The ECOSS representative asserted that Sikkim is a male dominated society where there is polygamy, violence against women because of alcoholism.

More or less all the states in Northeast India have a very strong patriarchal edifice. But, what makes it different from the rest of India is that the women in these societies have spaces where they can get organised, prioritise their agenda, voice their opinion and enact within their prescribed normative condition. The difficulty arises when these spaces get a defined rigidity. Political space has largely been an exclusive domain of men. Hence decision making and policy intervention takes a back seat for these women.

Within the Family

Very rigid sexual division of labour within the households is the hallmark of the societies in Northeast. It is not manly to fetch water and it is not womanly to cut a tree. In one of my research, I prepared a daily routine cycle in the Meghalaya village in RiBhoi district. While women get up at 3.30-4.00 am, make fire, make tea, lunch, collect leaves for *eri*, which they need to do four times a day. They come back, have lunch, then go to the field, come back, weave, take care of the children, make dinner, and before sleeping clean the area of the silk pupa; men on the other hand have tea, go to the field, come back and rest. The gendered drudgery of the women is so much taken for granted and considered part of the Khasi culture, that nobody questions it; not even women. This is the cycle which is prevalent in most of the villages in Northeast India.

Mono cropping instead of jhum multi-cropping has threatened the food security of the villages in Nagaland, according to Secretary, Indigenous Women's Forum. If the crop fails, then for the whole year there is nothing to eat. And in any deprivation women make themselves the last priority while feeding the hungry mouths. Unbridled mining across Nagaland is bringing in labours from outside, who are also making the women vulnerable to diseases like HIV-AIDS. At the same time mining is affecting the respiratory health of the women and children and it is also affecting their reproductive health.

The inside world has emboldened gendered role expectation, what in Manipuri is called *nupakithabak* (man's work) and *nupikithabak* (women's work). In the outside there is all women's polo team, Olympic medalists Mary Kom and Sarita Devi, theatre artists like Sabitri Heisnam, poets, literary personalities, doctors, pilots along with the women entrepreneurs. They are the hallmark and pride of Northeast India. But at the same time the insides of the women's world are stark with gender discriminations. Although there is no female infanticide, the birth of a daughter is always accompanied by the wishes of the people with a blessing to 'have a son next time'. There is no dowry, but a section of the house is kept vacant to adjust the things brought by the bride. There is no bride burning but there is a sublime legitimacy given to a man to bring in a second third wife. And there is no wailing of widowhood, but a widow without a son gets disinherited from her husband's property. Tripura is showing alarming rate of domestic violence. The sex ratio in Nagaland and Manipur is steadily decreasing and the

‘single mothers’ are a category which the sociologists will need to undertake studies.

Conclusion

The South East Asian trajectories of martial women, horse riders, and women of great beauty, the chieftains, and also powerful mothers as well as market vendors have been sublimed in the broader notions of patriarchy over a period of time but have not been eroded. Two forces are at work here, the feminisation of masculinity as well as the masculinisation of femininity, if we take the western notions of what it is to be a male as well as a female. But if we take our indigenous notions of the two concepts then there is no binary and instead we understand that every male and every female has both femininity and masculinity within them and this is how we understand ourselves, our bodies, our cosmos and our society⁷. Such an open notion of gendered self is conducive to building a society with greater understanding, sympathy, creativity, exploratory spirit and opening up of imagination and making it more peaceful and less violent. Therefore, people in Northeast are good in performing arts, are creative weavers, committed and talented sports-people and even have their own novel ways of protests in expressing their collective grievances. But the masculine patriarchal ideology tends to always hegemonise their perceptions. To counter this tendency there is a need to redefine the perceptions of femininity and masculinity by locating them within the broader context of the east as well as our own specific notions of feminine and masculine.

Notes:

¹Then 32 years of age, the brutalized and bullet riddled body of Th. Manorama was found in the wee hours of July 11, 2004 at LaipharokMaring village in Imphal East District. She was picked up by the soldiers of Assam Rifles (One of the Para- military force, stationed in Manipur since this state was left by the British), from her BamonKampu residence the previous night. It was the first time that the arrest memo was issued at the time she was picked up. The way her body lay on the side of the road agonised and horrified the sensibilities of the populace. Her genital area was blasted by the bullets. Around 12 Meira Paibies went to the gate of the *Kangla*(the traditional capital of Manipur, where the Assam Rifles was stationed at that time), stripped themselves in front of the gate and gave a heart piercing cry- ‘Indian Army come rape us! We are all Manorama’s mothers’ - these were their wailing and cries in their naked bodies.

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devaki_Jain cited on 10th April 2017

³https://en.wikipedia.org/.../Gender_roles_among_the_indigenous_peoples_of_North_America cited on 10th April 2017

⁴ Besides the obvious difference that patrilineal follows the male lineage as well as affinal residence by the females and the matrilineal follows the female lineage and the avuncular residence, in the terms of the power structure within the family, the men (father in the case of the first and mother's brother in the case of the latter) are the decision makers. Therefore just as patrilineal structures, matrilineal structures also exist under the realm of Patriarchy. Matriarchy, therefore, is a utopia.

⁵ Sikkim, valley region of Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and the Assam barring North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong, have Panchayat system. Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, NC Hills and Karbi Anglong and Bodo Territorial Area of Assam, Hills of Manipur, and tribal areas of Tripura are governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, and the ADC Act which allows them to have village bodies under the customary laws of their respective tribes.

⁶ During one of my interviews in the year 2014-15.

⁷ Brara (1998) .

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**Research in progress: Racial Discrimination and Violence against
Northeasterners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014**

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Racial Discrimination and Violence against Northeasterners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014

--- Hoineilhing Sithou and Salah Punathil

Introduction

This working paper primarily deals with two issues. First, it gives a brief account about racial discrimination and violence that Northeasterners experience in the metropolitan city of Delhi in the recent past. Secondly it deals with the state response to the problem of discrimination and violence in the form of the Bezbaruah Committee, 2014 and the receptions and perceptions among migrants in Delhi about its implementation. The data presented in this paper is part of a survey that was conducted with ninety five respondents to understand the problems of the Northeast populace outside Northeast region, taking the case of New Delhi and using the snowball sampling method. The survey is prepared with elaborate questions seeking respondents' view on all contours of discrimination and violence that persists against Northeasterners in Delhi. While doing the snowball sampling we have ensured that the sample should represent these internal categories of subjects under study; members from all states in Northeast, male, female, students, informal labourers, professionals and government employees. We have given attention to the residential settlements of Northeasterners to understand the spatial differences in experiencing discrimination. The survey was part of a project entitled 'Archiving Marginalities in Northeast India' spearheaded by the Department of Sociology and Centre for Regional Studies under the UGC-UPE Phase II, University of Hyderabad.

The Northeast of India comprises of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is the home of numerous ethnic communities that have migrated from all points of the compass, majority of them belonging to the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid racial grouping (Downs, 2011, P. 223). 'A large segment of the population is made up of the mongoloids of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family who came into the region from northwestern China, northern Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos at different points of time, and the Caucasoids belonging to the Aryan linguistic family (Nongbri, 2014, p. 4)'. In fact, many of them trace their lineage to Southeast Asia with a few centuries of acculturation in between (Mc Duie-Ra,

2012, p. 27), but its strategic location is at the confluence of South, South East and East Asia (Nongbri, 2014, p. 5). In accordance with general contemporary usage, Northeast India designates that portion of the country which lies to the north and east of Bangladesh, between approximately Latitude 20° to 29° north and Longitude 90° to 98° east (Pachua, 1998, p. 1). It spans over an area of about 2.6 lakh sq. km and covering nearly 8 percent of the land area of India and less than 4 percent (3.8 percent) of its population (39 million according to 2001 census) (Nongbri, 2014, p. 3).

The large scale migration from Northeast India towards metropolitan cities like Delhi in the last two decades makes Northeasterners a visible category in the so called mainland of India. Duncan Mc Duie-Ra (2012) argues that the migration of Northeasterners to places like Delhi has blurred the boundary prevailed between Indian nation state and its perceived essential other, the Northeast. Poor infrastructure, unemployment and political turmoil in Northeastern states push the people to move out of their states. The employment opportunities opened in the neo-liberal regime attracted them to the cities like Delhi. While many of the youth are employed in informal sector, many migrate for educational purpose and employment in the government services and private companies.

Over a period of time, the Northeasterners came to exist outside the conscious mind space of the average Indian, and they are greeted with various derogatory categories because of their physical and cultural characteristics. As a mode of discourse, the stereotype functions to exaggerate the difference of the 'Other', and as a mode of identification, it operates a series of mutually exclusive categories differentiating 'Self' and 'Other'. These occurrences are not just contemporary social phenomena but something that has historical relevance. During the colonial regime, the colonial discourse wanted to construe the native as a population of decadent nature and hold certain stereotype on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. Therefore, race was a means of differentiation done for the convenience of classification. To a sociologist, race is not determined by physical characteristics alone. Rather, race is a social concept that may vary from one society to another depending upon how individual members of a society perceived physical differences among human beings. The idea of race itself and the actual divisions of persons into groups based on selected hereditary features like skin colour, facial features and hair textures are social constructs (Banton, 1987).

This has to be noted that earlier discourse on racism in India was mainly framed around caste based discrimination. However, such a discourse was very marginal and racial violence is never understood as an Indian experience in academic and political discourse in India. Race is always perceived as an alien thing. However, the experience of Northeastern migrants in Delhi and other cities in India invokes the problem of racial violence in India today more seriously than ever. The recent campaign for anti-racism legislation in India throws in an array of sociological questions and debates on prejudice, discrimination, identity and racism. The practice of racism on the Northeast people in mainland India is of a different order in which their identity as an Indian is questioned. To add to the long list of death, cases of physical atrocities and physical assault against Northeasterners, a 29 years old Manipuri BPO employee was beaten to death by five youth in South Delhi on 21st July, 2014. Six months prior to this incident, a 19 years old Arunachal Pradesh student Nido Tania died after being beaten with iron rods and sticks by some men. This happened after an altercation with a shop keeper who allegedly made fun of his clothes and hair¹. A committee called the Bezbaruah Committee was set up following the attack and murder of Nido Tania in 2014.

Violence against Northeasterners in Delhi

The narratives of Northeastern migrants in Delhi expose different forms of racial violence in various arenas of life in Delhi. To understand the problem of racial violence against Northeastern migrants and its multiple manifestations, it is important to explain how Northeasterners are constituted as different and the essential other of the mainland India. The increasing migrations of people from various parts of Northeastern state to Delhi in the recent past, due to the backwardness in their respective homelands and better opportunities for education and employment in Delhi, has brought the question of intolerance and violence rather than diversity and accommodation in the city. The geographical belongingness of being placed at the outer edge of India's territorial map, but more importantly, physical appearance and cultural differences, marks the Northeasterners in Delhi as a visibly different social category. However, the problem lies in the fact that this difference is hierarchised racially and often met with violence. The experience of discrimination and violence comes from non-Northeasterner, ranging from verbal abuse to physical attacks such as killings and frequent instances raping of Northeastern girls. Nandita Haksar's recent book, *The Exodus is Not Over: Migrations from the Ruptured Homelands of Northeast India* (2016), features first generation youngsters from the Northeast who migrate to

Delhi, Bengaluru, Goa and other places in search of work. Mostly, they find jobs as low-rung workers in retail, the hospitality industry or call centres. She relates the stories of Tangkhul Naga migrant workers from Ukhrul district of Manipur. She writes that it has taken enormous courage for Ngalatim Hongray, her brother, Yaokhalek Hongray, and Livingstone Shazia as well as RS Mayori to tell their stories: the humiliation and racism that they endure and the utter lack of worker rights².

