

INTERIM REPORT ON FIELDWORK BY CRG IN THE NORTHEAST AND BIHAR

[In the first leg of our fieldwork, we have already paid as many as five visits – three to the Northeast and two to Bihar. As essential first steps, we covered Tripura and Assam in the Northeast and parts of North Bihar.]

A. Work in Northeast (Assam and Tripura) till date:

1. **Reviewing CRG past work:** Our field visits to Assam and Tripura basically were attempts to build on whatever work CRG has till date done in the field of governance and peace building and explore on that basis new issues in terms of the CORE project. CRG's work on the Northeast had earlier dealt with issues of conflict resolution, migration, gender, autonomy, justice and sustainability of rights, experiments with democracy and citizenship, and finally nation and borders of various kinds. These works have sought to demystify the dominant understanding of peace that always celebrates peace whatever be its nature and quality and have emphasized the need for differentiating various kinds of peace and their implications for rights, justice and democracy and vice versa. The dominant understanding is based on the imperative of making peace by whatever means.
2. **Further research areas:** Although valuable in their own ways, these works left further room for inquiring (a) into the instrumentalities that have been successful in establishing peace with the effect of what we call pacification sans the democratic agenda of rights, justice and democracy; (b) with the current phase of insurgency in the Northeast being almost over (on phases of insurgency, please see CRG's earlier note on fieldwork in the Northeast), the new tools and technologies of governing Assam and Tripura in particular and the Northeast in general; (c) the contrary phenomenon of partitioned and separated existences of communities, and the new population groups as a consequence of governmental operations; (d) and the numerous peace initiatives that help in making shared existence possible particularly in mixed villages and neighbourhoods but that remain by and large outside the ambit of official peace process.
3. **Objective:** Our field visits to Assam and Tripura were geared to the objective of reflecting on these relatively under-attended areas. In our visits we studied new economic initiatives such as growth and extension of rubber plantation in Tripura, policies on land and forest and new arrangements of settling population groups there, the play of the

notion of sovereignty in peace dialogues as in Assam, the state of the middle space in a conflict-torn society once again as in Assam, parallel peace building efforts, new social movements there, new governmental welfare initiatives in Tripura, and the functioning of autonomous area and arrangement there. In our further work extending to Mizoram and Nagaland, other issues pertaining to governance and peace building will be studied. In Nagaland we shall concentrate on local records of women in peace building, and in Mizoram we shall study the evolution of governance originating from a peace settlement (in other words, while the project seeks to study peace building as consequence of particular governmental mode, here we shall seek to see albeit briefly the particularities of governance as a consequence of its origin in a peace settlement). In fact the larger objective is to map out in historical terms the use by various social groups of armed means as way to enter the political society.

4. **Database:** This line of inquiry led us to look for mainly three kinds of data:
 - One, it is important that we gather from government sources such documents, statements and policy formulations that shed light on the evolution of governmental thinking on conflicts in the region. A whole new series of policies has been and is being introduced to the region with unprecedented effects.
 - Two, we have also sought to conduct long interviews with the interlocutors and leaders on both sides involved in the official process, political leaders and stakeholders, members of the larger society, etc.
 - Three, we also chose to focus in detail on one or two cases of local initiatives and peace traditions and what role they play in making social life possible in the first place. We found out that while these play a great role, there was hardly any scope for celebrating them. Besides, we are also seeking to make use of the archives and resources that are available in local language.
 - Finally, we have gathered literature on political economy (emergence and strengthening of market economy, growth of crony-capitalism, cash flows and extension of banking, globalization and new infrastructural links, etc.) in the context of conflict and peace building in the Northeast. But this is insufficient. We have to study more.
5. **Possible Directions:** While pacification has brought in considerable stability in the region, this has re-modeled the question of rights, justice and democracy in a complicated

way. As we know, in such context, civil society is primarily viewed as the vehicle of democracy, and this line of thinking is understandably in tune with the current emphasis on civil society by the global multilateral agencies. The literature in this regard continues to be dominated by a patently modernist understanding of civil society according to which civil society is supposed to be (i) an ‘inclusive space’ cutting across identities and ethnic boundaries and (ii) a space that also sets democratic ‘deliberation’ in motion. Such an understanding refuses to trace the roots of civil society in the existing social structure that according to this line of argument continues to be divided along ethnic and primordial lines. The civil society thus emerges as a “rootless” phenomenon, sent by God to facilitate peace on earth. While much of this argument is normative and does not squarely tackle the question of how such a civil society could come into existence in a conflict-torn region, we shall draw attention to the micro-histories of peace-making in the region. At the same time we shall try to see the effect of the new mode of power that we witness as consequence of “government of peace building” on new subjectivities. In other words, the possible picture may not be one of black and white (conflict versus peace and democracy), but steel grey (where new subjects are emerging). In other words we may be faced at the end with the need to study the productive capacity of this new mode of power, which we provisionally designate as “government of peace building”. It will be necessary to read this note along with CRG’s responses to the posers set by Oliver Richmond and its earlier notes sent to CORE partners from time to time.

