

TWO DAY WORKSHOP ON STATE OF RESEARCH ON FORCED MIGRATION IN THE EAST AND NORTHEAST

JOINTLY ORGANIZED

BY

**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY (IIAS), SHIMLA, PANOS
SOUTH ASIA AND MAHANIRBAN CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP (CRG)**

DATE: 12-13 FEBRUARY, 2010

VENUE: HOTEL PRAGOTI MANOR, GUWAHATI

The two day research workshop on "State of Research on Forced Migration in the East and Northeast jointly organized by Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla, Panos South Asia and Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG) in Hotel Pragoti Manor, Guwahati from 12-13 February 2010 explored the possibilities for newer research agendas through a stock taking exercise of ongoing and previous research on resource politics, conflict, militarization and disasters that led to forced migration and displacement in India's east and north east. The workshop was attended by scholars from various academic institutions in east and north east India; activists; and media persons.

In the inaugural remarks Peter de Souza commented that the new ideology of liberalization has been partly responsible for land acquisition, destruction of forests and conflicts relating to water. It is significant to note that post 1991, the policy transition to transform Indian economy has been responsible for contraction of public space. It is in this context that the discourse on forced migration considers this crisis as a sort of collateral cost that one must pay. Pradip Kumar Bose provided a review of the research done on forced migration. The pattern of migration in South Asia reveals that push pull factors are not the main explanations that inform peoples' movements within and across borders in the subcontinent. Legality and illegality are concepts that underline forced migration of people in the region. Hence we need to understand the agency of the victims, role of memory, borders and paradox between care and power to understand forced migration in India's east and north east. There is no shared paradigm of forced migration research and the lines between migration, displacement and forced migration are very thin. The lines become important much more for those who perpetuate the system. There are as many competing theoretical viewpoints for such studies as there are regions, theories and cultures. Ranabir Samaddar in his comments on current research on forced migration emphasized that there is an urgent need to study the production of the alien in the process of forced migration in east and north east of India. There is a disconnection between the historical dimension of migration and the current studies which often leads to an imbalance in perceptions. Migration, among other things, has given rise to a lot of social marginalization and the history of racism stands witness to it. Charles Tilly points out, in this regard, how trust as a social resource is created in the process of migration. Creation and survival of networks underline this and in due time, there happens a transplanting of these networks. A study of laws is also necessary

for adding further dimensions and to know how different kinds of laws, including customary laws have regulated migration over the years. Moreover, is it possible to create a regime of rights by the government perched on the regime of security? He also proposed a historical atlas of migration in the north east and east to map peoples' movements in this part of the world. Two pertinent issues were raised in the discussion: a) methodologically pliable morphology of migration; b) though categorization is the underlying logic of government, in studying categorization, we cannot forget the categories.

In Session II on land use pattern, conflict and migration Subir Bhaumik explored the belongingness to land as a key factor behind conflicts pertaining to land. Apart from being an economic entity, land is viewed as something that invigorates huge amount of passion. In this regard, land is linked to the historical imagination of communities; but at the same time, the ways land is seen by the local communities and the nation state, are at loggerheads with each other. Therefore, conflicts occur with regard to land acquisition and utilization. Walter Fernandes, besides stressing the claim of land to be one of belongingness, said that it is also the legal status of land in the north east that pulled people from outside into the region to come and settle here. Landless agricultural labourers migrated into the north east in thousands and most of them belonged to the muslim community. But the issue became communal only when the dimension of land conflicts was attributed to it. Particularly in Assam, laws were enacted and rules were changed to take away land from the traditional indigenous owners in order to make it available to the Bengalis who moved in from outside. Community land was converted into private properties and the power of women eroded in the process. The discussion highlighted the three principal points of: a) the past with its different readings of notions about land; migration patterns resulting in and out of conflicts and their timelines; and the varying degrees of truth in reconstructing and representing the past; b) the policies formulated and followed, with special reference to their trends in the wake of the development projects; c) the passion associated with land and manifest in most extreme forms.

The third session was on Homeland, Displacement, Violence and Memory. In this session, Dolly Kikon in her presentation Memory and Landscape raised certain crucial questions relating citizenship rights, autonomy movements and Armed Forces Special Powers Act. With regard to AFSPA she highlighted not only the region in official discourse is "disturbed" but also people are "constant suspects" – at the end of the day it is a vicious cycle. Ishita Dey in her discussion on transit refugee camp Cooper's Camp and a permanent liability home- Ranaghat Women's Home highlighted three issues: firstly the transmission of collective memory within families and across generation and through state policies of refugee care. Secondly, how the partition narrative is vivid with the experiences of the last journey from the homeland to a new home and thirdly constant configuration of us/ them through official discourse and among the refugees with the redrawing of boundaries and creation of us/ them across two timescales. Monirul Hussain in the initial comments said that the term 'disturbed area' generates a disturbed feeling and autonomy creates some kind of partition. His comment on Ishita's paper was that even Assam has a permanent liability camp where Bengalis have become Assamese. The Government policy of Rehabilitation needs to be revisited.

