

State of Research on Forced Migration in the East and North-East

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Among the major aspects of forced migration in India's east and north-east that deserve attention are border and boundary conflict, security, and refugees, the large presence of internally displaced persons in the region due to various conflicts and development projects, and mass-scale displacement due to natural disasters and environmental degradation leading to resource conflicts in recent times. A workshop organised by the Calcutta Research Group in Guwahati in February 2010 reflected on the present body of work and future trends in research on forced migration in India's east and north-east.

Research studies on forced migration show persons in east and north-east India suffering incidences of multiple displacements related to conflict, environment and development in a single lifetime. Issues such as the resource crisis, natural disasters and protracted conflict have affected and continue to affect people across all backgrounds and regions in the east and north-east. They have been forced to flee and resettle their lives. Research points to the need for effective policies for the protection of the rights of the victims of forced migration.

The Calcutta Research Group's existing body of research indicates that there are similarities as well as continuities between the factors and results of forced migration in India's east and north-east. The two regions cannot be treated as disjointed units in this regard. Apart from geographical proximity, there are several other overlaps between these neighbouring areas that compound their experiences of displacement.

A recent workshop organised by the Calcutta Research Group in Guwahati on 11-12 February 2010, along with the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and Panos South Asia, Guwahati reflected on the present body of research and future trends and possibilities of research on forced migration in the region. The workshop explored the possibilities for a newer research agenda, through a stocktaking exercise of ongoing and previous research on the resource politics, conflict, militarisation and disasters that have led to forced migration and displacement in India's east and north-east. The workshop was attended by activists, media persons and scholars from various academic institutions in the region.

Some of the major issues in research on forced migration studies are:

- Border and boundary conflict, security, and migration (including refugees).
- The strong presence of internally displaced persons in the region due to various conflicts and development projects.
- Mass scale displacement due to natural disasters and environmental degradation leading to resource conflicts in recent times.

The north-east is a highly heterogeneous and uneven region where communication is still difficult and freedom of movement is, in large part, restricted by the state and by non-state actors. Ethnic conflicts became endemic in post-colonial times. Such conflict not only includes conflict between the state and ethnic insurgent groups but also must count the inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic clashes that displace a considerable number of people from the hills and valleys of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram.

The eastern as well as the north-eastern states have been subjected to the compulsions of development projects that directly affect the poor and powerless indigenous population groups of the hills and the plains as well as economically backward agricultural communities. Absence of adequate resettlement and rehabilitation policies for the displaced has led to further pauperisation.

In addition, the "Look East" policy of the government of India, aimed to bolster relations with south-east Asia, has considerably complicated the situation with a half-hearted appreciation for the crises and half-baked policies to mitigate them. The east, which serves as the pathway to the north-east for the rest of India and gives rise to the "mainland" debate, often provides the lens to see the north-east. But this region, too, has had its own peculiarities.

In reading the conflicts of the east, there lingers a memory of injustice and lack of official accountability that defines relations between the parallel power structures in the region. Peace has therefore been elusive for the east too, especially in more recent times, which have been turbulent for West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand. Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have also not been left out. There have been numerous

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grassroots-level political movements in Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal that have raised questions of power, justice, resource distribution, development and public participation. Environment has been another major concern in the east and north-east of India, with environmental disasters like the Aila as well as slow but steady degradation of habitat due to population influx and developmental projects.

In his inaugural remarks, Peter Ronald de Souza said that the new ideology of liberalisation has been partly responsible for land acquisition, destruction of forests and conflicts relating to resources of everyday life, like water. Post-1991, the policy transition to transform the Indian economy has been responsible for the contraction of public space. It is in this context that the discourse on forced migration considers this migration crisis as a sort of collateral cost that one must pay.

