

PEACE STUDIES PAPER 04

**THE SEARCH FOR PEACE
IN NORTH EAST**

Charles Chasie

Peace Studies
Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change
and Development
Guwahati, Assam, India

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Introduction

**Anuradha Dutta, Professor
Peace Studies**

**OMED KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL CHANGE
AND DEVELOPMENT
39, SAPTA SWAHID PATH
DISPUR, GUWAHATI-781 006
ASSAM, INDIA**

INTRODUCTION

Charles Chasie who has been associated with the peace process of Nagaland for a very long period of time examines and analyses the peace process in the North-East region from a different perspective in this paper. Chasie, in a novel sense, stresses on the role of each individual of the region in bringing about the changes required for peace building by living effective lives that are of service to the community. Struggling with issues which are familiar with one another, the North-Eastern region, according to Chasie, needs to develop the thought process by moving together which alone can bring about changes in the future of the region absolving all conflicts. It is possible to bring peace if people get together as in the case of Naga National Reconciliation function where 35 tribes together pledged to solve the Naga problems.

But for the problems arising from the conflicts in the North-East, very little attention is paid to this part of the country. Notwithstanding the apathy and negligence towards the region, she has a lot of potential to call attention of the humanity with the richness of the different ethnic

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groups, their tradition and culture, which are yet to be explored. With all its resources, North-East today is a conflict ridden area. Charles Chasie has his own approach to the problem of conflict management. The societies in the North-East had a number of institutions which solved the problems within the society. Many of these institutions however have lost their significance today. The writer, therefore, fervently calls on the intellectuals to come out of their shell of western education. "Capacity building", he says, "is not a short term training which enables people to earn". Chasie calls upon the intellectual community to develop its own thinking. He has very carefully pointed out how at the time of taking any decisions for the region, one has to consider the specific situation of the region. As almost each group is deprived and hurt, very careful observation and identification is necessary. The actual healing process can start only when the various groups are brought to a level playing ground. A big economic package for the North-East without looking into its needs is not the solution. One can therefore ponder, how is it that the youth of the North-East have joined various terrorist groups inspite of these economic packages? Human approach is must to handle these questions.

A wrong approach so far has only intensified the problem. To prove the case in point, Chasie has brought out both the positive and negative aspects of Naga movement which is the beginning of all separatist movements

in the region. Naga insurgency has adversely affected the entire North Eastern region. There is therefore the need for a collective effort not only on the part of the North Eastern states but also of the nation as a whole. Undemocratic laws should not be introduced in the name of law and order. Government of India needs to change its attitude. If policies of the government remain the same, even the Look East policy will not be constructive rather will play a negative role for the region. Hence, instead of adopting a 'sensitive area approach', the Government of India should adopt a 'sensible area approach' which can contribute not only to the development of the region but for the betterment of the country as a whole.

Charles Chasie, in this short paper, has been able to suggest certain very effective ideas. Peace Studies feel that this paper will be able to generate positive thinking in the minds of the people. If intellectuals and policy makers consider Chasie's suggestions and take initiative for the solution of the long drawn problems of the region, it can perhaps be a successful attempt. The Chair thanks the author who agreed to share his ideas on peace immediately on request.

Anuradha Dutta
Professor, Peace Studies, OKDISCD

The Search for Peace in North East

Introduction:

I, for one, firmly believe that the destiny of North-East is bound together and the region will either survive or perish together. None of us will really benefit at the cost of others. This must encourage us to come closer and work as a team because only *Team North East* can really help the region. In *Team North East*, some will be more capable, others may be less so, but we need to carry one another along on our common journey to the future.

However, before I go further, let me warn you that I am not here sharing my thoughts as an expert. What follows are only the humble observations and perceptions of an ordinary man who is searching for answers in his own inadequate ways. But I believe that while we may keep making mistakes, human as we are, our refusal to give up and our consistency in our search for answers may be the key to our own and our people's survival. The trouble with all of us in the North-East is that the issues confronting us, and our situations, are always too close and immediate. Nevertheless, our determination and cooperation in helping one another to filter our thought processes

and clarifying them will, I believe, not only bring us closer together but also help provide adequate perspectives for the region.

