

**Academy of Third World Studies  
Jamia Millia Islamia**

**In collaboration with the  
Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research**

Concept Note for a Seminar on

Contested Space and Identity in the Indian Northeast

Conveniently lumped together as the “Indian Northeast”, the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura boast a rare ethnic diversity and cultural heritage. In the late 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century the Indian Northeast sparked keen research interest among leading anthropologists, such as Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (“The Naked Nagas”, “Himalayan Barbary”) and Verier Elwin (“The Art of the Northeast Frontier of India”). Anthropological methodology and sensitivity may have progressed since but anthropological research on the Indian Northeast has been in sharp decline since the 1960’s. Today, if the Northeast is being discussed at all, it is in the context of conflict and development as well as the nexus between the two. But the complex societies in the eight “sister states” are not always fully understood and there is a fair amount of confusion about the root causes, the dynamics and the nature of civil strife in India’s borderlands. Meanwhile, it is clear that the unresolved problems of the Northeast pose a major challenge to the project of nation-building and put the viability of traditional concepts of security, development and autonomy to the test. It is proposed to hold a one-day conference, in collaboration with the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research and with support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, with a view to (1) bringing key aspects of the situation in the Northeast into renewed focus; (2) clarifying concepts and notions relevant to the understanding of the Northeast; (3) shedding light on the regional geo-political environment; and (4) providing a platform to discuss policies for responsive and accountable governance.

Strategically located at the crossroads of South Asia, South-East Asia and China, the Northeast has become, rather than a beacon of cross-regional peace and prosperity, a synonym of “violence-prone lawless borderlands”. Various strands of security feature prominently in the discourse on the Northeast. From an Indian standpoint, the issue of border security owes much of its delicacy to geography: except for a 16 km wide corridor connecting the Northeast with mainland India (the so called “chicken neck”), all of the northeastern states’ outlying borders, some of them contested, are with neighboring countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and China). Human security has remained elusive for the majority of the people living in the sister states in the face of militancy and counter-insurgency operations. By some estimates there are 130 insurgent movements, with 10-15 attracting regular attention in the national media. Insurgency related killings are daily occurrences in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, while the security forces continue to draw criticism for heavy-handed operations. The controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been in force for more than 25 years in parts of the Northeast. Even

though the sustained level of violence seems to suggest that issues of governance have not been addressed satisfactorily a debate on possible remedies is slow to unfold. Is it the assertion or the suppression of identity that leads to insurgent movements? How do the state and civil society interact to promote solutions? What is the nature of the peace talks between the central government and some militant outfits and how can the low-intensity warfare in the Northeast be channeled into a political process? Is a reconfiguration of the eight sister states likely to yield a peace dividend or will the redrawing of the map result in displacement of those “who don’t belong”?

Ethnically and culturally, the Northeast—with a total population of 45 million— has long been a melting pot, comprising app. 200 ethnic groups and indigenous populations (the latter’s proportion ranging from 12,4% in Assam to 94,5% in Mizoram). Against this backdrop, it is little surprising that political analysts think of the quest for autonomy as “a primary reflex of politics in the Northeast”. Demographic changes add to the complexity of the situation. Migration patterns have considerably altered the composition of the population in parts of the Northeast, sustaining economic growth, but also causing frictions and straining relations between communities. The indigenous Muslim population in Assam feels it has been shortchanged vis-à-vis Muslim immigrants from across state boundaries and country borders in vote bank politics. Adivasis in Assam, Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and Reangs in North Tripura are becoming increasingly assertive to have their political and socio-economic grievances addressed. The issue of a “border within” throws up questions of how to square the goal of affording equal opportunities for all with strategies of positive discrimination and affirmative action for disadvantaged segments of society. Many an analysis of the problems in the Northeast boils down to a discussion of the relationship between security and development. The holding in New York of a “North East India Investment Conference” in September 2007 as part of the Indian government’s “Incredible India!” campaign was portrayed by the national media as a sign of the growing confidence with which the Northeast is presented as “the new kid on the trade and investment block”. The argument that economic deprivation fuels militancy, which, in turn, hampers economic development is common currency in political analysis. But how does it apply to conflict in the Northeast? And how does the exploitation of natural resources relate to the political economy of conflict? Critics argue that development projects in the Northeast have caused major displacement and taken a heavy toll on the natural habitat. By some estimates, 230,000 people have already been displaced and up to 200,000 more will likely be dislodged from their homes as dozens of mega dams and hydro-power projects are currently under construction or under consideration. The question arises whether “development” will remedy political ills or create a new reservoir of disenfranchised and alienated people. What should be the parameters for sustainable development and the mechanisms to provide local people with a stake in national projects?

It hardly needs emphasizing that the proximity of South-East Asia militates against an India-centric debate on the situation in the Northeast. The benefits of a strategic partnership across Asian regions are obvious. The ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity has boosted bilateral trade to US\$ 30 billion annually and further cooperation is envisaged with respect to science, technology,

human resource development, health and transport. India also participates in the East Asian Summit (EAS) with a view to opening a window of cooperation in the energy and finance sectors, among others. And yet, critics argue that India's "Look East" policy is too narrowly focused on the binary of trade and security. If democracy is not being brought into the equation and civil society involved, they say, the people of the Northeast will end up being denied an opportunity to rectify the wrongs of the colonial past and explore common ground for cross-border solutions. From an academic viewpoint, comparative research on governance in South and South-East Asia will shift the Northeast from the periphery to the centre of an axis connecting conflict situations in Kashmir, Southern Thailand and the South of the Philippines. Building on a growing body of literature on Asian perspectives on the rule of law and post-colonial nation-building, the proposed conference will finally open up room for a discussion of broader questions relevant to the research focus of the Academy of Third World Studies: what strategies can be developed to prevent the outbreak of violence in developing societies? What is the potential role for federalism and decentralization in the constitutional discourse in Asia? And what are the implications of India's re-orientation towards the East for the prospects of regional integration and peace-building in the framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)?