The first day of the workshop concluded with a roundtable discussion with the participants of the workshop and media representatives from Assam at the Press Club, Guwahati. Three issues were raised in the session; firstly, the control of media by state and non state actors plays a key role in the media reporting on issues of conflict, displacement and forced migration. Secondly, the media persons pointed out the

unavailability of data on forced migration to follow up on a reported story and thirdly limited journalists in media houses. Despite all these limitations the group agreed that the media in north east India has been pro- active on reporting issues related to displacement evident in the monthly compilation – “News on North East” by ICSSR, North Eastern Regional Centre. Media persons requested Panos and CRG to hold two to three day workshop on forced migration and displacement issues where new technologies that could be used to cover news and issues related to forced migration could be explored. Media persons said that there needs to be an exchange of ideas where the journalists and the researchers working on displacement issues. The roundtable discussion ended with a vote of thanks from Sanjoy Barbor.

The second day of the workshop began with the session on Gendered Nature of Forced Migration. Gita Bharali in her presentation highlighted the absence of gender in studies on development induced displacement in the country. She reflected on the study done by NESRC and emphasized that 50-60 million people have been displaced in India mainly due to conflict over Common Property Resources. In Assam, out of 14 lakhs acres acquired for development projects 10 lakhs acres are CPRs. The impact on women begins with alienating the woman from the very source of her partial economic autonomy. The acquisition of land for development projects makes a transition from community ownership to individual ownership. Women have more power with regard to landholding system in case of CPRs. The Village council decides the allotment of land to families. Women can make the decision about what to cultivate and where to cultivate. In the individual based land holding system women lack control over CPRs. Women are also deprived in the rehabilitation process. Basic to the deterioration of women’s status is the absence of alternatives to the livelihood lost. The woman needs such an alternative because despite loss of livelihood she is expected to continue to play her role of provider of the family. A salaried job can be one such alternative. However, most skilled or semi-skilled jobs are given to men from the dominant castes. Those given to the subalterns, particularly women, are unskilled, often on daily wages. For example, in West Bengal of the 125 permanent jobs given, only 8 went to women. Of the 45 semi-skilled jobs, none went to tribals or Dalits and 2 to women. 6 more men and 5 women got temporary jobs. 90% of the jobs got by tribals in AP were unskilled, often temporary. The study we did in Assam shows that 14 out of 372 respondents got jobs in the projects, none of them is woman. Vijaylaksmi Brara argued that women do not have choice vis a vis forced migration. In conflict related displacement, women continue to bear the baggage of cultural norms and expectations. It was pointed out that women are not part of conflict resolution committees. There are higher cases of drop out of girl children in situations of conflict induced displacement. There is a need to recognize single women headed household in rehabilitation policies. She also argued that customs should not be seen as detrimental to women’s role in peacemaking processes and women should form the decision making bodies. Rakhee Kalita in her initial comments pointed out the neutralizing force of the village council where male members make the decisions. The discussion revolved around two issues: 1) Question of donor agencies: World Bank being gender blind. Government agencies have incorporated gender 2) Women’s involvement in peace and conflict resolution.

In the following session on Violence, Militarisation and Displacement in North East, Sujata Dutta Hazarika highlighted the lacunas in the governance structure through local self governance structures in Assam which she argues could possibly be an effective means of implementing development projects to arrive at peace making. Governance is one of the ways of arriving at peace resolution and PRIs (panchyati raj institutions) could be an effective way for peace building. Pradip Phanjoubam in his presentation on conflict induced displacement in North East says that the historical

background of mapping of political lines is crucial to understanding conflict. North East was created by certain political developments and cartographic exercise where the north east was not involved. The conflicts are embedded in the history of the arbitrariness of the political lines. Bodhisattva Kar said the two presentations addressed two issues: the relationship between peace and violence, violence and law.

Amites Mukhopadhyay's presentation focused on the politics of relief and aid in post aila Subdarbans. The relief and aid was influenced by the changing political power in Gosaba block. The Marginality emerges from the official discourse of Sunderbans being portrayed as the wonderland and in this context the conservation policies have produced a dichotomy between human livelihood and conservation of nature. Embankment erosion is common in Sunderbans and their marginality is heightened when in the name of protection they build ring embankments. In 1980 when storms like Aila struck Sunderban very little discussion took place at the governance level. Vulnerability of population of Sunderbans continues to be abetted. Monirul Hussain in the context of Assam highlighted the case of disaster in Bolbola (a village 80 kms away from Guwahati) where people migrated from Northern bank of Brahmaputra to the southern side and a village was created. There was a flash flood in 2004, and large number of people died. Media reported that a dam burst in Meghalaya caused the disaster. But the reality was different. A new railway line was created and the entire residential area went under the vacated tract of a reservoir. Almost 150 people died in the disaster and there was no place to bury the bodies. Uphill, a rava village was approached for land to dispose the bodies.

The last session of the workshop was a roundtable on conflicts and displacement in eastern and central India where Subash Mohapatra, JP Rao, Satyabhama Awasthi and Amrita Patel shared their experiences in Chattishgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa. Three issues emerged in the course of the roundtable, firstly, whether conservation of forests means displacement and loss of livelihood tribals as in the case of Achanakmarg Tiger Reserve in Chattisgarh, secondly the constant denial of the state to acknowledge conflict induced displacement Chattishgarh. The denial of state to acknowledge displacement accompanied by state regulation in terms of militarisation of the area with the aid of Salwa Judum and confinement of people in camps and tight control over the border districts like Bijapur have forced people to stay in these inhumane situations and denied them the right to move.