

**Forced Displacement in India with reference to India's Northeast
A One-Day Consultation Meeting and Dialogue**

**Organised by
Calcutta Research Group
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Venue: Don Bosco Institute, Guwahati**

Session I

Panel Discussion: An Overview of Displacement in India's Northeast

The inaugural session was chaired by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Choudhury. The speakers were Walter Fernandes, Immanuel Varte, Lalrinmawii Fanai, Amrita Saikia and Anjuman Ara Begum. This session laid the theoretical foundation of the Dialogue and set the tone for all the other discussions that would follow through the rest of the day. The primary concern reflected in all the presentations was the constant lack of security with regard to life, living and livelihood. All the speakers threw light on the multiple triggers of internal displacement in Northeast India and the resultant effects these have on humans and communities who find themselves embroiled in the midst.

Walter Fernandes, a veteran on Northeast and Displacement Studies began his keynote lecture 'Displacement in India's Northeast: An Overview' by invoking Article 21 of the Constitution of India enshrined as Right to Life. He discussed the position of the State in relation to the Development practices it undertakes and noted that it is always the subaltern who pay the costs of development leading to internal conflicts and displacement and mentioned that these events promote patriarchy in subtle ways thus changing the core of many egalitarian societies that exist. He ended his lecture by thinking out loud on how the notion of development could be re-thought to make it sustainable and egalitarian in a way that would honour the 'dignity of life' as espoused in the Constitution.

Taking cue from the previous lecture, Immanuel Varte's presentation 'IDPs: Perspectives from Meghalaya' also discussed the perils of development and the subsequent ways in which such practices change the core of indigenous societies. Varte noted that such cases of internal displacement always create societal disruptions due to the contestations of assimilation, acceptance and otherisation at play. Internal displacement as a result of government aided development projects like tourism, road expansion, mining, etc., almost always negatively impact indigenous societies which rely heavily on natural resources for living.

Lalrinmawii Fanai in her presentation 'Dealing with Displacement: Responses from Mizoram' talked about the rehabilitation situation of displaced people in Mizoram for the

past few years and gave an over-view of the same. She threw light on the housing conditions of IDPs in the state. Her presentation stressed on the role of government and the civil society in their treatment of displaced people. Her presentation stressed on the Right to Return and the Question of Repatriation as two modalities which need to be looked into always while engaging with displaced people with an aim to ensure that these two are met alongside trust-building exercises which is crucial in formulating return policies.

Amrita Saikia's presentation 'Conflict-Induced displacement in Assam: Impact on Bodo, Muslim and Tea Garden Workers' discussed at length about the relationship between internal conflict and internal displacement. She also highlighted the living conditions in camps and how these affect the inhabitants, particularly women as they find themselves in situations that completely strip them off their right to basic dignity. She also spoke about lack of potable water, nutritious food and health care—rudimentary necessities for living—being completely missing from camps.

Anjuman Ara's presentation 'Dislocations and Homelessness: Transit Camps in Assam' talked about the condition of inhabitants living in Assam's Detention Camps which have now been termed as Transit Camps. Her presentation focused on the legal dimension of the NRC exercise and the identification of 'illegal immigrant' in the state and how these in turn have led to the creation of a new class of displaced people who albeit do not fit in the conventional idea of displaced but are displaced anyway.

Session II

Roundtable: Narratives and Perspectives of Displacement: Voices from Manipur

The session was jointly chaired by Rakhee Kalita Moral and Sumona Dasgupta and the speakers were Mary Beth Sanate, Nonibala Ngarengbam, Nengboi Haokip, Ranjeeta Sadokpam, Chitra Ahanthem, Immanuel Varte, Thomas Michael, Kumam Davidson Singh, Timothy Khongsai and Wahidur Rehman.

The participants shared their experiences of living through the conflict that unfolded in Manipur in 2023. In what became an intense exchange of emotions, participants opened up about their feeling as they navigated through the turbulent days of armed conflict that ravaged the state and continues to do so still. The session initiated conversations that were felt experiences of the speakers and hence immersively affective.

The roundtable opened with a piece of audio shared by Mary Beth Sanate (presenting in absentia from hill district of Manipur) bringing glimpses of life in the relief camps, from 2023 and her conversation took participants through the hardships faced by displaced persons in rainy season and cold conditions that worsened health with scanty mattresses and mosquito nets to support camp inmates. Sanate's words reminded how trauma kept many IDPs from returning back to their homes shattered by bullets and mortar.

Nonibala Ngarengbam also spoke of her experience of working in camps. She spoke of the abject conditions of living in the camps and also highlighted how the sustained conflict has changed the social and economic conditions of the people of Manipur. Nengboi Haokip

shared experiences from Kangpokpi in Manipur, where social media and online messages had in a way played a role in raising alert on blockade, while violence and armed forced restricted movements. Ranjeeta Sadokpam discussed about the critical health problems like chronic disease that many inhabitants in the camps suffer from and how they lack health support. Chitra Ahanthem underscored the imbalances in media role that sparked off differences and widened gaps among communities, at times failing to tie-up events by looking at incidents through its lens of binary. Immanuel Varte spoke on how the idea of protecting land and resources at times pushes people to atrocities and further aggravates differences, displacement and distrust. Thomas Michael highlighted how instigations and fake news propagation in public forums by few leaders during the course of the conflict laid the foundation for fabrication of provocative thoughts which were fanned by social media units thus triggering violence. Timothy Khongsai spoke of his personal experience of living in Imphal during the beginning of the conflict. Wahidur Rehman's words took the participants through the narrative of Muslim settlers in Manipur known as Pangals and their position in the conflict subsequently.

