



INSTITUTE OF TAI STUDIES AND RESEARCH

An Autonomous Institute under Dibrugarh University

MORANHAT - 785670 ASSAM (INDIA)

Registered under International Organisation For Standardization (ISO)

No. 1080040122/2022

Registration No. 256/04 of 1997-98, under the Society Registration Act XXI of 1860.

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Workshop on Contours of Ecology, Landscape, Identity and Development in Northeast India

April 2-8, 2022

Concept Note of the Workshop

Northeast India, also known as Northeast Region, which forms a land-bridge between South East Asia and the Indian mainland with a rich and diverse ecological landscape is home of more than two hundred ethnic groups. As such, the region has a geo-strategic location as it shares India's international borders with countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. The region comprising the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura has a hilly landlocked terrain with lush green valleys. The diversities in its landscape due to its location and most of the land being consisted of rivers, hills, low-hills, valleys and plains, etc. has led to the development of a distinct multi-ethnic culture. The majority of the communities in the region share a common history of migration and experiences of colonial rule under the British. India's independence and the integration of the present states into the Indian Union unfolded new challenges in governance, development, citizenship and issues of identity among others. The States of Meghalaya and Mizoram in their entirety and certain parts of Assam and Tripura fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and the institutions of local governance established there under for these areas, reinforced by village-level representative bodies. The hill areas of Manipur have local bodies mandated by State legislation. Nagaland has well established institutions of village level administration and development through village councils and village development boards respectively, set up as per Naga customary practices and usages, and also duly mandated by the State's Acts and Rules. The transition of Panchayati Raj Institutions was seen in all of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh; most of Assam and Tripura; and the valley areas of Manipur. As such, the North Eastern Region is well-equipped with institutions of inclusive governance to assure inclusive development.

The landscape identity unites the inhabitants of this region to each other or distinguishes them from inhabitants of another area. Thus the role of spatial dimensions to develop an existential identity plays an immense role through which people feel more attached to a specific place that has a certain meaning to them than to the surrounding landscape. In the longtime, it led to the sense of belongingness, a sense of identity, a sense of obligation and a sense of rights over the landscape and its ecology. This intersection between landscape ecology and human beings has its own dynamics which affects the landscape patterns and processes overtime due to human intervention or through the process of development leading to constraint and contestation between the existent diversities of the Northeast India.

The forest cover in the region constitutes 52 per cent of its total geographical area and its natural resources like coal, uranium, limestone, oil have made the region vulnerable to the fast-changing ecological landscape with serious implications for cultivation/plantation patterns such as conversion of agricultural to tea plantation land in Assam, conversion of Jhum cultivation pattern, felling of forests or displacing the forest dwellers etc. The extraction of oil, uranium and felling of timber among others have also contributed to bring about new human-environment dynamics in the name of development. The biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation has affected the primary sectors of agriculture and allied activities.

The basic identity conflicts in the region are due to the policies of political and economic development in the region. The social and environmental impacts of resource extraction like oil mining, timber, coal mining, introducing new patterns of cultivation/plantation hereby changing the ecological landscape patterns like conversion of agricultural or forest lands to Tea plantation land in Assam, conversion of Jhum cultivation pattern, felling of forests or displacing the forest dwellers from forest land hampering the inter dependence between the people and the forest resources in the name of development has created spaces of conflicts over development and environmental conservation, preservation, human rights, etc. Further the political policies on land, citizenship, privatization, corporatization, and its impact on the identity of the people concerned has led to the emergence of very fundamental question on impacts of the multifaceted intersections between ecology, landscape, identity, development in the context of the northeast India. The changing dimensions of manage/control over resources and its socio-political impacts, preservation of the rights/identities of the people and the ecology, the economic and political bargain between different identities and power-houses, etc. has led to the demand for serious research concerns for understanding the contours of the Northeast India.

Currently, there have been conflicts and confrontations over land use and control as well as issues of citizenship with the introduction of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as it is perceived that granting citizenship to refugees will undermine the ethnic communities living in Northeast India. With more than fifty insurgency groups demanding secession from India, the people have been affected by violence and human

rights violations which has got implications for the region's economy and development programs. The 'Act East Policy' aims to foster economic and cultural exchanges along with strategic relations with South Asia and imagines a space beyond the Northeast region which assumes importance in the rapidly changing geo-politic realities giving the Northeast region a platform to explore with renewed vigour, the areas of development, peace and stability in the post-Cold War scenario.

On the basis of those backdrops in the context of Northeast India, the complex human-environment dynamics need intensive analysis taking into considerations the multifaceted intersections between the local and global perspectives of ecology, landscape, identity, and development. Keeping in view the significance of the problem concerned, the Institute of Tai Studies and Research, Moranhat proposes to conduct a seven day national workshop w.e.f. April, 2-8, 2022 with the following key areas as sub-themes:

- a. Ecology, Landscape, Identity and Development: Concept and Theoretical Perspectives
- b. Cultural Landscape, Demography and Changing Contours of North East India
- c. Political and Administrative Institutions and the Nation State: Policy, Function and Implementation
- d. Agriculture and Allied Sectors: Indigenous Traditions and Sustainability, Policies and Movements
- e. Land ownership, Forest Resources and Contested Spaces
- f. Development Projects, Livelihood, Security, Environmental Change and its impact on biodiversity
- g. Locating North East India in Act East Policy: Connectivity Initiatives
- h. Migration, Citizenship, Identity and conflict in Northeast India
- i. Dynamics of Economic Growth: Market role of Gender, class and community
- j. Ethnic Identity, Autonomy Movement and Violation of Human Rights
- k. Emerging Concerns of Ecology and Biodiversity Conservation: Problems and Prospects
- l. State in Resource sharing, governance, control and ownership

The workshop hopes to facilitate the development and understanding of the importance of the issues among the scholars from the disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, History, Environmental Sciences, etc.



(Girin Phukon)

Course Director of the Workshop