B. Work in North Bihar till date:

1. **Objective:** Two field trips were conducted in Bihar as part of the CORE project. The first field work was conducted in June 2011 and the second in October 2011. Four districts of North Bihar namely Saharsa, Madhepura, Supaul and Darbhanga were covered in these visits. The objective of the survey the landscape of conflicts through an investigation of land relations, labour migration, ensuing conflicts and the management of these conflicts through governance mechanisms in the districts. The prism through which the above mentioned variables were investigated was the fact that these districts are flood prone and the biggest form of governmental intervention is the building and maintenance of the embankments as well as the administration of relief and rehabilitation during and after floods. The survey involved extensive discussions with villagers, interviews with local

leaders, parties and government officials. The emphasis was on the study of Mahadalit communities¹.

2. **Work done till date and some important aspects (first phase):** In the first field trip, types of tenancies were studied as well as the method of paying wages to the agricultural workers. The relation between caste and landholdings were investigated. Also, the pattern of labour migration was investigated. It was found out that the migration was seasonal, mainly of agricultural workers, to Punjab and Haryana. The logistics of migration was investigated which included the methods of transport, recruitment of workers through labour contractors, mode of payment and remittances. The caste composition of migrant labour was investigated as well. Various government schemes and its impact on migration and livelihood were investigated as part of the survey. The schemes that were studied included Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Indira Awas Yojana, and various other schemes that were launched for the Mahadalit communities. Irregularities and the disaffection of the people with these schemes and their operations were recorded. Local governance structures through which these schemes are implemented and the power structure they create in the process were investigated. Special emphasis was placed on the investigation of socio-political changes that have occurred after the formation of the category of Mahdalits and the conflict emerging from this. In this regard, a visit was made to a village called Madhura in Supaul district where a clash over occupation of land took place between a Mahadalit community and Yadavs (OBC community).

¹ Bihar Government constituted **State Mahadalit Commission** in 2007 to:

- Identify the castes within Scheduled Castes who lagged behind in the development process.
- To study educational and social status and suggest measures for upliftment of these castes.
- To recommend actions for initiating measures for their educational and social upliftment together with ways for their employment.
- Any other subjects State Govt. entrusts the Commission.

The castes include Bantar, Bauri, Bhogta, Bhuiyan, Chaupal, Dabgar, Dom, Ghasi, Halalkhor, Hadi, Kanjar, Kuraria, Lalbegi, Mushar, Nat, Pan, Rajwar, Turi. Pasi, Dhobi and Chamar

3. **Work done till date and some important aspects (second phase):** The second field survey in Darbhanga during the floods gave an opportunity of recording firsthand the experience of the victims. The role of the government, local administration and representatives were recorded. The dynamics of claim-making and negotiation between these three actors were observed through participation in protest movements by local representatives, attending the meetings of the monitoring committee during the floods and through informal interviews with the government officials supervising relief. Visit was also made to the relief centers to observe the negotiations between people, local representative and administration in distributing relief. A survey of villages inundated with flood water and accessible only by boat was also conducted to observe the damage and see the governmental response. The flood happened during the time when agricultural labour migrates to Punjab and Haryana which gave the opportunity to investigate the direct relationship between flood and processes and patterns of migration. An important part of the study was to investigate the role of informal sector of governance mainly the NGOs. An attempt was made to contact the NGOs listed by the local administration that were supposed to help the administration in supporting the relief efforts. The Owner Driven Reconstruction Collaborative (ODRC) in the Kosi area was studied. It was an attempt to investigate the increasing role of this informal sector of governance in managing local conflicts and influencing the economic, political and social fabric of the area.
4. **Possible directions:** This study focused on flood, governance, and conflicts in North Bihar may bring out a new aspect of governance of conflicts in Bihar. Largely set in the background of the growth of footloose wage labour, pauperized agriculture, and caste inequalities, the study may indicate new areas of further research into the inter-relation of migration, accumulation, conflict, and governance.