The following sections show how violence emerges as the most disturbing concern in the narratives of migrants while we conducted field work in Delhi. Most of the respondents, irrespective of their profile, have at least one experience of violence to narrate either as their own experience or as something that their friends, relatives or known people have gone through. Symbolic violence through verbal abuse is something that many respondents have experienced at least once in their life in Delhi. Derogatory words such as ‘Momos’ and ‘Chinkys’ are very frequent and directly deployed on them in public places. These are racially stigmatised ways of addressing a population having distinctive physical features and cultural practices. Apart from these, they are also called *Nepalis*, *Bahadurs*, *Firangis*, *Japanese* and *Chinese* all of which identify them as foreigner. Such identifications as foreigner despite their actual belongingness to the Indian nation generate an identity crisis in their everyday life. The narratives from the field reveals many other everyday forms of discrimination and violence they encounter in Delhi. Most of the respondents say that they are forced to pay more charge to auto-rickshaws and it often results in verbal abuse and quarrel. Many respondents agreed that they are subjected to discrimination and humiliation when it comes to their accommodation in Delhi. They are denied houses by house owners as they are deemed unfit to the prescribed life style and food practices. Their food practices especially meat cooking such as pork and beef often leads to conflict and end up with humiliation from house owner and neighbours. The culture of socialisation among Northeasterners especially celebrations where boys and girls mingle are easily sexualised by others. There are several instances to show how such notions lead to abuse, quarrel and violence where neighbours and house owners eventually blame the Northeasterners as deviants. The instances of denying house for Northeastern migrants and forcefully getting evicted from houses are also not very rare.

However, the direct physical attacks are most overt expression of racial discrimination in Delhi. There is strong sense of fear among Northeastern

migrants that they may get targeted by others in Delhi. The recent instances of violent attacks intensified their sense of insecurity. Women are the most vulnerable among these migrants as they are more subjected to both physical and symbolic violence. The instances of rape in Delhi make the Northeastern women very uncomfortable especially travelling in the night. Many women migrants have said that they are verbally harassed by men due to their stereotypical perception about their sexuality. The dress pattern, appearance and visibility in the public life are not always perceived in a normalised sense as their body is sexually objectified in the public life.

Most of the respondents, both men and women say that they are careful in avoiding confrontations with people and more submissive to avoid potential violence. They are less assertive and often ignore small abuses to avoid violent attacks from others. Some of the narratives reveal how they are subjected to abuse and even physical threats when they resist everyday forms of violence. Most of the respondents think that their home place is safer than Delhi despite of all turbulence there. However, many female respondents have agreed that coming out at night time is risky for women in both the places. Some respondents especially that from Manipur think Delhi is safer than their home place. The ethnic conflicts and army violence and poor governance make life in states like Manipur extremely difficult and insecure. For migrants from states like Manipur, Delhi is not merely a place for better educational and employment opportunities, but a place where life is comparatively safer. This indicates that that the experience of Delhi varies significantly among Northeastern migrants depending on their home land in Northeast. For example, many migrants from Assam state says that they experience less problem in Delhi as they are geographically and culturally more in proximity with the mainland and many of them physically look similar with the mainland people. Most of the Nagas think that their homeland is safer and comfortable than Delhi but lacks the opportunities available in Delhi.

The Bezbaruah Committee, 2014

The Ministry of Home Affairs had constituted a Committee under the chairmanship of Shri M.P. Bezbaruah, retired IAS and member of the Northeastern Council, to look into the various concerns of the citizens hailing from the Northeastern States who are living in different parts of the country and to suggest suitable remedial measure, including legal measure which could be taken up by the Government³. The eleven-member committee headed by a retired IAS

officer M.P. Bezbaruah submitted its report on the discrimination against racial attacks on members the Northeast community in metros of India.

The 82-page report paints a grim picture of the nature and extent of discrimination and attacks against the Northeast community. It provides a comprehensive list of short-term and long-term measures that must be taken by the government for counter discrimination against the community. The report estimates that over two lakh people from the Northeast have migrated to Delhi between 2005 and 2013 and that about 86 percent of them have faced discrimination. It also finds that Delhi is the worst offender among the metro cities when it comes to racial discrimination against people from the Northeast⁴.

The Government responded favourably towards the following points under the Bezbaruah committee recommendations:

- a) The insertion of new sections of 153C and 509A in the Indian Penal Code to strengthen the legal framework against racial discrimination.
- b) Setting up of a special helpline no. 1093 for Northeast people.
- c) Setting up a panel of seven lawyers, out of which five are women lawyers, to provide legal assistance to people from Northeast.
- d) In order to educate the people about the Northeast, Universities have been advised that history of Northeast and participation in the freedom movement of the country should be taught at graduation level and post-graduation level, and for this purpose, curriculum be changed.
- e) Appointment of a nodal police officer and a police station for Northeasterners for immediate registering of FIR.
- f) A relief fund for helping victims of hate crimes is given under Delhi Victim compensation scheme 2011.

Was the implementation of the recommendations affective at the ground level?

In the survey we conducted, there were two questions that were asked specifically on the Bezbaruah committee:

- (1) The Bezbaruah Committee which was set up in 2014 had recommended the act of reaching out to Northeast people via social media: facebook (eg. Northeast India against Racism), whatsapp groups, special helpline for Northeast people (No. 1093) which is synchronised with Helpline No. 100, email support etc. Have

you found them useful? Do you think they have to an extent solved the problem faced by the Northeast migrants? Comment.

(2) Of the response that was made by the Government towards the Bezbaruah committee recommendations, which of the following is most relevant, most active and effective as a long-term solution to the problem faced by Northeasterners in Delhi? Please mark it on priority base. Please narrate.

TABLE 1

Has the implementation of the recommendations made by Bezbaruah Committee succeeded in solving the problem faced by the Northeasterners?	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	65	68.4
No	12	12.6
Not Aware	14	14.7
No Answer	4	4.2
TOTAL	95	100

A clear-cut majority of 68.4 percent of the respondents gave credit to the efforts made by the government through the implementation of the recommendations made by the committee in solving many issues faced by the Northeasterners in the context of Delhi. Even those of them who had not really made use of them felt that the presence of such efforts, like the helpline number 1093 which can be easily dialled in case of emergency, gave a sense of security and comfort. Though a few were sceptical about it, there were those who were not aware of it but believed it would be useful if utilised effectively. The need to promote awareness about the laws was brought up by a post-graduate from Shillong working with Convergys. He suggested that the various Northeast Student Associations in Delhi should work together with the Delhi Police in spreading awareness about the number 1093 and other means of availing police assistance.

There were many incidents narrated by the respondents in which they had first-hand experience of using the various laws implemented under the Bezbaruah Committee recommendations. A 45 years old government employee from Manipur who had been staying in Delhi for twenty four years responded in the affirmative. He said, the very fact that the committee had come into existence

proved that authorities have taken cognizance. The fear of the law inculcated in the minds of the people prevents the vulnerable to a great extent. It also helped the people to approach the concern authorities in a convenient way than before. The setting up of a helpline number 1093 will be the fastest medium to reach to the authorities. The salary of a Call Centre employee from Manipur was withheld for a long time on the ground that his residential certificate was considered invalid. He approached the police who ignored him initially but responded when he warned them of contacting the Northeast Support Centre and Helpline. There were stories of respondents using the helpline due to harassment by landlord who refused to give back security deposit, molestations of friends and fights with local (non-Northeasterners) etc. Community bond is however strong and people from the region have a tendency to approach their friends, community people (student organisations/ church groupings) and relatives, and usually used the law as the last resort to solved their issues, as is the practice in Northeast India. This very often does not solve but aggravate the situation and there is a need to create awareness to make them trust the law of the Indian State along with efforts to build the trust.

TABLE 2

BEZBARUAH COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS	No. of RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE
a) The insertion of new sections of 153C and 509A in the Indian Penal Code to strengthen the legal framework against racial discrimination.	14	14.7
b) Setting up of a special helpline no. 1093 for Northeast people.	21	22
c) Setting up a panel of 7 lawyers out of which 5 are women lawyers to provide legal assistance to people from Northeast.	5	5.2
d) In order to educate the people about the Northeast, Universities have been advised that history of Northeast and participation in the freedom movement of the country should be taught at graduation level and post-graduation	32	33.7

level, and for this purpose, curriculum be changed.		
e) Appointment of a nodal police officer and a police station for Northeasterners for immediate registering of FIR.	4	4.2
f) A relief fund for helping victims of hate crimes is given under Delhi Victim compensation scheme 2011.	0	0
No Answer	19	20
TOTAL	95	100

The Table 2 above shows the respondents' choice as to the most relevant and effective recommendations of the committee in solving the problem faced by Northeasterners. We can see that 33.7 percent of the respondents supported the inclusion of Northeast India in the National level curriculum at the graduate and post-graduation level with the purpose of bridging the cognitive gap and map and enhancing knowledge of the diversity of the Indian society.

A 34 years old respondent from Manipur residing in Munirka (New Delhi) opined that money and relief fund is not really important. She also doubted the efficiency of the option of 'insertion of new sections of 153 C and 509 A in the Indian Penal Code' because the culprits always have a chance to bargain their way out from the rule of law as in the case of Jessica⁵. Another respondent from Manipur staying in the same locality in New Delhi highlighted how language barrier becomes an obstacle in dealing with policemen. He continued, '...the appointment of a nodal police officer and a special police station for Northeasterners will definitely make approaching the law easier. Educating the people about the rich and relevant history of Northeast States will make others realise that we are also Indian just like them. They always looked upon us as Chinese or Nepali due to our physical appearances... But we always perceived them as Indians. This is because we were much aware of them through the national news, movies, or learnings in textbooks since high-school'⁶. A 25 year old research student from Jawaharlal Nehru University was positive that education was the answer in solving the problems faced by people from the Northeast region in India. She said, 'Education is important as it is the first thing moulding the mind-set of children. Knowing the history of Northeast India, and to be more precise, Northeast is in India will really

help in building and connecting people from different regions in the knowledge that they are people of one nation⁷.

To conclude, the question of racial discrimination in India needs to be addressed more sharply both at the level of academic practice and policy implementations. The continuing problem of discrimination and violence in Delhi and other cities demands more empirical examination to come up with viable solutions and implementation of policies. This working paper would be further advanced from the above discussion by elaborating the following issues to arrive at more concrete views on the problem. First, we have realised from our survey that the internal difference within the category of Northeast in terms of state, class, gender, physical appearance and culture are very significant in mapping the divergent experience of discrimination and violence among the Northeasterners in Delhi. Secondly, racisms against Northeasterners need to be theorised adequately and discussed in our academic discourse more actively. To achieve this, a detailed discussion of literature on race and discrimination will be done while developing this paper. Thirdly, it is interesting to ask how the experience of migrants in Delhi differs from other metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad and semi-urban location like Kerala state. This would allow us to come up with a comparative understanding of racial attitude against Northeasterners in various regions of the country.

Notes:

¹ Bhowmick, Nilanjana. 2014 (Feb. 6). What the death of NidoTaniam tells us about racism in India. Viewed on 9th August, 2014. <http://time.com/4876/nido-taniam-india-racism/>

² As cited in Civil Society, <http://www.civilsocietyonline.com/books-authors/lost-migrants-from-the-northeast/> (accessed on 10th April, 2017).

³ Bezbaruah Committee, <http://iasscore.in/current-affairs-ias-main.php?id=87> (accessed date: 10th April, 2017).

⁴ Polanki, Pallavi, Sunday, March 19th, 2017, Bezbaruah Report on North East Community: Five Key Recommendations, Firstpost, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/bezbaruah-report-north-east-community-five-key-recommendations-1678393.html> (accessed on 19th March, 2017).

⁵ Jessica Lal was shot dead on 30th April 1999 by the son of a politician. But the accused was initially acquitted by the court.

⁶ Seilienmang Haokip, Interviewed on 2th July.

⁷ Indrani Nath, Interviewed on 7th June, 2016.