The narratives took the participants through the lives and struggles of individuals living in relief camps, and across micro-profiling providing for a nuanced understanding of life in the camps. There was significant focus on the approaches that may help with rehabilitation for those living with trauma together with solidarity and network building among displaced persons to help prevent disruptions inflicted by displacement.

Educational institutes have been playing a crucial role and contribute through campaigns, and donation of books, with students and social clubs helping out and strengthening solidarity. Youth are hopeful that issues of conflict if talked out through dialogues, peace discussions (instead of showcase of violence), can help people settle down with possibly happier and hopeful future.

In terms of media coverage on displacement, media at times plays a role in widening disparities, failing to tie-up events beyond binaries. The stories of one community helping another often remain less focused. And herein, the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) can play a significant role in the study of reportage and media portrayal, by giving equal weightage to justice and accountability. 'Human interest stories' and 'human rights' stories' are different because 'human rights' stories' look for accountability and try to cover the backdrop in which 'cause' and 'effect' take shape. It would be interesting, as suggested, if CRG could take the work ahead on resource distribution and relief and rehabilitation planning through appeals for people uprooted in democratic space.

Protection of land and resources at times pushes people to commit atrocities; accessibility, distribution and acquisition of resources make all the difference, and while people call for

justice, there is need for looking into the ways, approaches through small steps that can take efforts ahead.

Mental health issues loom large and interactions with youth is a concern. To think of the trauma one goes through while bidding farewell to one's home, knowing that a homecoming rather seems impossible, make us rethink and reflect on the responsibilities of together working towards the creation of a space, a land peaceful, safe and more humane.

The suffering of millions of innocent people is at times merely caused by a fight between two, forced by false feelings of patriotism and propaganda; and therefore, to strive for turning displacement cases into a blessing in disguise, through community and group work, might help grow kindness and empathy, while also fostering peace.

Session III

Discussion Towards a Policy Perspective on IDPs

The third session was chaired by Shyamalendu Majumdar. The speakers were Reverend Lamboi Haokip and Babloo Loitongbam. The discussion threw light on thinking ahead of ways in which internally displaced persons can be taken care of in camps and particularly in conflict torn places such as Manipur and the policies which exist to render security, protection and care for the displaced.

The session opened with a recorded conversation between the first speaker of the panel, Reverend Lamboi Haokip, who was present in absentia, from the hill district of Churachandpur, Manipur, and Sumona Dasgupta, a member of Calcutta Research Group, on 'Beyond Relief: Reflections from Churachandpur'. The conversation geared around the possibilities of thinking beyond relief and rehabilitation in an IDP camp. Reverend pointed out how in camps, human beings get reduced to be treated as 'subjects' and 'material' awaiting relief, and their value get defined through the ration they receive. For policy implications, it is necessary to break this and instill a deeper value in the lives of the displaced. He spoke about rendering psycho- social support to victims in the camps.

Babloo Loitongbam spoke on 'The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights of IDPs and its relevance to Manipur situation'. Loitongbam began by explaining the fallacies of being an IDP and referred to existing global protection mechanisms meant to protect them. Briefing the background of the emergence of International Human Rights doctrine after World War II and the humanitarian discourse of rights and principles that emerged thereafter. He spoke of the UN 30 principles or guidelines that exist as an important platform to claim rights for the IDPs. He then went on to highlight some of the most important principles and scope of the IDP rights in that context. A couple of Policy Recommendations by Babloo Loitongbam include:

- i)** Translating the document of guiding principles for IDPs into regional languages so that they are more accessible in camps for generating awareness among the displaced persons of

their rights, and to also foster help towards the betterment of their mental health. Community workers or caregivers should also be aware of these rights so that they can work effectively in trying to render them care in tune with the existing protection mechanism.

ii) Writing a Report based on the experiences shared in this dialogue and then write and submit a letter to the UN Special Rapporteur for the Internally Displaced People (IDP) and include the Manipur situation in that report.

Concluding Session

From the Rapporteurs' Notebooks: Some Key Takeaways and Ideas

The speakers were Debashree Chakraborty, Shatabdi Das and Sucharita Sengupta. The Concluding session summed up the key takeaways from the previous three sessions. It is a reminder of how the narratives bring forth a host of issues that require navigation, and help to understand that battered lives are left stronger, while resilience keeps growing in the face of crisis. The uncertainty of the future harps at the root causes of the issues, as lessons can be taken back to the society from the sessions of the programme, that corroborate empathy and courage in the face of turmoil, coming together with hope and resilience.

The Dialogue ended with a Vote of Thanks by Debashree Chakraborty.

List of Participants:

Amrita Saikia, *Independent Researcher, India*
Anjuman Ara, *Royal Global University & CRG, India*
Babloo Loitongbam, *Human Rights Alert, India*
Chitra Ahanthem, *Independent Journalist, India*
Debashree Chakraborty, *CRG, India*
Immanuel Varte, *Morning Star College, India*
Lalrinmaawi Fanai, *Independent Researcher, India*
Mary Beth Sanate, *India*
Nengboi Haokip, *India*
Nonibala Ngarengbam, *Integrated Rural Development Service Organisation, India*
Rakhee Kalita Moral, *Cotton University, India*
Ranjeeta Sadokpam, *Human Rights Alert, India*
Reverend Lamboi Haokip, *India*
Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Rabindra Bharati University & CRG, India*
Shatabdi Das, *CRG, India*
Shyamalendu Majumdar, *CRG, India*
Sucharita Sengupta, *OP Jindal Global University, India*
Sumona DasGupta, *Independent Researcher and Consultant & CRG, India*
Thomas Michael, *Department of Social Welfare, India*
Timothy Khongsai, *NESRC, India*
Wahidur Rehman, *AMMOCOC, India*
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