EMERGING ISSUES OF PEACE AND CONFLICTS IN NORTH EAST INDIA AND BEYOND

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Abstract: *Peace studies and Conflict resolution are related multidisciplinary fields taking within their purview the practical and theoretical bases of arbitration involving education, research and skills-based training to help build conditions necessary for peace, constructive social change, and universal respect for human rights. Peace and conflict studies as an issue has emerged as one of the most important topics within the field of social science, particularly since the last part of the 20th century. It identifies and analyses violent and nonviolent behaviours as well as the structural mechanisms attending conflicts including social conflicts with a view to understand those processes which lead to a more desirable human condition. It is both a pedagogical activity, in which teachers transmit knowledge to students; and a research activity, in which researchers create new knowledge about the sources of conflict. Peace and conflict studies involves understanding the concept of peace which is defined as political condition that ensures justice and social stability through formal and informal institutions, practices, and norms. The papers tries to study the theoretical dimensions of peace and conflict and how the perennial conflicts in the North Eastern region is hampering the process of development in entire North East India in general and Assam in Particular.*

Key words: Peace & conflict, North East India.

Introduction:

The last part of the 20th century had witnessed a large number of issues which were hitherto unfamiliar to the world. One such issue which attracted the attention of the social scientists and the policy makers towards the last part of the last century was the subject of Peace and conflict studies and the issues related with it. Conflict resolution and peace studies are related multidisciplinary fields encompassing the practical and theoretical bases of mediation involving research, education, and skills-based training to help build conditions necessary for peace, constructive social change, and universal respect for human rights. It identifies and analyses violent and nonviolent behaviours as well as the structural mechanisms attending conflicts including social conflicts with a view to understand those processes which lead to a more desirable human condition. Peace and conflict studies involves understanding the concept of peace which is defined as political condition that ensures justice and social stability through formal and informal institutions, practices, and norms. The

papers tries to study the theoretical dimensions of peace and conflict and the different issues involving the perennial conflicts in the North Eastern region is hampering the process of development in entire North East India in general and Assam in Particular. For a better understanding of the idea of the peace and conflict studies it is desirable to have an understanding of the concepts involved in the discipline, i.e. Peace and Conflict.

Meaning of Conflict and Conflict Resolution:

Conflict is defined as a serious or protracted disagreement between individuals or groups. The source of conflict is usually an unmet need of one or more of the parties involved in the disagreement. Such a need could include anything from safe drinking water or a secure home, to protecting intellectual property rights or getting due respect for accomplishments. Disagreements typically worsen when people identify a solution to the conflict that works for them but which doesn't take into consideration the needs of the opposing group. Often in conflict situations, opposing sides stick to their own solution—or position—because they don't

fully understand the needs of the other group, because they don't trust the other group, or out of pride. Conflict resolution refers to strategies that eliminate the sources of the conflict—and, optimally, that find the best outcome for all involved.

Meaning of Peace and Peace Studies:

The axiom 'Peace' denotes a state or period in which there is no war or a war has ended. It is therefore "the opposite of war". This, in turn, leads to the question "What is war?" This leaves the impression that it is almost impossible to define peace without using the term 'war'. But is it fair to describe peace as the opposite or absence of war? What about other factors like security or the role of justice? Is it possible to have circumstances that are both peaceful and unjust? Given that politicians, scientists and political philosophers have deliberated on these questions for centuries, it is impossible to address these questions in depth in this paper.

On the other hand, closely related to resolving conflict, peace studies examine the prevention, de-escalation, and solution of conflicts by peaceful means. Often the work of peace *building* begins where the work of conflict resolution leaves off—in post-conflict situations/regions, peace workers (including international development workers and others) look to creating sustainable futures for affected communities, absent of violence.

Peace studies sometimes distinguish between "negative peace" and "positive peace" processes. Negative peace refers to practices such as peacekeeping—activities that take place in a post-war situation like monitoring peace processes and helping former foes implement their peace agreements. Positive peace refers to peace building and peacemaking activities—strengthening societies so that structures and systems are in place to make violent conflict less likely. The scope of peace studies involves learning.