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Conversation: N. Jayaram in conversation with Manish Thakur

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N. Jayaram in conversation with Manish Thakur

[Transcript of the interview held on 30 December 2016 at Tezpur University]*

Manish Thakur (MT): Sir, first of all, I must say, we have known each other for almost eighteen years now and I have known you from much earlier, as I had seen your name in Professor Yogendra Singh's first survey of literature on sociology in India and some of your papers on education. Although we have known each other for nearly two decades now, this is the first time that we are meeting formally for a conversation. For making this formal conversation possible, on your behalf and my own behalf, I must thank Professor Chandan Kumar Sharma of Tezpur University. And I must also thank Professor Sujata Patel, President of Indian Sociological Society for encouraging and supporting this endeavour. Before we come to the bigger questions that we have, at least those I have in mind, let me begin by asking you how you chanced upon the subject of sociology, because very often we find that being viewed as a residual subject. Could you please tell us something about you having opted for the subject at your undergraduate programme?

N. Jayaram (NJ): Before I answer this question, let me also thank Professor Chandan Kumar Sharma and Professor Sujata Patel for initiating this process of a formal interview. I am happy that you are interviewing me, but that also places me in a very awkward situation because for the last eighteen years we have been interacting informally. Anyway I am very happy to engage in this conversation with you. You asked me how did I choose sociology, how did I 'chance upon' it?

MT: Yes, I used the phrase 'chance upon'.

NJ: In a way yes, it was indeed by chance. For my BA degree programme I studied three cognate subjects –economics, political science, and sociology – at St Joseph's College, Bangalore [now Bengaluru], a constituent college of Bangalore University. The subject which fascinated me most as a young BA student was political science. That was for the way it was taught by one Professor Clement Arulnathan. He was a passionate teacher of political science. He mixed political science with current politics and, at an impressionable age, you very much are taken in by that. I did study the other two subjects, but mainly for the examination.

MT: Sorry sir, but all these subjects had equal weightage?

NJ: They all had equal weightage. You had to take any three on offer and I chose these three — economics, political science, and sociology. Since I took so much interest, I earned the college prize for securing the highest marks in the university examination and I felt very happy. And when people asked me then what would I do after completing my BA, my answer was simple: ‘MA’. What subject? ‘Political science, obviously.’ But when my friends pointed out that political science was not [then] taught at MA level in Bangalore University, ‘I will go to Madras University, that is a famous centre for learning political science’, I responded. If I don’t make it there, I will go to Mysore University, I thought. So, I did go to Madras, but by then the caste politics was so strong in Madras [now Chennai] that they identified me as [a Brahmin].

MT: When was this sir, roughly if you can give us a timeframe?

NJ: It was 1970. Caste factor was so strong in the university culture of Madras that a professor there refused me admission on two grounds, one that I came from outside [the state] and the other that I was a Brahmin. For the first time in my life somebody had directly asked me for my caste. And I had to respond to him and he was not amused. Disappointed, I went back to Bangalore. Then I got admission in Mysore University; my name was in the first list there.

MT: In political science?

NJ: In political science. I wanted to take admission. They did give me admission, but they told me that I cannot get hostel accommodation...

MT: In Mysore?

NJ: In Mysore University. When I got back home, I told my family I have joined Mysore University, but I would not be given hostel accommodation. My mother did not like the idea of me staying outside the university; she refused [permission]. That meant I went back to Mysore, withdrew my admission and came back to Bangalore and looked for admission in Bangalore University where I had applied for both economics and sociology. My teachers in St Joseph’s College advised me against taking up admission in economics because the professor there was an authoritarian person. Somebody said the university sociology department has got a new reader who has come from the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi and you may find that department interesting. The subject was not interesting to me, yet I enrolled in MA programme in sociology at

Bangalore University. The very first day the person who came to teach us sociology of religion was a senior person [Shri V. Muddalinganna], a Gandhian of sorts. He asked each one of us in the class why we took up this subject.

MT: The same question I asked you about.

NJ: Yes, why did you take up this subject? The subject was not of my interest. I was sitting in the last bench. So he went one by one, everyone was telling the subject is ‘interesting’...

MT: Exciting...

NJ: ...‘exciting’, etc. and he was cross-questioning everybody. If somebody said this subject is interesting, he asked why. If somebody said it has wide scope, he would ask what you mean by wide scope. I knew I cannot be saying any of this. So, when my turn came, I simply told him, ‘Sir, I have nothing else to do and my family thinks that I should not be joining workforce immediately, I should do the post-graduate course. I could not get admission into political science [in Madras University] and hostel accommodation [in Mysore University], and economics, I did not want to do. So I am here.’

MT: So, you were honest.

NJ: I was honest and forthright and he did not probe me further. But, before leaving the class, he asked me to see him. I went and saw him and he told me, ‘Young man, I like your frankness. You are young, you have a long life ahead of you and you will be spending two years of your valuable life in the university system. I know you did not take up this subject with interest in it, but, having taken it up, invest your time and energy and take it seriously.’ And that was a piece of remarkable advice. I have never looked back. So, my entry into sociology was definitely by chance; you could say accidental. But, after having taken it, I took that advice seriously and I have been in this subject for so many years now.

MT: I would not say it was accidental, because, as you mentioned, there were so many other structural factors: your caste; your ethnicity; you being rejected when you went to Madras; your part of being in a joint family, you mentioned your mother not wanting to send you to Mysore. So, I have the temptation to call it incidental. But now I see that there are other elements, larger processes impinging on your individual choice when you opted for this discipline. And this brings me to my next question. Both of us belong to a discipline which had once produced Karl Mannheim, and I recall it was in 1936 when he wrote his famous book

Ideology and Utopia, and there he talks about ‘the existential situatedness of knowledge’. And, in our own country, sociologists have talked about social conditioning and things like that. So, now in that case, can I ask you if you don’t mind— that your belonging to a particular caste, having come from the joint family, also your being the first-generation migrant or I don’t know maybe the second-generation migrant in a city — how some of these larger issues and factors have played any role when you became a sociologist?

NJ: Oh yes, you can. I do remember reading Professor Yogendra Singh on social conditioning of sociological thought. How these conditioning factors play an important part in shaping our academic orientation is a fact that we should all recognise. And, for the first time, even before I read Professor Yogendra Singh’s book on the subject, which, in fact, I have reviewed...

MT: And that was in 1986. You were already a Professor then?

NJ: No, I was not a professor by then. Much before that Professor M.S. Gore, who was Director of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), was my examiner...

MT: PhD thesis?

NJ: One of my PhD thesis examiners. And that was my first job. I was interviewed for a job... Lecturer in Sociology of Education at TISS.

MT: And that was which year sir?

NJ: That was in 1977. In the beginning of 1978 I joined TISS, but the interview was in the latter half of 1977. He did not come for the viva voce because he did not find the need for one. But he was there in the interview and since he had read my thesis, he brought to my attention the idea of social conditioning. He asked me: ‘Dr Jayaram do you come from a joint family?’ I told him, ‘Yes, I come from a joint family. We are about eighteen people there.’ And, he appeared satisfied. But then I put a counter question to him: ‘Professor Gore, you asked me if I come from a joint family and I have answered your question. But what made you ask me that question? How is it relevant?’ Because, those days, I was in a fighting mode. I thought people were asking irrelevant questions. But, he was a thorough gentleman, so there was no question of fighting. I was only curious to know why he was asking me that question. Then he told me, ‘It was writ large in your thesis. The way you have written the thesis shows that.’ The second point, which again was much before I read Professor Yogendra Singh, was when I went to England...

MT: After your PhD?

NJ: Yes, after my PhD, after I became a lecturer in Bangalore University.

MT: What we would call post-doctoral?

NJ: It was not called post-doctoral. It was called Younger Scientists Exchange Scheme between the British Council and the UGC [University Grants Commission]. This was for a period of three months. I was selected for that and I spent three months at the University of Surrey, Guilford... with Professor Asher Tropp. He hosted lunch one day; his wife was also there. Halfway through the lunch he asked me: 'Dr Jayaram, are you a Brahman?' For the first time, after that Madras episode, somebody was directly asking me about my caste. I could not be rude; I had to answer. I told him that I was born in a Brahmin family. Then I asked him: 'Professor Tropp, instead of asking me what my caste is, you asked me if I am a Brahmin. Why?' He said, 'Oh Dr Jayaram, it is very simple. I have a theory and I wanted some sort of confirmation. And the theory is this: If somebody coming from India eats beef but not pork, he is a Muslim; eats pork but not beef, he is a lower-caste Hindu; he eats both, he is a Brahmin.' I was looking at his face with my mouth wide open. Then he explained: 'Every community has food restrictions –prescriptions and prohibitions. A Brahman in your part of the country is a strict vegetarian. Once he crosses that vegetarian boundary, there is no boundary for him, nothing can stop him. Since you have eaten both beef and pork, I found it remarkable and wanted to get some confirmation.' That was eye-opening. The point is, even if I don't care for my caste, even if I am not proud of my caste origin, others identify me as belonging to that caste. And this is an experience with which I have lived ever since. But one important dimension that he [Professor Tropp] brought in that I need to respond to ... is that I come from a family which originally migrated from the coastal district of South Kanara, present-day Udupi district of Karnataka. My parents migrated to Bangalore around the time of the Second World War. Two of us were born after the family's migration.

MT: Were you born in Bangalore?

NJ: No. It is very interesting. I was born in my mother's natal place near Udupi, but my records mention that I was born in Bangalore! Those days expectant mothers went for confinement to their natal homes.

MT: By the time you had already come to Bangalore?

NJ: Yes, by that time we had already come to Bangalore. So, my records just mention Bangalore as my place of birth. In my family, which has six brothers and one sister, I was the first one to become a graduate. Of the remaining five, two earned their vocational diplomas from a polytechnic; one entered college, but dropped out because the economic circumstance of the family was not that good. Even to educate two of my brothers in the polytechnic, my mother had to pawn her meagre jewellery. Very difficult times, those were. But there was a consensus – partly I attribute this to the value that is placed on education in the caste group – that at least one of us...

MT: You being the youngest got the benefit.

NJ: Yes, I being the youngest got the benefit. This is an important consequence of the rank order of my birth; the sacrifice that my eldest brother made was that he dropped out of school when he was in the 7th class. I graduated ... because of the emphasis that my mother placed on education. She wanted somebody in the family to become a doctor and since this was not fulfilled with the first six children, the seventh one had to. I became a ‘doctor’, but I was not useful to her in any medical treatment! Thus, one important factor in shaping my education and the value that I attach to learning comes from the caste system, whether I like it or not. Also I told you about my food habits. There was this challenging phase when I started eating non-vegetarian food though I did not relish it. I wanted to make a social statement against the caste system. But at some stage I realised it makes absolutely no sense. Why do you inconvenience yourself? You need not have to make a demonstration of what you believe in to others. You are in a position vis-à-vis caste system in your home and extended family and how you deal with other human beings keeping this aside is very important.

MT: But it is interesting. In fact, I wanted to move to the next question. But you have revealed two or three dimensions of caste. You referred to the culture of learning that your caste group may have had historically inherited. In that sense, caste also is some sort of capital, in the sense value of education gets inherited as part of the cultural capital that a caste group inherits. On the other hand, you also had another experience when you went into the post-graduate department of [of political science] one of the oldest universities [Madras University] where the professor asked you about your caste and rejected you for belonging to a particular caste.

NJ: Yes.

MT: It is interesting how your own biographical trajectory crisscrossed the larger historical processes. Because Tamil Nadu had historical experience of having gone through the non-Brahmin or anti-Brahmin movement and that gets reflected in maybe you not getting admission there. Did you feel any sense of reverse discrimination after your Madras experience?

NJ: Yes, I felt hurt. But, in retrospect, I could appreciate that the same thing could happen to someone else who is discriminated against because of her/his caste. The point is, I had no say in my being born in a Brahmin family, just as someone else has no say in being born in another either.