Context of Conflict in North-East

It is worth looking at the North-East region from a geopolitical point of view because then one can see that it is no surprise if North-East has problems – for various reasons the North-East has not received the kind of attention as some other problem areas of the world have received. Some may even say that if North-East did not have problems, the world would have few reasons to have problems! At the same time, the problems are only one side of the coin because the potentials of the region too are immense. The North-East is admittedly a strategic region of global proportions and it has the potential to provide answers to humanity. Looking at it this way, the region's importance can only rise further, as indeed it has in recent years. Let us consider the following:

- (a) North-East is one of the few meeting points of major races of the world – some say four major races of the world (Aryan, Mongoloid, Austric and Indo-Burman) meet here.
- (b) It represents the natural confluence of India and China, the two most populous na-

tions of the world.

- (c) It is possibly the richest ethnic region of the world within any given geographical area of its size. And, the wealth of cultures and traditional wisdom are still to be fully explored. There is hardly any other region like this in the world.
- (d) Largely due to "accidents of history", the North-East has become not only completely land-locked but also "enveloped" by very highly developed cultural societies, and the only region to have 99 percent of its boundaries with foreign countries.
- (e) The history and civilization of the region, regardless of who inhabited it at different times, seem to go back as far as recorded history itself and, certainly, to ancient times¹. And around 2nd Century A.D., history tells us that North-East was already a major world trade route, providing the alternative Silk Route to China². The possibility of the region opening up again and playing its true

¹ M. Alemchiba in 'A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland' and S.K. Chatterji in 'Kirata-Jana-Kriti', p.167

² B.G. Verghese in 'India's North East Resurgent'

role is before us, once again, following the recent India's Look East Policy. We have to ensure that the North-East becomes a producing and exporting region so that it does not remain a mere transit route for goods from other regions. If we take the analogy of a bridge, the North-East can either facilitate the bringing together of peoples or other people can walk all over us. Which do we want?

(f) Among the world's biggest problems are minority-majority and race relations, conflict and violence, food scarcity and the search for original sources of food, ecological issues, etc. The North-East has the potential to provide answers to these.

(g) The North-East is part of the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hot Spot and part of the original home of the world's flowering plants³. Among the notable contributions are rice and tea from aff accounts. And as the world's food sources shrink, or people become dissatisfied with artificial alternatives, humanity will look more and more towards original sources again.

³ Armen Takhtajan, 'Flowering Plants: Origin and Dispersal'

(h) The North-East has often been described as a "sensitive area" because of the conflict and violence in the region. It also, today, represents the longest running conflict situation in the world. While violence has been a real problem, the region is also full of moving stories of reconciliation and healing. And, the region can give certain insights about the nature of violence and the imperatives of healing and peace. For instance, at the Combined Naga National Reconciliation Function in December, 2001, in Kohima, Naga leaders representing over 35 tribes took the pledge to "... go beyond seeing only where others have hurt us to where we may have provoked them to hurt us so that forgiving and being forgiven will become possible". This adequate appreciation of the role of provocation both in violence and healing has been warmly welcomed as a new way of thinking in conflict resolution circles, and in various conflict situations, including in West Asia.

What is clear in North-East is that most peoples of the region have experienced prolonged conflict and they now long for peace so that they can get on with the business of living. But in looking for answers, we do need to con-

tinue to appreciate that the problems in the region are complex and different from each other. The same prescription, therefore, for the entire North-East is unlikely to work. But are they really insolvable? This is the challenge facing the ingenuity and intelligence of the peoples of the region.