Conflicts in Assam and other parts of North East India:

The North Eastern region of India in particular and Assam in general is poorly connected to the Indian mainland by a small corridor and is surrounded by international boundaries. The countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China are sharing their borders with the region which in turn is the setting for a multitude of conflict that undermines the idea of India as a prosperous and functioning democracy. The region has witnessed unending low intensity conflict since Independence in 1947. Most of the conflicts have been waged to assert for a different ethnicity, culture, identity, political empowerment, optimal utilisation of resources and to ensure protection of ethnic minority rights. The political goals of the armed conflicts have differed, ranging from demands for greater political autonomy, more transparent political rights and institutional structures to outright secession from India. The response of the Indian state to such conflicts in the region has varied over the years.For instance, the Naga insurgence, which started in the 1950s, known as the mother of the Northeast insurgencies, is one of the oldest unresolved armed conflicts in the world.

Apart from Nagaland, the other states of the region like Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura have witnessed a series of conflicts over the years.

Reasons for Conflicts in North-East India:

The historical connections among the traditional tribes in the Northeast are largely of Tibeto-Burman/Mongoloid stock and closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. It is ethnically, linguistically and culturally very distinct from the other states of India. Though cultural and ethnic diversity per say are not causes for conflict, but one of the major problem areas is that the Northeast is territorially organized in such a manner that ethnic and cultural specificities were ignored during the process of delineation of state boundaries in the 1950s, giving rise to discontentment and assertion of one's identity. Whereas,the colonial rulers took nearly a century to annex the entire region, and administered the hills as a loose 'frontier area', with the result, that large parts of the North Eastern hill areas never came in touch with the principle of a central administration before.

Hence, their allegiance to the newly formed Indian nation-state was lacking from the beginning – accentuated by the creation of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) – which meant the loss of a major chunk of the physical connection between mainland India and Northeast India. Interestingly, 99 percent of the Northeast's boundaries is international and only one percent is domestic boundary.

Issues Hindering   Peace in Assam North East India:

Unfortunately, the data and information on the region is not sufficiently analyzed and communicated between the region and the Centre, contributing to further misinformation, mismanagement and alienation. At another level, conflict in the region has been an all pervasive phenomena, and in its violent form, it has not only affected the territorial and political sovereignty of the Indian state, but also the life of the various people living in the region in incomprehensible and inexplicable terms. In a drastic and dreaded sense, there is a "culture" of conflict and unfortunately, people have submitted to such an existence.

The longest ongoing negotiations are between the Indian state and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by ThuingalengMuivah and IsakChisiSwu (NSCN-IM), ongoing since 1997. Resolution, however, seems long in the making as both actors have divergent goals; the NSCN (IM) demands territorial unification of Naga inhabited areas in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland as well as Naga sovereignty; the Indian state is willing to offer greater political rights but only within the Indian Union. Moreover, uniting Naga inhabitants areas across Assam, Manipur and Nagaland is politically risky due to the deep-seated resistance of the Assamese, the Meiteis and smaller ethnic communities like the Dimasas or the Kukis, to such a plan. The issue has once again come to a sweltering stage with the NSCN (IM) giving a boycott call to the ensuing assembly election of February 2018 in Nagaland over the issue of Central government's delay of announcing the much talked about Naga peace deal which is supposed to bring the conflicts in Nagaland to a logical end.

In Assam, the previous Congress government of Tarun Gagai claimed credit for peace talks with the ULFA. Interestingly, in a departure from the past, both the pro-talks and anti-talks factions of the ULFA did not issue an election boycott notice during the LokSabha elections of 2014 in the state.   While a surrendered ULFA commander, Naba Kumar Sarania *alias* Hira, contested as a consensus candidate of non-Bodo organisations in Kokrajhar, and surprised everyone when he defeated the veteran Bodo like Chandan Brahma and SanchumaKhungurBisumatery in the election. On the other hand the ULFA Commander-in-Chief, Paresh Barua has taken a hard stand and has denied to join in the peace process in the state and has been continuing his violent activates despite all odds against him. Given this, it is critical that whoever comes to power at the Centre will have to envision a viable framework of negotiations, both with the NSCN (IM) on one hand the ULFA and the NSCN(K) on the other hand. The for a resolution that not only aspires to end the violence but also addresses the core issues raised by these armed groups. The death of S.S. Khaplang in June 2017 has given a severe jolt to the hard line elements in the entire North East and how the government of the region makes use of the situation to persuade the ultras to join in the peace process will closely be watched by all quarters.

Peace processes are highly complex with divergent interests, actors and emotions in play made even more difficult due to the overarching factor of violence. In a conflict situation, the category of 'friend' and 'enemy' takes centrestage with other identities relegated to the background, especially in areas where the conflict is wrapped around notions of ethnic identity. As a result, the language used to describe the other is negative and the worldviews are narrow and parochial. Since in conflict situation, people's basic needs to be guaranteed are their physical safety and survival, it makes them focus on

how the public sphere mostly constituted by an elite core addresses these issues.