MT: But is the matter so simple? Our primordial identity is so unique.

NJ: No. It is entrenched to a great extent. I cannot change the whole society, but I can engage with you and some others with the idea of caste. I think I have engaged with my students. My doctoral students have come from different caste groups and I have never had any problem. And, since you raise that issue, I should also mention and you must have noticed that I don't have a surname. This is a question that I raised in the family after a long time. My father has a surname, my eldest brother has a surname, but after that nobody has the surname. You are aware of the Non-Brahmin Movement in the erstwhile Mysore state. My second brother was a bit enlightened. He said that the first step that we should take in this direction is to remove the surname which is indicative of one's caste. Oh, my father did not care; my mother did not much understand. So, my second brother took the initiative to get rid of the surname and he ensured none of his younger brothers or sister had the surname name. So, I don't have a surname. It would be difficult, or even impossible, for you to identify my caste by my name.

MT: But, that does not make you *not* a Brahmin!

NJ: Of course, that does not make me *not* a Brahmin, because you have other markers from which you can identify.

MT: And even if those markers are not there, politically caste does matter.

NJ: Yes, certainly.

MT: And that's why I keep dwelling on caste.

NJ: I know. There was a chief minister in Karnataka [Shri Gundu Rao] who used to call himself a chicken-eating Brahmin. It is there. The point Manish is that

caste is a relational matter; it is not just an individual matter. It is one prism through which relationships are processed.

MT: I am talking of caste in a different sense because, as you rightly said, caste is single and collective resource both, inherited and it could also be a collective resource for some form of resistance or some form of protest.

NJ: Sure.

MT: And in many universities these days we have perspectives from below and we have new writings coming up. So, in some of these writings people do identify sociologists with their caste. For instance, an article in *Economic and Political Weekly [EPW]* last year identifies some of the sociologists with their caste names. And then they would infer that the discipline has been Brahmin-dominated or upper-caste dominated and things like that. So, even though the identification is not simple, somehow the way it gets perceived, I think that is the point we are making.

NJ: Yes, that is what even I am trying to emphasise.

MT: That does matter. Anyway, now let me dwell on another, I would say, distinctive aspect of your biography as a sociologist, as a professional. If I remember correctly, you had all your education in Bangalore.

NJ: Yes.

MT: You did your PhD from Bangalore?

NJ: Yes, I have had all my education in Bangalore. I should tell you something about my educational career. I did my schooling in a Protestant mission school, United Mission High School. It was a very notorious school. In 1964, only three of us passed SSLC [School Leaving Certificate Examination] from that school. But, I had the benefit of studying in a Jesuits-run Catholic college, St Joseph's College for four years and that changed me substantially.

MT: Change in the sense— in terms of linguistic competence?

NJ: No, not linguistic competence; that had to wait. It liberalised my worldview; it was a cosmopolitan college.

MT: It took you away from the Brahminical universe.

NJ: Yes, it took me away from my Brahminical universe and there was no family interference, as I had passed the age where family dominates you. My linguistic competence [in English] did not improve because I made friends with those who spoke Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu, the languages with which I was comfortable, and avoided people who spoke English because it was intimidating to me. Only after I moved to the Department of Sociology, Bangalore University for my post-graduate studies in sociology I made a conscious effort to learn spoken English and also written English on my own. That was because Professor C. Rajagopalan, who was Head of the Department at that time, was originally from Kerala. He could speak fluently in English and Hindi, besides Malayalam, which was his mother tongue.

MT: Tamil also?

NJ: Not much. These three languages he could speak fluently, but not a word of Kannada. So, if I wanted to interact with him, I had to construct the sentences beforehand. And, since the conversation was directed by him, I had nothing more to add after uttering the first sentence!

MT: Your homework did not work.

NJ: So, I made it a point for the next two years not to speak to anybody in Kannada. People made fun of my English, but it did not matter. Now, I speak English confidently.

MT: But sir, I was asking you this question for a different reason altogether. You were someone who had all his training in Bangalore and in a state university. We have been talking about centre-periphery relations. And, generally, you would think the centres of the discipline, like the central universities in Delhi, are much better known internationally and nationally and things like that. But even later, I mean despite having been trained in Bangalore, I go on emphasising this point, and having worked there for almost two decades or more than two decades...

NJ: Formally, I worked there for twenty-one years [27 February 1978–31 March 1999].

MT: Okay, so I would say more than two decades. You would acknowledge that you had larger national acceptability. I mean, you being in Bangalore, having been trained in Bangalore, having not come from Delhi School of Economics or having not been a disciple of M.N. Srinivas or any such stalwarts, these things did not matter in any way. It did not come in the way of your wider acceptability

within the profession, within the university system, and within all other institutions which are somehow related to higher education. I am aware of your being a member of UGC subject panel on sociology and curriculum revision committee and ICSSR [Indian Council of Social Science Research] review committee. I also know that routinely you get invited to many universities in Delhi for various purposes, and many PhD theses come to you for evaluation from these universities. So, these are indicators of your wider professional recognition despite having your training, as I have said earlier, in Bangalore. How do you look at this? What we hear these days about periphery being deprived of the intellectual academic resources and being in a state of crisis, something that you talked about this morning [in the Panel Discussion] that you have been hearing for five decades. So, can you elaborate on this interplay of relations based on your own experience?

NJ: In a way you are right; there is this notion of centre-periphery. But there are two dimensions to it. One is essentially in structural terms: wherever there is a centre you can think of periphery, and wherever there is periphery you think of a centre. You go back to the writings of Johan Galtung. This is a function partly of history, partly of policy decisions that have been taken, etc. But then this is not a hard and fast structure, you can look at different centres and different peripheries. True, Bangalore is a periphery if you look at Delhi as the centre, but Bangalore itself is a centre in relation to Dharwad, Gulbarga, Mangalore, and even Mysore. So, you have different centres and different peripheries.

MT: You mean to say they are changing?

NJ: No, they are different. I am not telling that they are changing; what I am telling is that the idea varies depending upon what you would like to see as centre and what you would like to see as periphery.

MT: I have one query, because in Karnataka, Mysore was seen as a centre at some point in time, in terms of its location, Dharwad could have been another centre, and Bangalore would emerge as a centre much later. That's why I thought that...

NJ: One of the important things you associate with these processes is the location of the university in the state capital. It is much easier for Bangalore to attract a professor from Delhi than for Karnatak University. Even now there is no direct flight to some of these places in Karnataka. You will have to come to Bangalore and then go there. So, if you are invited to Gulbarga you will think ten times

before accepting the invitation, whereas you will not have to think ten times before accepting the invitation to Bangalore because it is better connected. And also when you look at Bangalore, Delhi appears as the centre of attraction; Bangalore becomes periphery. But Bangalore itself is a centre for other peripheries. Then there is another important point of the relationship between what is regarded as centre and what is regarded as periphery. Though I studied in Bangalore, did my PhD in Bangalore, and worked for twenty-one years in Bangalore, not for once did I feel that I am in the periphery. I always looked at the radiating points to where centres were. One of the important catalysts in this process was Professor Rajagopalan. He was a doctoral student of Professor G.S. Ghurye. He was employed in Punjab University and in IIT Delhi before joining Bangalore University.

MT: Professor Rajagopalan was your guide?

NJ: He was my guide and mentor. And he had worked in Delhi. So, constantly I would get exposure to what was happening in the so-called centre through him. And he was such a person that he could bring many senior scholars to Bangalore. For instance, Professor A.R. Desai, his teacher, visited Department of Sociology, Bangalore University. And when Professor M.N. Srinivas moved to Bangalore, he had relationship with the department. So, I was not starved of interaction with the stalwarts. Also, I realised very early on that, if I focus attention only on Bangalore and Karnataka, there will be a barrier to what I can learn in future. So, I consciously chose to publish, to go and participate in conferences and seminars, etc. I looked forward to engagements with scholars and centres from outside Bangalore and Karnataka. Moreover, Professor Rajagopalan advised me 'Whenever you take on, take on a big name, something of their greatness will rub on you'.

MT: That is a sage advice.

NJ: It was a very sage advice. There is no point in engaging with unknown scholars; nobody would know. What is the point in Muhammad Ali defeating me, hitting me, right? If I were to take on Muhammad Ali, people will say, 'Oh Jayaram has taken on Muhammad Ali!' So, I always looked at outside Bangalore for my reference points. This in a way has saved me.

MT: Sir, can I interject? So, can we infer that, in a way, you were consciously casting your academic net wide ever since you joined Bangalore University and you also had the good fortune of having been mentored by someone who had seen

the world and who had better exposure? And that way you believed that individual talent, individual competence, individual efforts can overcome some of these structural barriers.

NJ: Oh yes, definitely Manish. That is very important and that is a message that I would like to pass on to youngsters today, those who are joining the profession. For instance, early on in my PhD days, I had an opportunity of attending an ICSSR-sponsored discipline-specific course on ‘Research Methodology of Sociology and Social Anthropology’ organised by the Department of Sociology, University of Saugar [5 November–8 December 1973].

MT: Saugar in Madhya Pradesh?

NJ: In Madhya Pradesh.

MT: And you were in Bangalore then?

NJ: I was then in Bangalore. And those days Professor Leela Dube was heading the department at Saugar. The resource persons who came there were drawn from across the country. That was one place, in thirty-four days, I was exposed to all the big names in sociology that you could think of then. And also Professor Satish Saberwal, who again...

MT: We will come to him later...

NJ: He was a resident resource person. So, I benefitted a lot by attending that course. What you lack in the periphery, you can make a conscious effort to seek outside.

MT: You are making an important point – how institutions can play a very supportive role; ICSSR made that course possible for you.

NJ: True.

MT: And for many of you for attending the course and all that.

NJ: For many of us, including Professor John Kattakayam. It was at that course that I happened to meet him for the first time.

MT: And you could hear all those big names, what you called big names, in those thirty-four days.

NJ: Yes.

MT: But now I am changing the track a bit. And we all know that you have worked mainly in the areas of education, diaspora, and in the area of research methods and all that. What were the formative influences, I mean, when you opted for these areas of research? Were these areas conscious choice or maybe coincidence? Like I know, for diaspora, you were Visiting Professor at The University of the West Indies.

NJ: Yes it is a very interesting trajectory. One of the subjects that I was very fond of during MA was family and kinship. People may laugh at it today! I was taught this subject by a teacher [Dr Bhavani Banerjee] who had done her doctoral work under Professor Irawati Karve. She taught it in such a fascinating way, I was very much impressed. In fact, I had bought a copy of Irawati Karve's book...

MT: Thick book, *Kinship Organisation in India*.

NJ: *Kinship Organisation in India*, on her recommendation. I have preserved it till today. By the time I finished my MA, that lady had resigned and migrated to USA. When Professor Rajagopalan asked me what I wanted to do, I told him that my economic circumstances were not good and so I am looking for a job. He told me, 'Job will pay you something like 400 rupees per month. Will a 300 rupees fellowship satisfy you? Can you defer the gratification of 100 rupees by few years? In the long run it will be helpful to you.' Then he offered to supervise my doctoral work. I said okay. Then one day he asked me, 'What is it that you propose to work on?' I told him that I want to work on family, especially the practice of dowry among the Bunts of South Kanara. I was not interested in any moral evaluation of the practice of dowry. Rather I was interested in understanding how the institution of dowry has helped the community retain its wealth? It is one of the most prosperous communities and owns two most prosperous banks, Vijaya Bank and Corporation Bank. He just dismissed that idea. Though he was himself a student of Professor Ghurye, he asked me to look at something which is typically sociological. And he asked me to think it over. My second choice was my own family experience vis-à-vis education. I started reading up on education and those days Kothari Commission's Report had been submitted and its recommendations were being discussed. J.P. Naik had written a book on the subject.

MT: You are talking of early 1970s?

NJ: No, late 1960s. 1964–66 was the reference period of the Commission's Report, which was still being discussed and written about even in the early 1970s.