Pradip Kumar Bose formally set the tone of the two-day workshop with a presentation on research done on the pattern of migration in south Asia. He said that push and pull factors are not the main explanations that inform peoples' movements within and across borders in the subcontinent. This is all the more true in case of migration patterns in India's east and north-east. Legality and illegality are concepts that must be acknowledged to underline the movement of people in the region. Hence, we need to understand the agency of the victims, the role of memory, borders and the 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. To explain the phenomenon, there are as many competing theoretical viewpoints for such studies as there are regions, theories and cultures.

Ranabir Samaddar in his comments on current patterns of research on forced migration emphasised the urgent need to study the production of the alien in the process of forced migration in the east and north-east of India. He observed that there is a disconnect between the historical dimension of migration and current studies. This often leads to an imbalance in perceptions. Migration, among other

things, has given rise to a lot of social marginalisation and the history of racism stands witness to this.

Borrowing from the American social scientist Charles Tilly in this regard, Samaddar said that trust as a social resource gets a primal position when people are forced to move. People are often left with no other choice than to trust. Creation and survival of networks characterise such movements. In due time, these networks are transplanted. A study of the law is also necessary for understanding how different kinds of laws, including customary laws, have regulated migration over the years. Moreover, questions tend to be raised on whether a government perched on the regime of security can create a regime of rights.

The forum 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: (1) developing a methodologically pliable morphology of migration; and (2) though categorisation is the underlying logic of government, in studying categorisation, we cannot forget the categories. For instance, are social science methods adequate to reflect on partition? Is there enough space to map the many migrations that continually happen but are not studied under the ambit of displacement and migration? Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty was the chair of this inaugural session.

The workshop was thematically divided into eight discussion heads, keeping in mind the causes, linkages and outcomes of forced migration and the conditions of victimhood. Instead of flagging completely new

research for discussion, the workshop concentrated on already existing research articles and papers, thus trying to obtain an idea of past research. There were eight sessions, based on review of research. Issues were brought to the table from eastern and north-east India and were discussed both by the panellists as well as the local people present in the forum. The sessions were:

- Changing land use pattern, conflict and migration.
- Homeland, displacement, violence and memory.
- Media and forced displacement: the victims' right to communicate.
- Gendered nature of forced migration.
- Violence, militarisation and displacement in the north-east.
- Disasters and forced migration.
- Conflicts and displacement in eastern and central India.

Changing Land Use Pattern, Conflict and Migration

In the first session, Subir Bhaumik explored belongingness to land as a key factor behind conflicts pertaining to land. Apart from being an economic entity, land incites huge passion in the possessor and the resident. In this regard, land is linked to the historical imagination of communities. At the same time, local communities and the nation state are at loggerheads with each other in the ways they see land. Therefore, conflicts occur with regard to land acquisition and utilisation.

In his presentation, Walter Fernandes argued that the legal status of land in the north-east pulled in settlers from outside into the region. Landless agricultural



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labourers migrated into the north-east in thousands. A large section of these agricultural labourers who were forced to migrate belonged to the Muslim community. But the Muslim identity was brought to the forefront and the issue became communal only when the dimension of conflict over land as a resource 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. When community land was converted into private property, the power of women eroded in the process.

The discussion initiated by Sanjoy Barbora in this session on land use highlighted three principal aspects. (1) 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; (2) the policies formulated and followed, with special reference to trends in the wake of development projects; and (3) the passion associated with land and manifest in the most extreme forms.

The floor also discussed whether there were any specificities in migration in this area given the several communities that practise itinerant cultivation. Therefore land use was a big question. Migration in this part of India therefore had to be understood by freeing oneself from sedentary notions about land. Other kinds of mobility coexisted with migration.

Conversion of landholding was also discussed in the light of customary livelihood practices. Measures like the Land Acquisition Act become a direct attack on land rights, especially with regard to the indigenous peoples. Was a land use pattern map of the north-east possible, so that the locus of land reform could be understood?

Uranium mining was pointed out to be another important issue that had displaced several in the east and could displace thousands in the north-east. Stiff resistance to uranium mining has occurred in Meghalaya. Fresh mineral reserves have been found in Nagaland, Arunachal and Assam, and these discoveries threaten to cause further displacement, conflict and

marginalisation. This session was chaired by Monirul Hussain.

