

2 May, 2017



Indian Council of World Affairs

Sapru House, Barakhamba Road

New Delhi

Report

on

National Seminar

on

**“India’s North-Eastern States and Eastern Neighbours:
Borderlands, People and Connectivity”**

Young Scholars Forum

Organised by the Asian Confluence, Shillong

In Collaboration with

Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi

09-10 March 2017

The **Asian Confluence's Young Scholar's Forum** had organised a two-day national seminar on '**India's North-eastern States and Eastern Neighbours: Borderlands, People and Connectivity**' (09-10 March 2017).

The inaugural session was attended by **Ambassador Riewad Warjri**, **Dr. R.C. Laloo**, **Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya**, **Shri Piyush Srivastava**, **JS, ICWA**, New Delhi, **Prof. Sreeradha Dutta**, **Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIS)**, Kolkata, **Shri P.K. Dubey**, **IG, BSF, Meghalaya Frontier** and **Shri PS Dkhar**, **IAS, D.C. East Khasi Hills, Shillong**. The inaugural session and the first panel discussion were chaired by **Ambassador Riewad Warjri**.

Ambassador Warjri appreciated the nature of the inaugural panel, which constituted members of the government, bureaucracy, both administrative and from the foreign service, member of the border security forces, as well as academicians.

In the welcome address, **Shri Sabyasachi Dutta**, **Executive Director, Asian Confluence** stated that the present Young Scholars Forum is based on three prisms; security, external relations and the development of the region. The entire effort is to converge these three prisms. Shri Dutta wholeheartedly appreciated the role of ICWA in the process of building this dialogue. In the past ICWA have also collaborated with Asian Confluence in such process. It led to the initiation of the Shillong Dialogue in 2014 which was published as the Shillong Consensus. The MoU in between ICWA and Asian Confluence was one of the basic motivation to strengthen such a platform, which resulted in the Young Scholars Forum. The Chair added that the Young Scholars Forum has taken a leadership role in understanding and studying North East India.

Dr. R.C. Laloo, **Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya** stated humbly about his inability to be able to properly contribute to the forum as he is belittled in the presence of such an august gathering, who were directly involved in the growth of an understanding of the region, strengthening the minds of the youth. He stated how borders remains to be the product of politics and politicians and how the problems that has risen from such borders can be resolved with the maturity and farsighted decisions of politicians. He narrated how the perception of borders and borderlands changes when it comes to the state and the security apparatus and the common man.

After the special address, the message from **Shri Nalin Surie**, **DG, ICWA** was read out by **Dr. Binayak Dutta**, **Department of History, NEHU**.

In his Special Address **Shri Piyush Srivastava**, **JS, ICWA** stated the relevance of the Young Scholar's Forum and the applicability of the theme that has been adapted, which is extremely important not only for the North Eastern region, but for the entire nation and South East Asia. For the benefit of the researchers and young scholars he explained the role and function of ICWA. He mentioned that border areas can become role models of mutual benefit and cooperation and understanding. The Govt of India has realized this. The country from the very beginning has stressed on building relations with its neighbours, which has found shape in 'the neighbourhood first' policy followed by the present government. India has peaceful borders as well as borders in conflict. Open borders along with a total visa free regime is what India shares with Nepal and Bhutan, which

remains to be unique in the world. However, he stated the challenges involved in turning borders as zones for prosperity and economic growth. The present government's 'Act East Policy' placed emphasis on connectivity, infrastructure, information highway, trade, manufacturing, space and S&T cooperation, and people to people exchanges, which would be a springboard for regional integration and prosperity, and would effectively connect our North East region with ASEAN. He remained extremely hopeful that the outcome of the deliberation would be able to identify the strengths and challenges in the way of integrating ideas, perceptions, concepts and visions, which would bring forth a positive outcome, being able to build concrete actionable points for the future growth and integrated development of the region and the nation.

Delivering the **Keynote Address**, **Prof. Sreeradha Dutta, Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIS)** analysed the role of borders on a theoretical perspective. She sought to look at the borders from beyond the zero line; from being a line of demarcation and property of the ruler. She stated how borders re-invented the state, especially in places like Europe. There is an immediate need to alter the political notion of borders, building a positive narrative, turning borders into bridges. She stressed on the role of Border Haats, criticised the lack of understanding of security forces to provide the expected dignity deserved by people living on the borderlands.