Peace

I do not intend to go into the problems of the region in any detail because that will take too long and also because, by now, most people have worked out in their minds what the problems are. But I do wish to share on the general theme of Peace and how we might go about it. This will take me back to some basics.

What is Peace?

Peace is a bit like the platypus: hard to define, easy to recognize. Most times, our description of Peace amounts to little more than absence of conflict although we ourselves admit that Peace is not the mere absence of conflict.

According to Federico Mayor, former director general of the UNESCO, "Instead of absence of war, it (peace) is increasingly seen as a dynamic, participative, long-term process, based on universal values and everyday practice

at all levels – the family, the schools, the community as well as the nation"⁴.

According to Jawaharlal Nehru, "Peace is not a relationship of nations. It is a condition of mind brought about by a serenity of soul. Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is also a state of mind. Lasting peace can come only (through) peaceful people"⁵.

British playwright Dorothy L. Sayers said, "Never think wars are irrational catastrophes; they happen when wrong ways of thinking and living bring about intolerable situations"⁶.

Martin Luther King Jr., a foremost name in the field of peaceful change and preservation of human rights, said, "Peace is not the absence of tension but it is the presence of justice and brotherhood"⁷.

Peace is positive and means much more than absence of conflict. A friend described peace as,

⁴ Leban Serto, Seminar Paper

⁵ Quoted in Reader's Digest, p.47

⁶ L. Dorothy Sayers in 'Creed or Chaos'

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., Seminar Paper

"a non definable but sensitive measurement of the ideal conditions of life for the proper development of human beings. The ideal is easily disturbed because it is in reality dependent on the quality of the thinking and behaviour of a given community/society/nation. This understanding simplifies the task of peace building. We discover that the values we live by decisively affect all the important areas of life on earth – love, freedom, health and the eco-system etc..."

Given the imperfect state of our societies and the world, peace gets its dynamism from the positive creative energies released by the frictions caused by the forces of "good" and "evil". Creative tension, therefore, is almost always needed for the dynamism of peace to emerge in situations that have already gone wrong – "tension" here does not mean confrontation *per se* which frequently cause more conflict and violence instead of imaginative thinking and healing. So long as there is no creative tension, shouts for peace may remain mere slogans. This is brought powerfully home by Dr Frank Buchman who said that "Peace is not just a beautiful idea. It means people becoming radically different"⁸. The thinking here is also futuristic and, therefore, hope-giving and no one is really "hopeless" as there is scope for everyone to change.

⁸ Frank Buchman in 'Remaking the World'

For Peace to reign, certain conditions appear to be necessary:

- That all are needed and all have a level playing field.
- The presence of even a tiny minority of conscience-keepers in community/society who will help release the creative energies of peace.
- That a significant number of people ('critical mass?') live effective lives that are of service to the community as a whole.
- The acceptance that clever human strategies alone are no longer sufficient. The Franco-German rapprochement which paved the way for the birth of the European Union, brought out powerfully by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in its book, "Religion, the Missing Dimension of State Craft", is a prime example. The same point has been made by Bishop Desmond Tutu⁹, the Nobel Laureate, on the South African situation and by Canon Nicholas Frayling, about Northern Ireland¹⁰ (Frayling also debunks the often pro-

⁹ Desmond Tutu in 'No Future Without Forgiveness'

¹⁰ Nicholas Frayling in 'Pardon and Peace'

pounded theory of "forgive and forget". He says this is neither practical nor really heals. Instead he advocates "Remember and Change" as a more wholesome proposition).

The Search for Peace

There is much wisdom in our traditional and cultural societies. Unfortunately, most of our socio-cultural institutions have been disrupted or destroyed or have become disused. The result is there is inadequacy of lateral thinking and often bankruptcy of ideas typifies so many of our societies. There is therefore, the urgent need to rebuild the traditional institutions.