Homeland, Displacement, Violence and Memory

In the second session, Dolly Kikon's presentation on "Memory and Landscape" outlined crucial questions relating to citizenship rights, autonomy movements and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The act was put into place not only within the official discourse of a "disturbed" region but it also converted the people into "constant suspects" of the security regime. This resulted in a vicious cycle where the factors of distrust and violence reinforced each other. The term "disturbed area" here generates the disturbance and autonomy creates some kind of partition.

Ishita Dey weaved in perspectives from the east in her presentation on a transit refugee camp called the Cooper's Camp and a permanent liability home, Ranaghat Women's Home. She pointed out that the transmission of collective memory within families and across generations about the state policies of refugee care experienced a change from the first generation to the second and the third in the camp as well as the home. The key factor was the intervention of "sensitive" state officials who perceived camp residents as citizens entitled to benefits. Partition narratives gathered from the residents of the camp and the home are vivid with the experiences of the last journey from the homeland to a new home. The mode of transport used at the time of leaving erstwhile East Pakistan is often indicative of the financial status of the people who used them. The binary of "us versus them" was constantly configured within the boundaries of the camp and the home through official discourse and among the old refugees who differentiated themselves from the people who had more recently crossed the borders. This led to a redrawing of the boundaries and created the categories of "us versus them" across two timescales.

A very interesting insight was offered by the discussant Monirul Hussain, who said that Assam has a permanent liability camp where Bengalis have become Assamese. Such transformations often occur without a tangible realisation. The session was chaired by Amrita Patel.

Media and Forced Displacement

A dialogue on the role of the media in reporting situations of forced migration was organised as part of the workshop at the Guwahati Press Club. It was moderated by Sanjoy Barbora and chaired by Pradip Phanjoubam. Journalists from Assamese and English newspapers and television channels discussed their ideas and the problems they faced in reporting situations of conflict and resource politics in the north-east. Three issues were raised in the session. First, the control of the media by state and non-state actors plays a key role in reporting on issues of conflict, displacement and forced migration. Second, media-persons pointed out that data on forced migration required to follow up on a reported story was often unavailable. Third, this limited journalists in media houses in reporting situations of migration vis-à-vis other news that fetched more revenue in terms of sale. Despite all these limitations, the group agreed that the media in north-east India had been proactive on reporting issues related to displacement, evident in efforts like the monthly compilation *News on North East* by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) North-Eastern Regional Centre.

Reporting about the east, Nathmal Sharma, a journalist from Chhattisgarh, said that though huge numbers of people were being displaced from their villages by the state-sponsored Salwa Judum, it was becoming increasingly difficult to report about the phenomenon as the state discouraged any information outflow. Though people might be eager to communicate, there was absolute control to stop any information from passing into the hands of the media. But journalists were eager to develop their understanding of situations of militarisation and the need to report such situations.

Gendered Nature of Forced Migration

The first session of the second day of the two-day deliberations began with the discussion on the gendered nature of forced migration. Research on forced migration and displacement has shown that the impacts of forced migration on women have been varied, depending on their class and

community backgrounds and the failure to recognise women in policy and legal enactments. One of the common problems women across various backgrounds have faced, and have been fighting, is the lack of recognition of women's rights in relation to their family, be it in the process of rehabilitation or compensation, or in their day to day livelihood. These issues continue to form the core of gender studies in cases of displacement, reproducing patriarchal structures of power. Donor agencies, government agencies and the communities have an equal role to play.

The chair of the session was Sanjoy Barbor. In the first presentation, Gita Bharali highlighted the absence of gender in studies on development-induced displacement in the country. She reflected on a study done by the North Eastern Social Research Council (NESRC) and emphasised that five to six crore people have been displaced in India mainly due to conflict over common property resources (CPRS). In Assam, out of 14 lakh acres acquired for development projects, 10 lakh acres were CPRS. The impact on women in such cases of acquisition begins by alienating the woman from the very source of her partial economic autonomy. The acquisition of land for development projects causes a transition from community ownership to individual ownership. Women have more power with regard to landholding systems 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.