With regard to the public spheres in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, the idea of a peace process is alien due to the lack of experience with the process. For instance, the armed actors in Manipur (the UNLF and the PLA) that represent the same community (the Meitei), are informed by a strict sense of Meitei ethnic identity that is exclusionary. The ideology that constitutes them, the language they use to describe their politics, and the lenses through which they view their horizon is always based on a negative process of "us *versus* them". This "us *versus* them" dichotomy is questioned when a peace process starts because the basic preferences for a particular kind of politics gets challenged. In other words, the discourse that has shaped the politics of the UNLF or the PLA and which has been accepted as a natural state of being gets challenged. The Meitei discourse today is mostly about how the Meiteis are threatened by the other more dominant minority community in Manipur, the TangkhulNagas. Hence, the Naga identity is seen as antithetical to the Meitei identity. Even if there is an acknowledgment of the Nagas by the Meiteis within Manipur, it is more about how the Manipuri kings were pluralistic, how Nagas and Meiteis had shared cultural norms and ideas when the kings of Manipur were in power, how the Meitei language was accepted earlier by the Nagas, and how, after 1947, the pluralistic identities have been torn apart due to the politicisation of identities as a result of the modern Indian state that has encouraged group identities.

Put into this situation is the struggle that the Meiteis have had with the imposition of Indian administration on a community that had been largely devoid of such politics despite the spread of cultural traits from Hindu India. Acceptance of Hindu rituals, customs, and practices, especially the reverence of Lord Krishna, do not automatically mean the acceptance of Indian politics. Moreover, given the protracted nature of conflicts in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland where the armed groups function, the public debate is mostly framed around issues of security. While some academics studying these conflicts might wish to see their liberal ideals of inclusion and broad-based cosmopolitan identity formation realised, in situations of conflict where the discourses are narrow and where physical safety is the real deal, these liberal discourses cannot perform the function of emancipation and transformation that they aspire to. Hence, there will only be frustration if the ground reality is not understood well.

Conclusion:

The Indian government's past and ongoing processes of national integration, state-building and democratic consolidation seems to have further aggravated the conflict scenario in the region. For instance, the eight states comprising the Northeast is populated by nearly 40 million inhabitants who vary in language, race, tribe, caste, religion, and regional heritage. Therefore, most often, the clubbing of all these states under the tag of 'northeast' has tended to have a homogenizing effect with its own set of implications for policy formulation and implementation; not to mention local aversion to such a construct. The politico-administrative arrangements made by the Centre have also been lacking. For instance, the introduction of the Sixth Schedule Autonomous Councils (currently there are ten such Councils in the region and many more demanding such status) ended up creating multiple power centres instead of bringing in a genuine process of democratization or autonomy in the region. Moreover, Para 12 (A) of the Sixth Schedule clearly states that, whenever there is a conflict of interest between the District Councils and the state legislature, the latter would prevail. It is even alleged that it is "a mere platform for aspiring politicians who nurture ambitions to contest assembly polls in the future".

Under such circumstances, the aim should be to deeply understand and study the narratives that led to the conflicts, and a peace process should ideally engage with such issues first: engaging with preferences and existing frameworks that offer justifications for a particular status quo of violence,

and how these preferences and frameworks might neither be optimal nor the only way through which a conflict situation can be understood. It is also critical to realise that in a protracted conflict situation, the emergence of new frames of reference may take time and effort as the situation is deeply mired in negativity, anxieties and fears. Conflicts in Assam, Manipur or Nagaland will not get resolved for the long haul if the conditions that gave rise to them are not transformed. The usage of "problem solving workshops" based on dialogue processes between the different public spheres in these areas that reexamine notions of "us" *versus* "them" will play a significant role in questioning "the fact of the enemy" and the narratives that tied such facts together. For the Indian state to assume that once it signs a ceasefire or Suspension of Operations (SoOs) with armed groups, everything else will fall in place and the coming of peace will be effortless is a thoughtless and shallow proposition. Dealing with divisive issues, establishing solid institutional mechanism that promote a level playing field and promoting liberal education at the school level are the policy choices that will herald in a more hopeful future for states like Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. However, these policy options will take time, patience, commitment and an inspired vision of the future.

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