The intellectuals of the region must play the very vital role of provoking and providing the thinking for the societies in the North-East. The intellectual base must be expanded and enlarged. "Capacity building" is a popular phrase here like elsewhere. Sadly, in many of the states when people use this phrase, intellectual capacity building does not even enter their thoughts and they mostly think about quick minimum training for a person to earn his livelihood and that too in a less than managerial capacity. This is perpetration of the British Colonial policy of Indian education for clerical positions. Can such thinking take the North-East forward? The survival and growth of the region will depend on the ability of the peoples for

lateral thinking and adequate perspectives. The situations are very rapidly evolving all the time and despite the peoples capacity to adapt, the constant changes they have to deal with, will finally wear out the peoples long before they can discover their true roles – indeed, one of the biggest problems in North-East today is an endemic "fatigue syndrome". And, if the intellectuals of the region will not adequately inform with integrity, and also build up the peoples in the region, one will have no one but themselves to blame tomorrow.

As stated earlier, the attempt here is in the nature of personal search with a desire to raise it to the level of collective effort in the region. This is not a "formula" that is being offered but simply to ask questions and to provoke further thinking from minds more attuned to the problems of the region and with more experience than myself.

In attempting to search for answers, it seems that a few things need to be kept in mind.

- Almost the entire region is made up of wounded communities and peoples, some more deeply than others. Healing, therefore, is the first pre-requisite. The problems of each state, and within states, are also different. They will all require level playing fields before real healing and solutions can come.

- Rehabilitation and re-introduction into society will be required for many, especially those who are victims of violence. There will be victims of both Indian security forces and insurgent groups. But the entire issue must be looked as a human problem and from the perspective of the victim without making any differentiation. A wound is a wound, no matter who inflicted it or how and why. I do not mean here a one-time grant or an "economic package" but a wholesome plan for healing as well as "work for idle hands, food for empty stomachs, and an idea big enough to satisfy". Such a package does not exist but only something like this will work in North-East.

Unless issues above are addressed adequately, one fears there may be no peace in the region, no matter how many accords and agreements are signed because the wounds will keep spreading and getting gangrenous and the poison will keep getting passed on from generation to generation.

- A third point could be added. Government of India's attitude must change. Thankfully, in recent years some flexibility are being witnessed. But more is needed to make the peoples of the North-East feel secure enough to envision the roles they can play and for peace to return. Here, one can take up the

following example of the North East Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 which is under review at the moment. It seems, this Act is undemocratic, unconstitutional and inhuman. How can any democratic government make a law that justifies the killings, by state machinery, of people it claims as its citizens and through the same instrument deny and subvert or subsume the independence and dignity of the judicial process? To justify such a law is to deny India's right to claim on the people over whom such law is applied and to prove to the world that Government of India is not a democratic government.

If attitudes do not change, grandiose plans like the Look East Policy may only widen the scope of the "mischief" capability of present and future insurgents while the North-East will not only remain merely a transit route but also a dumping ground for goods coming from outside the region. The result will be more bitterness and more violence.

The North-East now deserves a chance to heal and to work out how they can become part of a larger whole. Surely, this is not unreasonable or beyond imagination of India which, today, boasts to be the only ancient civilization to survive to this day. On the other hand, it would convince about the many thousands of years of India's

civilization and enhance its image and prestige abroad even while gaining the respect of her own peoples within the country.

Is an overall strategy needed?

In trying to find answers to the problems plaguing the region, a wholesome strategy is required that is "understanding and feeling", and which is willing to keep in mind the history and uniqueness of each problem in the region. This is where the difficulty arises in trying to work out a strategy for the region. For this reason also, one suspects, different governments, at different times, have always fallen back on Control and Containment after the initial determination.

Because the problems have been left inadequately addressed for too long, the issues have tended to become entrenched and complex. In most case, it has also become difficult to address individually because each problem has "spread out" like ripples and has affected surrounding areas where more "unique problems" were being added. In such a scenario, while needing to deal with each problem separately, a more holistic and strategic planning may be needed. For instance, which are the key States with burning problems? This is a painful question because there are "burning problems" facing each State. But without, in any way, subtracting the importance of the other

States in the region, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland seem keys to finding answers in the region.