Once the land is acquired, women are 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 the role of provider to 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 jobs given to the subalterns, particularly women, are unskilled and often on daily wages. The NESRC's study in Assam showed that 14 out of 372 respondents got jobs in the projects, none of them a woman.

In the next presentation, Vijaylakshmi Brara argued that women do not have

choice vis-à-vis forced migration. In conflict-related displacement, women continue to bear the baggage of cultural norms and expectations. Women are not part of conflict resolution committees. There are higher cases of dropout of girl children in situations of conflict-induced displacement. There is a need to recognise the single woman-headed household in rehabilitation policies. She also argued that customs should not be seen as detrimental to women's roles in peace-making processes and women should form part of the decision-making bodies.

Rakhee Kalita in her initial comments pointed out the neutralising force of the village council where male members make the decisions and the consequent impact on women's livelihood issues. The group debated two issues. First, whether gender-just policies could be initiated at the donor level, and the effectiveness and translation of gender-just policies by government and non-government agencies. Second, women's involvement in peace and conflict-resolution processes also needed to be reviewed.

It was pointed out that when the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh were stranded on the Malaysian coast for "illegal" crossing of borders for employment, their wives back in the refugee camps stopped getting financial assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), because the signatories were the male heads of the household. The UNHCR in Bangladesh was not even paying the family dole to the women who were left behind. Similar instances were cited. Except in the case of camps run by the Lutheran World Federation for Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, the family dole was given to the male-headed household. In Chakma refugee camps, the camp committee often discontinued the dole when refugees went out for work.

It was pointed out that even strategies like joint patta and joint bank accounts to ensure equal entitlements for men and women in rehabilitation programmes had failed in the case of Orissa. The participants also brought to the forefront the health and hygiene situation in Salwa Judum camps where there was no provision for sanitary napkins for women. They were forced to use infected cotton and synthetic cloth. The group debated the need to revisit the effectiveness of incorporating

a "gender" discourse into policies, and the gaps and bridges in praxis, particularly at the various stages of peace and resolution, of which rehabilitation was an important component.

Violence, Militarisation and Displacement in the North-east

One of the areas of major concern in the research on forced migration in the north-east was the protracted ethnic conflict between various communities within Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. While the causes of conflict have been revisited in the previous years, there is also a need to juxtapose and debate the relationship between violence and the law. The session began with two interesting presentations on revisiting violence. The first presentation by Sujata Dutta Hazarika highlighted the lacunae in the governance structure. She argued that local self-governance structures in Assam could possibly be an effective means of implementing development projects. Effective governance was one of the ways of arriving at peaceful resolutions and panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) could be an effective way to peace-building.

Pradip Phanjoubam, in his presentation on conflict-induced displacement in the north-east, said that the historical background of mapping of political lines was crucial to understanding conflict. The north-east was created by political developments and cartographic exercises in which the region's actors were not involved. The conflicts were embedded in the history of the arbitrariness of the political lines.

Bodhisattva Kar, in his comments, said that the two presentations addressed two issues: the relationship between peace and violence, as also that between violence and

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law. First, he said the discussions so far had suggested that violence was an aberration which broke up the organic whole of the idyllic garden that was the north-east. Second, the invisibilisation of violence through law led to the question of peace. Was there a consensus on peace where there was a presumption on violence? The specificity of the north-east case lay in freeing the discourse of migration from the anticipation of sedentariness in understanding migration. A number of questions remained open: who defined boundary? Who defined peace? Was good governance an answer for peace or did it signal the silencing of people?

The group debated the shared experience of violence in the east and north-east India. It was agreed that the state had played a crucial role, and the only difference had been the AFSPA, which had been the limiting factor in the north-east.