MT: It was a public discourse.

NJ: It was a public discourse. And I thought that is an area which also gave me some scope for engaging with sociology, political science, and several issues. An excellent analytical thinker that he is, Professor Rajagopalan helped me articulate my research problem in pure sociological terms. The fascinating perspective you see in my thesis on the relationship between education and social stratification looked at from two different poles of education — higher education and lower education — was the outcome of my constant discussions with him. I did my research work among students in higher education in urban areas at one end and an ethnographic study of primary school education in a village at the other. But the second area in which I have published is attributable entirely to a chance factor.

MT: Diaspora?

NJ: Yes, diaspora. I was selected as ICCR [Indian Council of Cultural Relations] Chair Professor in Indian Studies at The University of West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and I was posted there.

MT: For three years?

NJ: It was initially for two years, but extended by one more year. I was there [in Trinidad] for three years [1994–1996]. And I asked ICCR what my brief was in this appointment. And they told me that the university has an optional course on ‘Indian Communities Staying Overseas’. For the first time I heard the word ‘diaspora’ then. And they asked me to do some empirical work on Indo-Trinidadians, a hyphenated community about which I heard for the first time. After going to Trinidad I taught an optional course on the Indian diaspora, which I found was very attractive to many people, including people of African origin. And I also did work on the Indo-Trinidadians, a diasporic community. In addition to education and diaspora, my original interest in political science, gave a sociological perspective to my thinking on civil society, multiculturalism, minorities, and also the political dimension of caste.

MT: And also the city and...

NJ: And the other one was city. But I wouldn’t say that I have any great expertise in this area. But then something important happened when I moved to Mumbai. I was invited in 2003 by TISS, Mumbai to head its Department of Research Methodology...

MT: Which many people may not know...

NJ: Yes. My brief in TISS was to rejuvenate the famous Department of Research Methodology of which Professor Hebsur and Professor Ramachandran were earlier stalwarts. And later on it became Centre for Research Methodology and now I am told it is a School. I discovered what they were teaching in the name of 'methodology' at TISS then was just 'methods'. And the sociologist in me looked at all these methods through the filter of theories that I had studied. So, I started floating a course on the relation between theory and methods. I also noticed a serious imbalance... there was an excessive emphasis on quantitative methods.

MT: So you brought out the philosophical premises of methods.

NJ: I gave attention to the philosophy of social sciences.

MT: More qualitative aspect...

NJ: More qualitative aspects, too. Not that I take any particular position on that, a point that we can discuss later on, but I wanted to set the balance right. And I am happy that I did this.

MT: I have a question here and, it is not very comfortable for me to ask this question. But you made a very interesting point that you do not have a position on this qualitative vs. quantitative methods debate. I want to extend this, and say, I just want to provoke you so that I get your reaction...

NJ: Go ahead, it gives you a purpose...

MT: And what I want to say is that, in your writings, whatever is the area, I mean as someone who has read most of your writings, if not all, and I have conversed with other colleagues, other friends about your writings, I have heard them. So, there is a general, what should I say, understanding that in your writings we find too much of eclecticism. Allow me two or three minutes to clarify what I mean.

NJ: Please, please.

MT: This eclecticism means that generally as part of your intellectual temperament, academic temperament, you don't take a categorical position on many issues. You say things, maybe one type of things in one article, and other type of things in another place. I am not talking of inconsistency. Like, I know that you had edited that book on *Social Conflict* with Professor Satish Saberwal. But no one can identify that you are a person who has been part of the conflict

tradition. Even in our textbooks we have this thing that these are structural functionalists and these are conflict theorists. You have taught theory papers for so long, you know [Georg] Simmel being a conflict theorist. So, I want to relate it to a larger thing that I would say metaphorically that some of the sociologists argue that sociology in India has become more or less a sanitised sort of discipline; it has been insulated from the larger burning issues of the day. I remember one of the quotations of Shiv Visvanathan where he said that you read Indian sociology and you would not realise that Bhopal had happened, this had happened, that had happened, the Dalit movements had happened, and many other, Narmada had happened. Somewhere he has written this sort of thing. So, can I say, that I wish to provoke you that do you see that Indian sociology is less political because we have too many Professor Jayarams, we have too much of eclecticism, or your eclecticism is a conscious part of the type of academic temperament you have or the type of academic contributions you wish to make?

NJ: Yes, if it is a pejorative sort of a comment that is made, if it is a negative sort of thinking that because of eclecticism there is irresponsibility, I deny that. But, if you ask me what my methodological position is, I would say that I consciously choose eclecticism, not that I have always done that. If you read my earlier pieces during my youthful days, when Marxism was ruling the roost over academics, I was strongly influenced by the Marxian perspective. If you look at my piece on, say Bangalore city or higher education, etc., you can clearly find the radical perspective there. In fact, I once made a presentation at the Communist Party Headquarters in Budapest...

MT: Budapest, Hungary?

NJ: Yes, Hungary. And they told me that I was more radical than they were because of the way I presented my views. But then you should make a difference between a young scholar, who is coming out and engaging ideologically, and when you reach a mature plain then you wonder if you are putting on blinkers. And then this was a very conscious thinking. What is important: is it this ideology which should drive what I do or is it the problem that determines what is required? And being a teacher, this was also a moral stand that I had to take. Early on, a student pointed out this to me, 'Sir you are talking all this, but do you know the implications?' And I am grateful to that student. I go back and see Max Weber...

MT: And his say on science as vocation?

NJ: Yes.

MT: Even politics as a vocation.

NJ: Yes. Whatever you call it.

MT: There are two essays.

NJ: What happens is they [the students] are all looking at you to learn. They have to make a choice. I cannot make a choice for my students in the classroom. And I would be misusing my class if I become a political orator in the classroom. So, I made a conscious decision. Many students ask me at the end, ‘Sir, when you teach Durkheim, we feel you are a strong supporter of Durkheim. But when you switch to Weber, we think you are a Weberian, and when you switch to Pareto, you are so convincing a pessimist as Pareto!’ Same is the case, when I teach sociological theories. I tell them, ‘That is my purpose. Now I leave it to you, there are critiques, I leave it to you, and you engage with it, you come up with your choice.’ Thus, I do not impose my personal predications, preferences on my students. So, you have different traditions in which dissertations are being written. But some people may choose me for particular reasons, but I will not impose my own views on them. So, what happens is that I turn out to be an eclectic. I think one important person from whom I learned disciplined eclecticism was Professor Saberwal. Professor Rajagopalan was analytically very clear; the left of centre orientation in him had some influence on me in the formative years, and that too was reinforcement of what my political science teacher [Professor Clement Arulnathan] in St. Joseph’s College had taught.

MT: But Professor Saberwal did take some stand on the issue of Partition, on the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations, and things like that towards the end of his professional career. And I would say that some of these stances were politically informed. What was the nature of communal relations in the nineteenth century and other things like, why we always compare ourselves, you know it better than me, with the West, why not with China and all that. So, anything else you would like to say. I would believe that this was your, even now this would be your conscious choice.

NJ: That is my conscious choice; disciplined eclecticism is my conscious choice. And I make no apology for that today. And I don’t pretend. My sincere belief is that what should guide us is the research problem, the issue that is there, and which is the best perspective which will give us insights on that. If you right away

impose your ideology on the problem and how you view it as a problem then I am at a loss. Sometimes it also becomes fashionable. You know, we have worked together; sometimes some word comes from somewhere, wherever it is...

MT: We know that somewhere...

NJ: You know where that somewhere is. But once that word comes, you want to grab it and you want to be the first one to use it in India, right? I am not; I don't do that.

MT: I have a subsidiary question. Since you have taught theory courses for many years in Bangalore and if you look at the history of the discipline, I am not talking about the history of the discipline in India, let's say in other places, someone would counter argue that much of the intellectual energy comes out of the big controversies that a discipline has seen. Like in Germany, they would recall three great moments of controversy: on methods, again when Mannheim published his book and the entire debate around sociology of knowledge, again the type of controversy that Max Weber generated about value neutrality. But if we go for eclecticism then we don't have that, whether you call it ideological boxing or different schools colliding with each other. So, somehow that does not generate that type of intellectual energy which would propel the discipline towards more creative endeavours. How do you react to this?

NJ: No, I don't think that is true. Because, even when I have taken eclectic position, others have critiqued that and I would stand my own ground on what I have said.

MT: Can you give us one illustration? Like, I remember once you reviewed M.N. Srinivas's book...

NJ: Yes, that was in 1983; the book [*Basic Needs Viewed From Above and From Below: The Case of Karnataka State, India*] of OECD-sponsored research project in which Professor Srinivas, Professor T.S. Epstein, Professor M.N. Panini, and Dr V.S. Parthasarathy — four of them were involved. This was something about looking at poverty from above, from below, etc. and I reviewed that book... taking a Marxian perspective.

MT: You mean class perspective.

NJ: Yes, class perspective; class perspective, not in the American stratification terms, but in Marxian mode of production terms. That people took it as a point to

criticise me; in fact, one of the criticisms was that I was a crude Marxist. Okay. Now that was my position on that. Then I reviewed a book by Professor Sarvepalli Gopal on anatomy of a confrontation; it was about Babri Masjid–Ramjanmbhumi issue...

MT: Dr. S. Gopal?

NJ: Yes, the historian. The book was titled *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid–Ramjanmabhumi Issue*.

MT: Was it single authored?

NJ: No, no. It was a collection of essays, many scholars, edited by Professor Gopal. When the review of this book was published, somebody called me an RSS sympathiser! That is, I was endorsing the RSS position on the issue because...

MT: Rightist position?

NJ: Because I said that, if you are doing an anatomy of a confrontation, you cannot have eight of the scholars taking one position and there is only one who does not appear to be even on the so-called right. Now, why don't you listen to somebody from the right? Where is the anatomy there? Anatomy, you will agree, cannot be one sided.

MT: It has to be essentially pluralist.

NJ: Yes. The point is that it has to be pluralist; there are perspectives on the issue, not one so-called *the* perspective. If somebody tells me that there is only one view, that is the only view that is possible, I would find it very difficult to swallow. So, I would say eclecticism is nothing wrong. Maybe it is not passionate advocacy; it may not make you a flamboyant person. But where are these people who take this hard core perspective, do they consistently follow it?

MT: But they do have a captivating audience.

NJ: They may have.

MT: They get all the claps in the auditorium.

NJ: Manish, captivating audience...

MT: They make up public intellectuals.

NJ: I know.

MT: They would get called to TV.

NJ: Yes. But, then there is the question of priorities that you set. I have never cared for that kind of attention or adulation.

MT: Okay. Sir, now I want to ask you a different set of questions.

NJ: Please.

MT: So far my questions were mainly related to your career trajectory, professional trajectory as a sociologist, type of things you have done, type of things you have not done or the type of things you have consciously done, to put it together.

NJ: And the type of things that I have consciously not done!

MT: Not done. Yes, that would be the right way of putting that. Now, since you have been in the profession for more than four decades, if I take early and mid-1970s as the starting point...

NJ: Yes, I first entered the classroom as a teacher on 13 October 1972.

MT: This is 2016, so I would say...

NJ: Forty-four years.

MT: More than four decades.

NJ: Yes, more than four decades.

MT: I would urge you to look at the questions that I will put forth from the perspective of someone who has seen it, who has been part of the system and who has been part of different types of institutions in his professional life. I do know that you moved to Goa University in [April] 1999, from there you moved to TISS in Mumbai in [November] 2003, and then you went to the Institute for Social and Economic Change [ISEC] in Bangalore for more than a year [December 2006–July 2008] as its Director. Then you were also in [the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS)] Shimla as a fellow for a year [June 2012–July 2013]. So you have seen different types of institutions apart from the other things I have referred to. I will come to other things later, but first how do you look at most of these institutions that you have been part of somewhere or the other and their

interface with the discipline or the disciplinary practices? And I am not asking you right now about your role as Managing Editor of the *Sociological Bulletin* because that is a point that needs separate treatment. Roughly, I want to know, what are the structural enabling factors that different types of institutions offer to young and promising sociologists? Or, to put it conversely, what are the handicaps that young researchers in the discipline would face depending on the range of institutions you have been to in the country.

