

Proposed Two Days International conference on North East India

Concept note

Venue: Azad Bhavan, Salt Lake

Dates: 7 & 8 January 2015

North East India in the Cultural Imaginations: History, Land and People

Since the colonial period, the concept of North East India historically emerged in the global imagination primarily as a strategic notion and a cultural category – not a geographical location. North East India is still subjected to multiple imaginations in terms of its history, land and people. Earlier, during the colonial period, the region was projected as troubled region inhabited by half-naked ‘savage’ and head hunter tribes – a contraflow against the progress of civilization. In the current perception, this region is viewed as a backward region in terms of socio-economic and human development index, a source of threat against national security and integration, the corridor to India’s South and South Eastern neighbours, a vibrant source of water, energy, oil, natural gas, mineral, plantation crops, horticultural products, medicinal plants, and an exotic tourist destination. Simultaneously, a strong cultural imagination emerged in North East India about ‘self’ (in plural) among the indigenous people which poignantly addresses the deep rooted notions about the culture and people and intersects to produce ‘indigenous’ views. This conference proposes to revisit North East India in order to understand how this defined political and economic space is primarily a product of several cultural imaginations with reference to time-knots.

As is discussed in several studies, the cultural and economic activities in the region had been quite vibrant since the precolonial times and maintained close links with neighbouring counties. Extant studies have shown that the history of human movement and trading activities across the border could be traced back to a remote past – back to centuries and millennia. This region had a long history of trading and cultural linkage with the neighbouring regions in China, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, and beyond. Allchin, Bridget and Raymond point out that ‘this frontier region is often regarded as a colourful corridor between South and South East Asia’ because it has been receiving various races, languages, cultures and religions from South East Asia and China

making the region culturally and racially diverse.’ With the commodities, border markets were also sites of cultural exchanges – the confluence of different languages, religious faith and aesthetic practices. Inter and intra-border trading also shoved human movements, migration and settlement patterns.

A fundamental change occurred in the colonial era in the perceived images of North Eastern borders. As is evident in the extant literature, the region had been viewed as strategic boundary, rich source of energy (oil, gas and coal), commercial crops such as tea, mineral and other resources. It also emerged as a cultural category – a ‘primitive’ space inhabited by ‘savage’ and ‘barbaric’ people, the land of ‘head hunters’ and the dark cultural space challenging ‘modernity’ and ‘civilization’. The colonial state adopted number of policies to ‘civilise’ the people and ‘modernise’ the economy by excluding the areas from rest of India. There was also a hidden agenda to expropriate natural resources and to protect and expand the territory beyond the region. In the current perception, a backward region, as it is, in terms of human development, North East is perceived as a source of threat against national security and integration

North East India - a conglomeration of eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim), is enclosed by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar with 99% international borders. Keeping in view of the strategic importance of this region, the British rulers were engaged in ensuring their hold over this region since 1835 and the rest is history. After a century of hostile encounters the colonial rulers formed NEFT (North East Frontier Tract) in 1914 with the objective of bringing the region under centralized authority. By the beginning of the 20th century, India’s North Eastern part captured popular imagination as a backward region with inaccessible terrain and land of the ‘tribes’. NEFT was restructured and renamed as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) by the independent Indian state in the year 1954.

Like some other critical problems, the post-colonial Indian state inherited the legacy of integrating, administering and developing the North eastern Region (NER). By then the segregation between North Eastern region and the rest of India was pronounced within a dichotomous paradigms of ‘fierce, violent and savage tribesmen’ and ‘gentle, unwarlike and inoffensive plainsmen’. The ‘segregated other’ image is quite evident in the apologetic statement of Verrier Elwin, the Adviser for Tribal Affairs under Jawaharlal Nehru’s regime. In the introduction of his celebrated book entitled *A Philosophy for NEFA*, he stated : “The tribal folk are not ‘specimens’, ‘types’ or ‘cases; they are *people*; they are human beings exactly like

ourselves in all fundamental ways. We are part of them and they are part of us; there is no **difference.**” (emphasis mine)

For the Indian Government, the most challenging task was to accomplish integration of the ‘different’ under the state building process – ‘different’ in terms of landscape, ecology, economy and culture. The large stretch of border along this region was equally a pressing concern. Despite several experimentations with government policies, liberal gestures, friendly negotiations and hostile encounters, the challenge in the North East still remains.

In this background, the proposed conference will explore:

- (a) The portrayal of the region currently defined as North East India in the pre-colonial literature;
- (b) The process under which North East India appeared in the colonial imagination conditioned by territorial ambition, strategic priorities, economic advantages, apprehension to confront intractable land and people and finally self-styled civilizing mission;
- (c) Current challenges of the Indian state to deal with the history, land and people of North East India
- (d) The ‘indigenous’ consciousness about the ‘self’ and the ‘tradition’.

The proposed conference seeks to address multiple strands in the cultural, economic and political imagination about North East India – past and present. The conference would involve scholars from various disciplines on international, national and regional level. It is expected that the conference would add new dynamics in understanding the cultural and political genealogy of the current hopes, dilemma, prospects, challenges, ethics and rationality - those engage the stakeholders in a future trajectory of ‘progress and development’. The conference is organized with the objective that the proceedings of the proposed conference will be published in an edited volume.