- Assam is not only the biggest and most influential State but all other States in the region "grew" out of it. Assam is also the State where intellectuals of the region are not only concentrated but also recognized and given due respect by the society. This allows for healthy debate and clearer concepts to emerge. All communications to the other States in the region are through Assam. Assam has also shown magnanimity through difficult times, sometimes even at her cost. So, Assam not only has the ability but also the moral authority to speak to the neighbours, who were once part of her.
- Manipur (specific to Meitei Community) is the oldest recorded or documented "civilization" in the region, going back 2000 years. But theirs' is a small community, concentrated in the Imphal Valley. And while highly capable, their own feeling of "suffocation", because of the geo-politics involved, may ultimately "destroy" this highly able and respected community in the region unless they plan "futuristically". The "outbursts" in the last few years are "symptoms" of cries from the heart. They need to be "listened" to with the respect they deserve. Through religion, the Meitei community also holds

out a painful dilemma in the conscience of Hindu India. But, apart from the civilizational and capability points of view, Manipur too holds an important "doorway" to South East Asia through Moreh – In history, the present problems of extortion, violence etc, are but mere water bubbles in a summer monsoon.

- Nagas have, sometimes, been accused of exporting violence in the region. The "Naga Issue" also, today, represents the oldest running conflict situation in the world. Whatever the shortcomings of the Naga Movement, the following are obvious:

- (a) It presents India, from India's perspective, with the challenge of how it deals with its dissenting minorities.
- (b) Recent Naga political history is no longer questioned by New Delhi – it has also been "proved" that no amount of economic measures will solve the problem.
- (c) "Naga Insurgency" has adversely affected the entire North Eastern region. The "mischief ability" of Naga factions in the region seem an accepted fact – earlier there was only the Naga Movement; today, there is no

State in North-East that is not affected by violence and militant groups and most of them are "aligned" to one or the other Naga group.

- (d) Naga populations also live across the border over a sizeable area in Myanmar (Nagaland State alone has about 215 Kms of porous boundary with Myanmar) and this provides both sanctuary and "mischief potential".

Two counter questions could be posed. These are:

- Would "insurgency" in North-East continue, or remain "unsolvable", if the problems in the above three States are adequately addressed?
- Could the same problems be adequately addressed in the other States if the issues faced in these three States remain un-addressed?

What seems clear is that without early adequate answers to the issues facing the region,

- The North-East will keep missing the "bus of history".

- The North-East will not only fail to play its role to its full potential but it could also create hurdles for India from doing so.
- India may jeopardize its spiritual heritage ('soul?') in the "killing fields" of the North-East.

The good thing about the above States is that they have had close past relations, however tenuous and painful at times, and these "threads" from the past have continued till today. The Naga Goodwill Visit to Guwahati in September 2001, as guests of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, where the Nagas were received with so much warmth by different sections of society is a case in point. They provide building blocks for future relationship and friendship.

The above is simply an attempt to answer the question, "Where do we begin?" There is no intention to belittle the other States. Indeed, all are needed, and ways must be found in which all can be included. The destiny of not only the North-East states is bound together but the region's future is inexplicably tied with that of rest of India and the neighbouring countries. What is needed is a win-win strategy. The peoples of the region must realize that they cannot afford to leave "solution" to their problems to others through blame-games because the "battlefields" are their own lands, and the future of their peoples is more important than what any of them may want for

themselves or for their groups. Here, recent efforts, official and otherwise, like the BIMST-EC, the Kunming Initiative, the Trans Asian Highway and Railway etc. give meaning and perspective. A healed and united North-East, with big enough visions, will not only gain much for itself but also be able to make significant, and unique, contributions. And then, from being described as a "sensitive area" the region may, one day, become known as a "sensible area".

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