Over the period, a new trend was emerging in eastern India – in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa – relating to conflict-induced displacement. There was evidence of corporate support in local appointment of people in state forces like the Salwa Judum and the police. In this context, there was a need to study implementation of the Geneva Convention Act. The historical shifts had informed the violence. Violence and militarisation has been a continuous process and the group members felt that the north-east has been the laboratory for incorporating local personnel into the military. One of the participants pointed out that the hiring of special police officers (SPOs) from the local population in eastern India at least had been transparent or documented. In the north-east, surrendered militants got accepted on a non-acceptance basis, i.e., without papers, and the matter went undocumented.

To move beyond the military discourse, it was important to agree that this was the age of civil rights. Human rights were a double-edged thing – one had to latch onto present laws and push their frontiers. Thus rights-based activists had to look at the institutions available to them. It was here that PRIS could be looked at as a way of effective governance.

In this context, rights for migrants were a crucial test for democracy. Democracies are meant for insiders. All societies believe

that they are democratic from the start. What then were the possibilities of the law regarding the rights of the migrants? Was it possible to recognise that migrants have certain rights? How did one understand the killing of migrant labourers in Manipur? Democracy could become an imperialist tool; it has never been sacrosanct. In this context, it was noted that with political imagination, violence could show what passed as rights and the claim-making processes.

The role of capital in migration opened up the relation between peace and development. Yet the killing of 36 Bihari labourers could not be defended by pointing to the role of capital as instrumental in understanding migration. The discussion concluded by noting that group rights and individual rights should be given equal importance.

Disasters and Forced Migration

Amites Mukhopadhyay's presentation focused on the politics of relief and aid in post-Aila Sunderbans. Relief and aid was influenced by the changing political power structures in West Bengal's Gosaba block. Marginality emerged from the official discourse, of the Sunderbans being portrayed as the wonderland. Conservation policies produced a dichotomy between human livelihoods and conservation of nature. Embankment erosion was common in the Sunderbans. Their marginality was heightened when in the name of protection, ring embankments were built. In 1980, when storms like Aila struck the Sunderbans, very little discussion took place at the level of governance. The vulnerability of the population of Sunderbans continued.

In the context of Assam, Monirul Hussain highlighted the case of a disaster in Bolbola, a village 80 kilometres away from Guwahati, where people had migrated from the northern bank of Brahmaputra to the southern side. There was a flash flood in 2004, and large number of people died. The media reported that a dam burst in Meghalaya caused the disaster. But the reality was different. A new railway line had been 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. An uphill village was approached for land to dispose the bodies.

Conflict and Displacement in Eastern and Central India

The last session of the workshop was a roundtable on conflict and displacement in eastern and central India, where Subhash Mohapatra, J P Rao, Satyabhama Awasthi and Amrita Patel shared their experiences in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa. Three issues emerged in the course of the roundtable. First, did conservation of forests mean displacement and loss of livelihood for tribals as happened in the case of the Achanakmarg Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh? Second, the state's constant refusal to acknowledge conflict-induced displacement in Chhattisgarh was remarkable. Third, there was a need to revisit relief and resettlement policy.

In Chhattisgarh, not only does the state deny acknowledgement to displacement, the relevant areas have been heavily militarised with the aid of the Salwa Judum. People have been confined in camps. Tight control over border districts like Bijapur have forced people to stay in these inhumane conditions and denied them the right to move.

Keeping in mind the displacement situation in the east and north-east and drawing from the experiences of the displaced people in the east, Amrita Patel pointed out the importance of moving forward and looking at the effectiveness of these policies. She said the current resettlement and rehabilitation policy is only applicable to people displaced due to development. She said the scope of resettlement and rehabilitation policy needs to be revisited, particularly when people continue to face multiple displacements, and increasing numbers of people continue to be displaced due to conflict.

Concluding Remarks

The group agreed on the urgent need to identify and trace the history of migration in the north-east and on the need to work towards an atlas of the history of migration in the region. Migration histories not only produced new realities but also could provide a contrast and way to work towards newer research areas. These histories could be linked to studies on forced migration, for instance, on the relation between labour migration and identity politics in regional formation.

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