NJ: I think I will be able to answer this question because I have worked in two regional universities — Bangalore and Goa; a deemed-to-be central university — TISS, Mumbai; an ICSSR-funded institution — ISEC; and a centrally funded institution of advanced studies — IIAS, Shimla. I notice there is a peculiar sort of situation in which certain structural features act as a barrier for ‘good’ teachers remaining in the peripheral institutions. In fact, they are pushed out for whatever reasons: it may be caste, it may be language, and it may be [lack of] opportunities— whatever it is. And there are also pull factors. About my own movement, I left Bangalore, obviously I was pushed out more by caste-politics. I went to Goa and I would have been happy to stay there. I think you would recall the wonderful time that we had for four years. But then the government, in its wisdom, thought that it should reduce the retirement age to fifty-eight; so, four of us left Goa University at that time, all senior professors. After the exodus of senior professors, you left, [V.] Sujatha left. Where did these people go? I got invited by TISS. It is, you can say, a sort of centre.

MT: Central deemed university.

NJ: You moved to IIM [Indian Institute of Management Calcutta], Sujatha moved to JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi]. In just one year or so the department was depleted of three teachers. And we had brought our own expertise in different fields into the department. Look at the department now; it is starved... it has only two permanent teachers. Look at [the department of sociology in] Bangalore University —from eight, I am told, it is now reduced to four. And, if you look at the publications that come out, etc., where are these institutions? As a consequence, students who study in these institutions seem to suffer considerably. At the same time, I would not say this as a standard outcome; it need not necessarily happen. Some remotely placed institutions have been very active; they put up with great difficulties and work. Sometimes, even centrally placed institutions find it difficult to attract good teachers at the top level. I would say, if you leave out the so-called universities in the centre — basically you would refer

to three: JNU, Delhi School [of Economics], and University of Hyderabad — where will you look for a good institution teaching sociology. I would say from my experience of going around, there are only two institutions: one is definitely the Department of Sociology, Tezpur University. To some extent another institution which suffers from these limitations, because it is not a central institution, though located in Delhi, is the Ambedkar University. That is because some individuals take deep interest in trying to put together, attract people, and make a conscious effort to go forward. It maybe a Professor Shyam Menon, Vice-Chancellor in Ambedkar University or a Professor Chandan Kumar Sharma here [in Department of Sociology, Tezpur University].

MT: No, but even then, I mean, since you keep referring to structural factors, would you like to argue that metropolitan–mofussil divide in institutional terms has a bearing on the quality of teaching or quality of research?

NJ: Oh yes, yes.

MT: And such defect may have some implications for the type of disciplinary practices we have. In fact, I wanted to know more from you about how you look at the disciplinary practices that you see around yourself in our times. And let me add whether you are happy to see new type of work getting done by young and promising scholars at new places at new centres? How do you assess, I mean, what would your assessment of the type of scholarship that you see in the discipline? Can you share something along these lines?

NJ: Very interestingly, much of the scholarship that you are speaking of, where it is challenging new areas, it is all coming out of so-called centres. The mofussil universities suffer from several disabilities: one is the inward looking nature of these institutions in terms of language, in terms of state boundary, like they don't want outsiders, etc. You look at the recruitment in state universities in the last ten years, how many state universities have been able to attract talent; let alone attract, even if somebody wants to go and work, will they give a job? So, you find that barrier which I spoke operates at the formal level and at the informal level. And there is also simultaneously a movement; even if there is a scholar who is promising in this regard, and wants to come back or stay there and do that, he finds it extremely difficult to work. At some stage he will want to migrate. If you conduct a survey [among young academics] as to where they want to work, you are sure to find that most of them would want to go out to some 'centre'.

MT: So, do you mean to say that we are condemned to live with this divide for years to come and decades to come?

NJ: I would not wish to put it so pessimistically. But, to be sure, in the near future, I don't see any prospect of this situation changing.

MT: No policies?

NJ: No policies in place. Because notice that there is a diarchy in higher education. That is why whatever decisions are taken at MHRD [Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India] get implemented in central universities first. These universities are saved. By the time these decisions reach the state universities or mofussil universities, you find they are diluted.

MT: I have kept two questions towards the end. The first one –and I would like you to expand on this – because many colleagues have asked me that they would like to know your views. All of us know that you have been the Managing Editor of *Sociological Bulletin* [hereafter *Bulletin*] the journal of Indian Sociological Society, which has been in existence for more than sixty years now; I don't know the volume number.

NJ: Yes, it is sixty-six.

MT: Sixty-six years; founded by Professor Ghurye. And, I think, you have similar distinction of having been an editor for fifteen years. I don't know for how long Professor Ghurye was the editor, I have no clue.

NJ: Professor Ghurye was editor for about seven years.

MT: That way, I think, you were the longest serving editor so far.

NJ: My record can be broken only after 15 years! It will be intact till then.

MT: Yes, you were the longest serving editor of *Bulletin*. You have just demitted the office last year. I also know that for long you had also looked after the ICSSR *Journal of Reviews and Abstracts: Sociology and Social Anthropology*. And I am aware of your publications in another journal that we have in the country, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* [hereafter *Contributions*]. You have published in *EPW*, too. I am very happy that as editor you never published your own articles in *Bulletin*, some sort of professional benchmark that you set for future editors. I just want to know from you how, as an editor of a journal which is a collective sort of thing, which is the intellectual expression of a collective body, do you see

the kind of growth and development of the discipline I was referring to in this particular journal [*Bulletin*]. Let me add that I also have a larger theoretical question in mind that from that vantage point you also see what type of theoretical engagements we have, how you referred to imitating, things coming in as fashion, intellectual fashion from somewhere... So, what type of work is getting done in different parts of the country, what type of papers you received, the quality of the papers, the factors behind the good quality or the bad quality, etc. You have referred to some of these things. And also, your experience with international organisations like JStor, now *Bulletin* is international in that sense. I was quite happy to note that [Indian Sociological] Society has got more money from JStor. Can you tell us something about your experience, and I am saying experience in the larger sense of the term coming outside of your own biographical trajectory in relation to the discipline.

NJ: Yes Manish, today... I am able to take a view, as I am out of the *Bulletin*. I would have perhaps given a different reply if you had asked me this question five years earlier. But, before I answer that question, I would like to clarify one point. It is not that I did not publish anything of my own in the *Bulletin*.

MT: After becoming the editor?

NJ: After becoming the editor I did publish one paper which was part of a seminar on the Bombay School [of Sociology]. That was, [the Indian Sociological] Society's Managing Committee decided to have a special issue incorporating papers from that seminar and my paper happened to be one of them. But, of course, it was double blind reviewed and then included. Similarly, I wrote a report on a seminar on 'Sociology in South Asia'...

MT: You had edited that.

NJ: I had guest edited; I had a report on the seminar.

MT: Not a paper?

NJ: Not a paper. I had a report. Then I wrote an introduction to a special issue that I did with Dr. Vibha Arora.

MT: And that issue had your paper?

NJ: No, I did not have a paper, just the co-authored introduction. So, these are the three pieces. And [the Indian Sociological] Society also asked me to do a meta-analysis of sixty years of *Bulletin*.

MT: That I remember.

NJ: Of what went in to *Bulletin* over sixty years. So, that is another paper that I published. But I consciously excluded publishing anything of my own, outside of these. I did not do any book review or write any professional notice in the *Bulletin*. That is just to set the record right. The *Bulletin*, as you know, has been the flagship journal of the Indian Sociological Society, a journal which has been published for the last sixty-six years without interruption. Yes for long there was the system in which the Secretary of the Society was ex-officio editor of the *Bulletin*.

MT: Managing Editor?

NJ: No, Editor. He or she was called the Editor.

MT: Now you were the Managing Editor?

NJ: Yes, the Managing Editor. Those days the journal would move from place to place depending upon who was elected as the Secretary. That would take lot of time; there used to be disruptions in the publication schedule of the *Bulletin*. Thanks to the initiative of Professor T.K. Oommen, somewhere in the 1990s, a decision was taken to appoint Professor M.N. Panini as the first Managing Editor of the *Bulletin* for a term of five years, and delink the editorship of the *Bulletin* from the office of the Secretary. That I think was a wonderful move. I functioned as Managing Editor for fifteen years.

MT: Do you recollect the time, just for the record?

NJ: 2000-2015; August 2000 to the end of 2015.

MT: Was Professor [B.S.] Baviskar the President of the Society then?

NJ: Yes, it was during Professor Baviskar's term as President that I took charge as the Managing Editor.

MT: And you left office?

NJ: When Professor Anand Kumar completed his term as President. I have worked with eight Presidents.

MT: No President had two terms.

NJ: No. No President had two terms. As a flagship journal, I looked at the *Bulletin* as a forum which also conveys to the external world what goes on in the academic field of sociology in India. And at the same time, from the receiver's point of view, we print about three thousand copies of the journal. And since this journal is given free of cost to all the life members; it goes to the far corners of this country and also abroad. That means, as a vehicle, the *Bulletin* carries the sociological knowledge that is produced in and on India to different corners.

MT: So, it has far wider readership than any other professional journal?

NJ: Yes, far wider readership than any other professional journal [in sociology in the country]. Of course, you may say, with the coming of the Internet anybody can access, etc. But there is nothing like this hard copy which we all have.

MT: But just as a matter of thought, now things may change.

NJ: Things do change; things will have to change to keep pace with time.

MT: Because, from now on, the hard copy will be accessible to only few who have opted for it.

NJ: Yes, only for those who opted for it. But others have access to the soft copy. And they are the beneficiaries; they will also get free electronic access to the back volumes. So, those who want to preserve hard copies will take hard copies. This has changed because of the availability and use of information technology. But, what I am trying to emphasise is that, as a forum in which the knowledge generated, the journal goes to different parts of the world. If that is the case, it also makes a statement about what type of knowledge has gone into it. As a matter of policy very consciously I decided that I will not take any political stand; as I told you about my disciplined eclecticism, I would not reject an article because it puts forward a particular theoretical perspective. I encouraged different types of perspectives to come into the *Bulletin*. So, people know, this journal is not foreclosed in terms of themes or perspectives; they could seek to publish their articles. There was no particular preference. But, when I did the meta-analysis of articles published in the *Bulletin* over sixty years, I discovered one important thing: there were very few theoretical pieces. And, some of these theoretical

pieces basically engaged the idea of how those theoretical ideas derived from the West translate in the Indian situation.

MT: Just applying those ideas.

NJ: Yes, applying those ideas to see their contextual fit in the Indian context.

MT: In a different context.

NJ: Initially, there were one or two articles in which people tried to express that, like Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Ghurye, etc., but later on this trend is not to be seen. Secondly, I found these articles following the qualitative research tradition. It was not my preference; most of the articles which were submitted for publication in the *Bulletin* were based on qualitative research. Though there were articles using quantitative techniques... you find tables, you find statistical analysis...

MT: Quantitative in the true sense or just with tables?

NJ: No, no, in the true sense. They have applied statistical tests like regression, etc. But such articles were very few. My only problem with papers based on qualitative research was, are these people doing qualitative research as a matter of design or are they doing it by default. Is it by design or by default? I discovered, many of them were doing it by default. You may ask me how I found that out. Very simple: the approach followed, the methods used are qualitative, but the language in which the paper is written is quantitative, like they speak of generalisation, etc.

MT: Sampling...