The **First Plenary Discussion** at the end of the **Inaugural Session** was chaired by **Ambassador Riewad Warjri**. The first discussant was **Shri P.K. Dubey, IG, BSF, Meghalaya Frontier** stated that how there is a lack of positivity while discussing or dealing with borders. He also mentioned about the apathy of government institutions in the maintenance of border posts. He also stated the lack of connectivity between borders and the inland areas, making borderlands isolated. He sought the immediate need of strong political decisions from the center as well as the state to have a proper coordination in making the borderland regions into regions of prosperity.

Shri PS Dkhar, IAS, D.C. East Khasi Hills, Shillong stated about the sense of fear that overlaps the concept of borders. He also stressed on the need for the formulation of people living in borderlands. He also emphasised the need of strengthening the role of Border Haats, the enhancement of the number of commodities being sold, as well as making them into an important tool to strengthen the positivity of borders.

The second day started with the second **Plenary Lecture** provided by **Prof. Sajal Nag, Assam University, Silchar**. The session was chaired by **Dr. Sreeradha Dutta, Director, MAKAIS**. Prof. Nag laid down the historical narrative of borderlands as developed in the oriental studies and the manner in which it has created more fear and distrust amongst communities than strengthening communities living on them. Providing a historical understanding of conflicts that arose in border areas in and around Assam and North Bengal, he examined the manner in which it has remained integral in understanding and assessing the conflict within communities in north east India, especially Assam. The Plenary Lecture was followed by the first Session which was chaired by Prof. Nag. The theme of the first session was **Borders, Boundaries and Citizenship**.

Dr. Dhruvajyoti Bhattacharjee, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, presented a paper titled "**Citizenship and Identity: A Different Perspective for Borderland Communities in North East India**". He stated that instead of looking into the ongoing politics of

citizenship and identity, there is a need to evaluate the concept of citizenship and identity of a community, as a tool for confidence building in conflictual regions and societies. The porous borders between India and Myanmar, despite posing significant challenges provide ample opportunity for socio-economic political development. He stated that thus it would be prudent for academicians and scholars to study the relationship between citizenship and identity from a wider perspective of being tools of confidence building between communities.

Dr. Palash Kumar Nath, Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture (ABILAC), Assam, presented a paper titled, **“The Issue of Endangerment of Ethnic Languages and Culture: Perspectives from North East India”**. The speaker took up the issue of endangerment of language and culture of some of the ethnic communities has, of late, which has gained lot of attention due to the pace in which many of these languages and cultural riches are vanishing. The paper drew upon the speaker’s hands on experience in working with some of the ethnic communities like the Singphos and Tai Khamyangs towards preservation and revitalization of their language. The presentation primarily focused on discussing various factors leading to the loss of such languages and culture in the context of North East India. It also dwelled on various efforts that the speaker was involved with towards documentation, preservation and strengthening these languages. The speaker also highlighted the need for community participation and empowerment in the process of preservation and revitalization of their language and culture. He briefly discussed the issue of community sensitization and empowerment towards preserving their own language and culture.

Dr. Binayak Dutta, Department of History, NEHU, presented a paper titled, **“Partition and the Predicaments of Citizenship in North East India”**. He stated that while there is little doubt over partition of India causing extreme violence, displacement and agony, very little space has been given to the study of the history of partition and after in Eastern India, till recent times. In his paper, he pointed out that partition in North East India is not an event but a process that has cast its imprint on politics, community relations and the nature of citizenship in the region. he stated that the drawing of borders over this colonial borderland and the displacement and migration of people across the border into what has come to be understood as North East India has critically complicated the politics over people. The idea of granting citizenship to Hindu refugees from across the borders as envisaged The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 has ignited a flurry of claims and counter-claims in this region. His paper attempted to emphasise the need to reconstruction of decolonization and displacement histories in Assam, in which he argued, could transform the way partition history is viewed and explored the idea of continuity and disruption in the politics over citizenship in the region.