NJ: Sampling and hypothesis, and things like that. So, much of my referee work focused on that, much of my editorial work focused on that. The third point I would like to make is an important point which you mentioned about the *Bulletin*. Since I took over the editorship of the journal – it may have happened earlier also, I cannot say definitely – I made a conscious effort to encourage younger generation of scholars. During the last fifteen years, many of the papers published in the *Bulletin* happen to be the first paper by the author concerned, that is, they have not had previous experience of publishing in the *Bulletin*, or for that matter in any other journal. This meant that I had to put in extra effort whenever the papers came from younger scholars.

MT: What do you mean by extra efforts? Expediting the process?

NJ: I wouldn't say expediting the process; that was not in my hands, because there is the process of refereeing. Sometimes a paper could get rejected because the language is deficient. Take for instance there was a paper I had from a research scholar in NEHU [North Eastern Hill University, Shillong]. This paper was on kinship analysis. It took on a very big name, Rodney Needham.

MT: Oh, the famous anthropologist!

NJ: Yes. When I read, I found lot of problems with the text, but I got the impression that this young man is trying to tell something important. I would keep the name anonymous. I sent it to a referee. The referee read it and said, 'This is a fantastic paper, but hopelessly written.' I will get back to you on this later on. And this referee, in fact, edited the paper; he recommended that 'This paper deserves to be published, but ask the person to revise it.' So, I took extra trouble in trying to revise the language of the paper and I had to go back and forth more than once. You may ask why I would do that. You see, I have been a beneficiary of some great man who...

MT: I will come to that point.

NJ: So, I feel, at some stage, young scholars need that little finger to hold on until they have learnt to walk; once they start walking on their own, they don't need that. These are some of my experiences with the *Bulletin*. As a reader you must tell me how you look at it. If you have any criticism I can address it.

MT: No, no my job today is...

NJ: If you have any criticism you can direct that to me.

MT: No, I don't have any particular criticism.

NJ: Or criticisms that you have heard.

MT: Once I read a piece by Nandini Sundar, much before your meta-analysis of the journal [the *Bulletin*] got published, and there she was looking at the *Bulletin* and *Contributions*. She was making a larger point that, how in some of the journals, in a sense she was making a point about the discipline itself, there are certain types of silences in the discipline...that is, the Northeast is absent, Muslims are absent, minorities are absent, etc. And in *Bulletin* as a locus where can you find and underline those silences?

NJ: Manish this is an important point you have raised. I think, in *Bulletin*, I have since addressed this silence sufficiently. Look at the number of papers we have published on the Northeast during the last ten years.

MT: That [Nandini Sundar's] is an old piece.

NJ: That is an old piece. It takes effort to address such silences. A journal cannot generate papers. If somebody writes [on those silences] you can try to improve the paper to publishable quality. But you can also put a similar question to some of other journals: whom do they publish, how many mofussil areas have appeared in those journals, etc.?

MT: How many of them have been published in *Contributions*?

NJ: In fact, when *Contributions* celebrated fifty years they called me to speak. I made this point that there is a perception that, within sociology, *Contributions* is an elite journal and *Bulletin* is *aam admi* [common people] journal.

MT: So, you mean to say that *Contributions* is supposed to carry a different mandate and it should be oriented to a different type of audience, maybe in different places, whereas *Bulletin*, as you said, as an *aam admi* journal, has to have this mandate of carrying the entire nation and its different constituents along.

NJ: To put this very simply, we have a professional obligation which *Contributions* does not have, that is, professional in the sense that *Bulletin* is an organ of the Indian Sociological Society.

MT: And you are responsible to the life members.

NJ: Certainly, responsibility for the life members, etc. But also, no journal can publish things which are not submitted to it.

MT: So, the journal also has a structural constraint where you don't fully control your publication material.

NJ: Though this is definitely true, what I noticed was, once the *Bulletin* started appearing regularly, the number of submissions started increasing.

MT: Because then it creates a virtuous cycle.

NJ: Yes, a virtuous cycle.

MT: If I submit, I know that it will get published fast.

NJ: At least, you will quickly hear whether it is accepted or not for publication. At some stage two important things happened. First, the first fifty-five volumes of the *Bulletin* were put on a CD [compact disc].

MT: That I know, that we had to buy by paying 500 rupees.

NJ: Yes, by paying 500 rupees. And then the second thing happened. Once the *Bulletin* started coming out regularly and people started making references to it, JStor took interest in it.

MT: That was the best thing to have happened to the *Bulletin*.

NJ: That was a lot of effort; it took more than two years, but all the back volumes with a moving wall of two years are available on JStor now. And that has also brought money, apart from the *Bulletin* becoming...

MT: Visible...

NJ: Visible internationally.

MT: And also anyone could download the article and all. And even some of us contributors feel good that our articles are on the website. So, I will Google Thakur and then JStor to see if I have any entries there. That is helpful because I know that the journal to which I am submitting my paper for publication to is also archived in JStor, so I will have more visibility. So, maybe, the journal may get good submissions.

NJ: And I should also say, now that you have asked questions about the *Bulletin*, it was a great learning experience for me. It broadened my horizon; I would not have read about so many things but for the *Bulletin*. And also different, you spoke about eclecticism; in fact, I found the virtue of eclecticism reflected in my editorial work. You may say this is what most people do but...

MT: A slightly personal question sir. Do you see this office of the editor or in your own professional career you having been the editor of the *Bulletin* as the most meaningful achievement? It is a personal question. How you would look at your job as an editor, the knowledge you have got from all quarters, I would say, for your contributions?

NJ: I will come to that. But, if you ask me what has been the most, what is the expression you used Manish?

MT: Meaningful...

NJ: My most meaningful experience has been my role as a teacher. That has given me the greatest of satisfaction. I think that joy I would not have got in any other job. If somebody were to ask whether I would like to be a teacher if there is rebirth, I would gladly say yes.

MT: True.

NJ: In the case of *Bulletin*, yes, fifteen years, as you know, with lot of, again, structural constraints, infrastructural constraints, we had to work. Thanks to many institutions, many individuals, some students, etc. I could do that. And when people talk about it positively, I really feel that, as a professional, it was a truly meaningful experience. I am very proud of the Society and I am proud of the journal. People may have criticisms; you may not compare this [the *Bulletin*] with the best. But, I think we have done a great job, I think we can all be proud of that.

MT: I have a different assessment. Of course, your love for teaching, your being a teacher, all these things are quite meaningful to you and should be meaningful to everyone who has this as a vocation. All said and done, teaching has some sort of a localised experience. You have a classroom; you are in a given institution, unless you go for online courses and things like that. But, in your role as an editor, someone from a small mofussil place in Madhepura in Bihar would know Professor Jayaram is the editor; as you pointed out someone who was editing *Contributions* also thought of calling you and having your view about the publication of the journal and its professional role and things like that. So, personally, I feel that your having been the Managing Editor of the *Bulletin* has given you much name and fame. I am not saying that you would not have acquired that name and fame otherwise. Why I am saying name and fame, is because, I think, teaching is one component, research is another component; you already had achievements in those areas. But when we come to something called institution-building, something called developing a professional culture, these things matter. How many of us these days are prepared to devote time to those things which will not immediately help us in our own promotion in our own career or research? Some would think it is a waste of time.

NJ: That is true. And also sometimes it may even appear as thankless when you get criticisms from people whose articles are not accepted, etc. That is there. And I have also edited, as you know, the ICSSR's...

MT: I mentioned that earlier.

NJ: ... *Journal of Reviews and Abstracts: Sociology and Anthropology* for more than a decade. Again, ten years; I did back volumes and continued for ten years. Now it has been disbanded. But editing these two journals, and editing the *Bulletin* especially, meant being very conscious about who I am vis-à-vis the profession. There is a moral responsibility in occupying a position. I do have a peculiar incident which I would like to record here. I have had the misfortune of rejecting my own teacher's paper.

MT: You are referring to? Can you mention the name?

NJ: Okay, I can mention the name. It was Professor Rajagopalan, my teacher and research supervisor, who had submitted a paper, which was refereed by somebody having expertise in the area. And the referee said, it cannot be published for whatever reason he gave. When I had first read it, I had thought it will be published; when it was rejected, I felt very sad, but I had to respect the referee's judgement. I went to his [Professor Rajagopalan's] residence to convey this bad news. He was a great man; he told me, 'You have done your job. I would have been unhappy if you had just published without getting the paper refereed.' He did not ask me who the referee was.

MT: Naturally.

NJ: But for sometime I carried...

MT: Guilt...

NJ: Yes, sort of. But, in retrospect, I look at this, maybe I was sad, but I had the moral responsibility. Frankly, I have done this to everybody – no fear; no favour.

MT: Now I am coming to my last question. And, in fact, Professor Chandan Kumar Sharma asked me to ask you this in particular. Your long, long association with Professor Satish Saberwal and last year I read the volume, the collection of essays you had put together in his memory. It is called *Institutions, Ideas and Processes*. It was published in 2016, if I recollect correctly; or was it 2015?

NJ: It was in 2014. It was titled *Ideas, Institutions, Processes: Essays in Memory of Satish Saberwal*.

MT: By Orient Blackswan. And that was your tribute to, I will use the expression, your mentor Professor Satish Saberwal. Can you tell us about your

long association with Professor Satish Saberwal? Of course, those who have read the book and those who have read your tribute to him would know about this. But for those who have not so far seen the book that would be much more interesting and meaningful. This is not a personal question that I am asking you. I think in this apparently personal question there are certain other structural features because he brings us to the idea of mentoring new generation, younger generation of scholars, the amount of time you can spare for them, the patience that a senior scholar should have for the junior scholars, etc. Are we ready to spend three days in an All India Sociological Conference and listen to some of the half-baked, ill-conceived papers and give them critical comments? And many other things like, do we have that patience? We have, you know, fly-by-afternoon speakers... they will come only when you call them for inaugural, plenary, or valedictory session. And again they would come from the centre, make the speech, get the claps and take the next available flight back. But, on the other hand, there are people like Professor Brij Raj Chauhan, about whom Professor Abha Chauhan was making a reference and also Professor Satish Saberwal, who wrote a lengthy letter commenting on my article published in the *Bulletin*. Do we have scholars like Professor Saberwal or what scholars like him can do for the profession and for the discipline? That is my last question to you.

NJ: It is always a great pleasure to talk about Professor Satish Saberwal. Out of fondness at some stage I started calling him Saberwal *ji* and that remained till the end. I should tell some things by way of background because some of the points that you touched upon would also be covered. I mentioned about this ICSSR discipline-specific course.

MT: Yes you did.

NJ: Those days it was of thirty-four-day- duration.

MT: In Saugar?

NJ: In Saugar, Madhya Pradesh. It was thirty-four days then; later on the duration was reduced. And participants were drawn from different parts of the country. We were all in the beginning stages of our research. Professor Saberwal had returned from the U.S. He had completed his term [as a Fellow at IAS] in Shimla. And he had been selected as Professor of Sociology in the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, which was then headed by Professor Romila Thapar. But in the interim period, from leaving IAS to joining JNU, because he had to get his quarters set up etc., he decided to accept the ICSSR's invitation, especially Professor Leela

Dube's invitation, to act as a resident resource person. That meant he was there for the entire duration of thirty-four days [from 5 November to 8 December 1973].

MT: All through the course.

NJ: Yes. Other professors came and went. Professor T.N. Madan came, Professor Yogendra Singh came, Professor André Béteille came, Professor Brij Raj Chauhan came, Professor S.C. Dube came. Many of them came and went, that is, for one or two days as they were required to lecture on. But Professor Saberwal was there throughout. It was there that I happened to meet him for the first time. In the afternoon, each one of us [the participants] was supposed to present our research proposals. I think on the third or fourth day my turn came; the names were listed alphabetically. My turn came, I made a presentation. I made use of the black board. And at the end, when other participants had finished with their questions, he gave a very critical feedback. And I appreciated it, as that was the first time I had received something by way of constructive criticisms. Then the session was over. Before leaving the lecture hall he told me, 'Jayaram join me for a cup of tea at my place.'