Sashi Teibor Laloo, Research Scholar, NEHU, presented a paper titled, **“My Grandmother’s Tales of the Partition – 1947”**. The speaker spoke about the partition from the perspectives of oral, documented and official accounts focusing on the Khasi and Jaintia communities residing on the southern foothills of Meghalaya, bordering the plains of erstwhile East Pakistan and modern day Bangladesh. The objective was to highlight the relations of the hill tribes and the people of the plains prior to the partition, the complexities in carving out the borders and the role played by the government to meet the needs of the hour. Finally, she shared the stories of her grandmother, who was born and brought up in the village of Wahlong, her vivid accounts of the

land before and after it was partitioned and how the people dealt the formation of this boundary line a few kilometers from her childhood home.

The first session was followed by the third **Plenary Lecture** by **Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar, Aaranyak, Guwahati**, which was chaired by **Prof. Sarah Hilali, RGU, Doimukh**. Lahkar, who was among five conservationists working in three natural World heritage Sites from across the globe, in 2016 won the IUCN's Heritage Hero, a global recognition that also made him the only Asian so far to win that People's Choice award. He spoke extensively how animals in the Manas National Park area has overlooked borders and through cooperation and support, the project has been able to work on the protection and conservation of endangered species found in the protected reserve forests in India and Bhutan, along with the many states that it covers in North East India.

The Plenary lecture was followed by **Session 2** which was chaired by **Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar, Aaranyak, Guwahati**. The theme of the session was **Natural Resource Management and Livelihood Challenges**.

Dr. Narayan Sharma, Cotton College State University, presented a paper titled, **“Addressing Livelihood Issues is the Key to Conserve Natural Resources in Upper Brahmaputra Valley, Assam”**. The Upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam harbours lowland tropical evergreen forests, considered among one of the most threatened forest type in the world. Several endangered large mammals still inhabit in these forests. The historical contingencies coupled with ever extensive human use, has resulted in these otherwise – contiguous lowland forest in isolated standing fragments today. However, many of these isolated fragments still strikingly hosts remnants of the landscape's original bio-diversity. The obvious question one may ask is whether these forest fragments are worth conserving. The speaker examined this question by studying non-human primates, which are severely affected by the landscape transformation. The paper suggests options that not only conserve the threatened bio-diversity of this region, but also sustain the livelihoods and aspirations of people and make forests of the Upper Brahmaputra valley ecologically and socially sustainable.

Parag Jyoti Saikia, Research Scholar, Jadavpur University presented a paper titled, **“Who Knows the Subansiri: Disquieting Discourses on a Turbulent River”**. The Subansiri river, flowing through two of the largest states of India's northeastern region is the biggest tributary of Brahmaputra river and in the recent times, has become the battleground of different discourses around the construction of 2000MW Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project (SLHEP). The probable impacts on the lives and livelihoods of the people living in the downstream areas of this dam, played an important role in mobilizing peoples' opinion against this project. In this backdrop, based on a seven month long field-work in the downstream area of this dam, the speaker presented his paper, bringing together different discourses of livelihood along the above mentioned river in Assam. The paper discussed the various ways in which people depend on the river and therefore the possible impacts of the dam on their lives. It studied these aspects vis-à-vis reports from Expert Committees and dam authority. At the same time, the paper emphasized on the need to situate these livelihoods within the larger political economy of the region by elaborating on specific livelihood practices associated with the river.

Shri Dipankar Lahakar, of Aaranyak, Guwahati presented a paper titled, “**Tigers of the Transboundary Manas Conservation Area**”. The presentation made discussed about the Transboundary Manas Conservation Area (TramCA), which constitutes an area falling under Manas National Park of India and Royal Manas National Park of Bhutan, recognised as one of the global priority tiger conservation landscapes for securing tiger metapopulation for the long term sustainable conservation. The study was conducted to estimate the tiger population in the TramCA area.

Dachanmi Dkhar, Research Scholar, NEHU, presented a paper titled, “**Ecology, Environment and Livelihood Challenges: The Craft Making in Jaintia Hills**”. The Jaintias are said to have specialized knowledge of craftwork such as pot-making, textile weaving, cane and bamboo works, wooden works, ornamentation and iron smelting. The production of crafts in Jaintia Hills is usually at the level of household industry mostly as a secondary employment for the craftsmen while agriculture is the primary occupation. However, the traditional crafts industry which was said to have once been “a considerable industry” has significantly declined in production and is continuing till now. Besides the impact of industrial economy there are certainly other economic challenges as well. Therefore, the presentation of the speaker assessed the subject to understand the significance and impact of ecology and environment in facilitating the emergence of craft-specific centers in the Jaintia Hills. The speaker sought discussion specifically on the crafts of pot-making and textile weaving as a case study and the livelihood challenges faced by the people engaged with it in a particular area in its geographical settings.