MT: Where was he staying there?

NJ: In the faculty quarters. I joined him for a cup of tea and he told me, 'You know, that it was a good conceptualisation, the way you presented and wrapped, etc.' Then he told me something for which even now I feel very happy. He said, 'You hold promise of becoming a good sociologist.' I was very happy. But suddenly my happiness was punctured. He told me, 'Unfortunately, you have far too many limitations.' The limitations he then started listing.

MT: One by one.

NJ: One by one, and it was puncturing my balloon of my happiness.

MT: Was it a long list?

NJ: Yes, it was a long list. He first told me my reading was inadequate. Whereas Professor Madan thought I had read more than what was required of an MA student. But Professor Saberwal said, 'You need to read critically; you are familiar with the works, but you are appreciating, you are taking a position without realising what it means. So how to build... you are not doing', what in his

terms, 'a synthetic reading; you are doing discrete reading. You are reading A, B, C, D, E, separately.'

MT: You are not able to connect the themes or arguments.

NJ: Yes, that is what he meant. He told me that is one limitation. Second, he said, 'Your language is inadequate.' By then I had made an effort, I should tell you. After my decision to converse only in English during my MA, it had improved considerably, but it was not adequate to fool him. There were limitations. He said that, I was jumping to conclusion without questioning the type of...

MT: Lack of criticality.

NJ: Criticality, etc. All those things he pointed out. I asked him, 'How do I improve?' At a weak moment he showed his little finger indicating that he would help me. And by presence of mind I grabbed it, I immediately grabbed it. If I had ignored that...

MT: That option...

NJ: ...perhaps today you would not be interviewing me. Maybe, I would have taught in some undergraduate college somewhere.... And that marked the beginning of our long relationship...

MT: Long, long relationship...

NJ: Long, long relationship, indeed. He passed away in 2010. Since then we [my wife and I] have been meeting Mrs Saberwal [who now lives in Bengaluru] every month, we have lunch together, exchange notes, etc. In this one thing that you mentioned, the mentoring part of it, you know I came from Bangalore...

MT: He was not your direct teacher.

NJ: He was not my teacher in the conventional sense of the term. I was nobody to him, nothing. You cannot say in caste terms or regional terms...

MT: Any reason, language...

NJ: In none of the terms. He just took a fancy to a young scholar who he thought had...

MT: Some promise...

NJ: Promise. And he was willing to invest his time in me.

MT: That's what I wanted to know.

NJ: Yes. He was then editing a special issue for *Contributions*...

MT: *Process and Institutions in Urban India*, which came out as a book.

NJ: Yes, Vikas published it as a book in 1978. He wrote a postcard to me. No, that day itself he gave me a book by Rudolph and Rudolph on *Education and Politics in India*. He told me, 'EPW has sent this to me for review; you attempt a review of this book as education is your area, it is not my area. You review that.' He added, 'I will write to Krishna Raj [then editor of EPW] that I have passed on the book to you.'

MT: He did give you that offer?

NJ: Yes, I still have that book with me.

MT: This is something great.

NJ: Remarkable. Because he said, 'You are working in this area; I am not working in this area. I can also review, but you will benefit from that and engage with that. You show it to me; I will help you with that.' Immediately he gave that book to me, the very first day we met... imagine!

MT: That was a great help.

NJ: Unbelievable. In retrospect, whenever I think about it, sometimes I cry because that was a very moving sort of a day for me. How many people would do that?

MT: Even now, how many people would do that?

NJ: When he went back [to Delhi], when he edited that book, he sent a postcard. It said that, 'I am editing this special issue for *Contributions*. You remember you presented a synopsis of your research [at the Saugar course]. You must have by now finished your data collection and writing your thesis. Can you send a paper based on your data?' This was how I wrote that paper titled 'Higher Education as Status Stabilizer: Students in Bangalore'. You won't believe, those days there was no Internet, no electronic typewriter; I had typed it in on my typewriter. When it

came back from Professor Saberwal, there was more of red-ink writing by him on the paper...

MT: Than what you had written?

NJ: Than my own words. At first, I was disappointed.

MT: Almost gave up?

NJ: I thought, am I competent to do academics; I should give it up. And one or two my friends to whom I showed [the paper], said does he think he is the only one who knows English, what does he mean writing so much in red, he did not find anything acceptable, etc.

MT: *Apne aap ko kya samajhta hain* [What does he think of himself]?

NJ: *Apne aap ko kya samajhta hain!* Of course, I was a bit more sensible, especially after having caught hold of the finger. Because it occurred to me, why is he telling all this, what is he benefitting by throwing my paper out? I happened to go to Delhi, so I carried the paper with me. He gave me a cup of tea at his residence and then he said 'Let's go for a walk.' In JNU campus, we walked. At some stage he stopped... I made a reference to the paper. He said frankly, 'No, it is not up to the mark. I think you can wait for some more time.' I said, 'I have a request... whether you publish it or not that's a different thing; you bring it to a level where you think it is satisfactory, that will be a shot in the arm.' You won't believe, he went through that paper seven times. That meant from the first time, later on he read six versions [of the paper]. It was the eighth version which was published. Now that was the beginning of my academic grooming under him and later on we did work together.

MT: In that volume?

NJ: No, the volume on *Social Conflict* [Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology]. And that has also a very interesting point to make. Before that, I should tell you that we also jointly wrote a chapter which appeared in Veena Das's edited book [*The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*]...

MT: On conflict?

NJ: Yes, on 'Social Conflict'. In our edited book, when Oxford published it...

MT: You have referred to this in your tribute.

NJ: Yes. I think that needs to be mentioned here because people may not have read that. Look at the generosity of the man. When they prepared the contract, Oxford [University Press] mentioned his name first, my name next.

MT: Because you were from Bangalore and you were not much known.

NJ: Yes. Then he wrote a letter to Ms Esha Béteille, and marked a copy to me. I have it even now. It says just because Jayaram is not in Delhi that is no reason for his name to appear second. Incidentally, the last name Jayaram with 'J' appears first, Saberwal with 'S' appears later, if you go by alphabetical order. And another important thing is Jayaram is a scholar in his own standing and we should respect that. They rectified it. The book carries Jayaram and Saberwal. Tell me Manish, how many people...

MT: That is what I wanted to know. Why don't we have so many people like him these days?

NJ: I don't know. Now this is a reality which makes such people great. Now, one thing that I learnt from him, he must have done this to others also.

MT: True.

NJ: See, the finger which he showed, some people pick it up, some people do not. Right? Some people may say he is arrogant, etc., because he went by certain standards. What did I learn from him? I learnt analytical skills from Professor Rajagopalan; he was a master analyst. You give him a problem he will break it into its component parts. I learnt academic writing skills and honed that from Professor Saberwal. And, in addition, all the professional qualities that you see in me, I have...

MT: You will give him the credit for.

NJ: I give him the sole credit. Whether it is integrity, whether it is being honest in expressing what you think...

MT: Or punctuality, meeting the deadline...

NJ: ... meeting the deadline.

MT: Discipline.

NJ: Discipline is a part of it. And he would always say, don't bother about big names, do what you think is right.

MT: It should be done.

NJ: It should be done. He said names do not really matter. I think many of the things that I learnt from him were over the last many years. I became a part of his family and was one person among many others who had free access to his house.

MT: Though his external appearance was not very inviting.

NJ: He was very strict with that. And, in fact, you won't believe, when he was almost dying he had refused to see people. When I wrote to his daughter [Dr Gayatri], when I telephoned her, she said he does not want to see anybody. I just said, 'I appreciate the point; respect his sentiments. Please convey my best wishes to him.' Later on, I wrote a note to her seeking '... one last chance of meeting; he meant so much to me. He was almost like my elder brother.' I got a reply. She wrote, 'Professor Jayaram, you will be surprised that he has agreed to see you. When you are in Delhi next, please let us know; you can come home.'

MT: You cherish that.

NJ: Oh, I cherish that moment. Many people wonder, he did not see his own relatives, how did he see me. I think then I discovered, for him, I was something like a son, a younger brother, however you look at that. It is one point that I gained from him. What is that he was gaining; he was not gaining anything from me.

MT: Yes. You were not in a position to give him anything concrete.

NJ: On the other hand, in a way he found it satisfying that he...

MT: Grooming somebody.

NJ: Groomed somebody for the next generation. I have imbibed this underlying principle Manish. Once a student asked me, she was not my student, she was working with somebody, whenever she had problems with methodology, the interpretation of data, and when she had problems with the referee's comments on her thesis as well as any personal crisis, she would come to me. Finally, one day after everything was over, she came and she said, 'Professor Jayaram, I don't know how to thank you.' Then I told, 'You don't thank me. There is a special way of doing this, that is, some day you will find somebody who maybe looking for

the little finger; lend it. I think that day you will feel satisfied that you have thanked me enough.' So, I look at all youngsters – some of them benefit; some of them do not, I cannot help it. You do know some of the people who have been so close to me; I have extended that same thing... I do know how much I have benefitted from him; and, in the remaining life, if I can help few more people, you see, that is done.

MT: So let us conclude this conversation on this happy note.

NJ: Thank you Manish.

MT: And on this, on your part, the fond remembrance that you have of Professor Satish Saberwal. And also this idea that such practices and such affection as this, what you call the act of grooming, if it gets more extensive and if it gets on the part of many other senior scholars that would benefit everyone.

NJ: One point, if you can go back before we conclude. You asked me what is the function of our being here.

MT: Yes.

NJ: It is the same. See, for me, you may say that I am retired now and I can afford to spend time. I will tell you, I have never attended a seminar or conference in which I have not spent all the days there.

MT: This is the point that I was mentioning.

NJ: If I go to a conference, from the first day to the last I am there. Whether I present a paper or not, that is a different thing. Even if I am...

MT: Don't you think it makes you less of a star because you don't come and go by the afternoon? I'm being sarcastic. Don't you look at it that way?

NJ: Oh, Manish, stars are very far. We will not bother about stars.

MT: So, anyway Sir, unless you have anything to add... You would have noticed, and I like using the word noticed that I have learnt from you, that all through I have known you for years now, all through I have addressed you as 'Sir'. Because I have no other way of calling you, even if I tried hard, I can't call you Professor Jayaram. Maybe towards the end you could not have called Saberwal *ji*, Satish.

NJ: No. In fact, once I did call, I did make a reference to him as Satish. My wife objected to it, 'He is so elderly', she admonished me. Incidentally, there is an entry on 'Satish Saberwal' which I have written for the *International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. It is not yet published; I think it is due early next year. I mentioned to her that I have written this on Satish, she said, now you say Satish, while you always referred to him as Saberwal *ji* before.

MT: No, I call you Jayaram when you are not there. But if you are there, when I am talking to you...

NJ: I know, I know.

MT: I have no way of, even if I wish I can't address you by your name. It's not part of the system. It's also a thing that is...

NJ: Cultural...

MT: Cultural, structural, also we live in a hierarchical society; why not acknowledge that. Also, all hierarchies may not necessarily be bad. Certain things come out of respect, out of affection. And I have been a beneficiary of your affection and I have gained much from you. And that is why I feel honoured and privileged that, apart from other things that I have gained, I also had the good fortune of having been part of this conversation. Again, as we conclude, we must say thanks for the facilities that Tezpur University has given us, specially the Department of Mass Communication, and four of them, these youngsters whom we have detained for the last two hours...

NJ: Listening to our conversation and standing all the time.

MT: And they have gone beyond their office hours; they have made this conversation possible.

NJ: We deeply appreciate that.

MT: And, personally, I want to again mention that it has been made possible by the initiative and efforts of Professor Chandan Kumar Sharma. It is interesting that we have met at a conference in Tezpur and that is a tribute to Tezpur and the facilities that it commands. Thank you so much.

NJ: Thank you very much.

MT: Thank you so much Sir. It was nice talking to you.

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