The **final Session** was chaired by **Prof. LS Gassah, NEHU.** He stated his personal experience in the promotion of trade and culture in the borderland areas of Assam and Meghalaya with Bangladesh. The theme of the session was **Border Trade and Trade Cultures.**

Dr. Suparna Bhattacharjee, Department of Political Science, NEHU, presented a paper titled, “**Border Haat: A Measure to Boost Bilateral Ties?**” Border Haat is a traditional form of weekly market or makeshift bazaar at a certain point on zero lines of borders which offers the people along the borders to market and shop each other’s products once a week. Though haats offer limited trading facilities in terms of items, numbers of vendors etc, transactions worth rupees three to four lakhs takes place per haat every week. Border haats are in high demand by people on both sides of borders living in remote enclaves and hilly areas, as they find it difficult to buy and sell products needed in day-to-day life. Given the context, the speaker tried to analyse the potential of border haat in engaging India’s North East with its neighbours and how haat proves to be a valuable mechanism to boost India’s Act East initiative.

Deigracia Nongkynrih, Department of Economics, NEHU presented a paper titled, “**Border Trade between North East India and Bangladesh**”. With the announcement of the Look East Policy of the Government of India during the 1990s to the now Act East Policy, the issues of promoting closer economic cooperation between North East India and the neighbouring countries of Myanmar, Bhutan, China and Bangladesh has gained prominence in discourse. Given the proximity and contiguity that exists between these nations with India, the paper has tried to assess the enormous potential of trade. It has also assessed the trade relations in between India and Bangladesh, by specifically looking at border trade between North East India and Bangladesh.

Uttam Lal, Sikkim University, Gangtok, presented a paper titled, “**Cross-border Exchanges and Channels of Flow and Mobility Along Indo-Myanmar Border: A Case Study of Tengenoual District in Manipur**”. He analysed the cross border trade essentially refers to the flow of goods and services across borders between respective jurisdictions of countries. It is often discussed in terms of exchange of goods at regional scale and beyond and only occasionally at local and village level. The basic premise of the speaker’s argument lay in treating the borders as homeland and subsequently explained the flow of goods and services and their dependence upon channel[s] of flow and mobility. The speaker emphasised to pitch in the discourse on cross-border trade between India and Myanmar from village level to local area level perspective. The information collected for the paper has been gathered largely as participant observation and through semi-structured interviews of the villagers, government officials as well as unstructured ‘walk and talk’ interviews at market places and along arteries of flow across the largely porous borders.

Dr. Nila Dutta, Head of the Department, Department of Sociology, Women’s College, Shillong, presented a paper titled, “**Indo-Bangla Border Haats: Socio Economic Connectivity (A Study of Kamlasagar Border Haat of Tripura)**”. Dr. Dutta made an attempt to study the functioning of Kamlasagar Border Haat of Tripura and its socio economic impact on the people of the border areas. Her study was based on primary data gathered through personal interviews from the people of Kamlasagar Border Haat of Tripura, which was supplemented by secondary data from different sources.

Each paper session was followed by questions and answers

In the **Valedictory Session**, **Prof. Sajal Nag, Assam University, Silchar** chaired the session, the lecture being delivered by **Prof. Sarah Hilali, RGU, Doimukh** who while going into the detailed theoretical pretext of how borders defined state and power, undermining the aspirations and continuity of local communities living on them. She assessed the manner in which borders have given rise to more conflicts and mutual suspicion than strengthening regional cooperation, peace and security. While narrating the case of Assam as well as Arunachal Pradesh, Prof. Hilali made a thorough assessment of the two day long deliberations.

The vote of thanks was delivered by **Dr. Binayak Dutta, Department of History, NEHU**.

The two day Forum ended with the screening of “**Pemako**”, supported by **MAKAIS** followed by a panel discussion. Panelists included **Shri Sabyasachi Dutta, Executive Director, Asian Confluence**, **Prof. Sarah Hilali, RGU, Doimukh**, **Dr. Sreeradha Dutta, Director, MAKAIS** and **Dr. Dhruvajyoti Bhattacharjee, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs**.

Report was prepared by Dr. Dhruvajyoti Bhattacharjee, RF, ICWA