

## **International Conference**

### **Locating Northeast India: Human Mobility, Resource Flows, and Spatial Linkages**

Department of Sociology, Tezpur University

9th-12th January, 2018

**Graduate Seminar:** 8th-9th January, 2018

#### **SECOND ANNOUNCEMENT**

To be held in the beautiful campus of Tezpur University, in the picturesque town of Tezpur in Assam, Northeast India, this conference intends to bring together a group of distinguished scholars and social scientists from different disciplines doing innovative research in Northeast India and its adjoining areas of Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The meeting will also provide a platform for fruitful interaction between scholars, policy makers, community leaders and activists working in the region.

#### **Some HIGHLIGHTS:**

\* As already announced, **Prof. Rehman Sobhan**, founder of Bangladesh's Planning Commission, (widely regarded as one of the founders of Bangladesh who mobilized support internationally for the Liberation War) and Founder Director Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, has very kindly agreed to deliver the inaugural keynote lecture.

\* Political scientist **Professor Sanjib Baruah**, Bard College, New York, will deliver a keynote lecture and **Professor Sanjoy Hazarika**, presently Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), New Delhi, will lead a plenary panel on the theme: Writing, Talking, Publishing 'North-East' where several reputed writers, artistes and publishers are due to take part.

\* **Professor Duncan McDuie-Ra**, Professor of Development Studies, The University of New South Wales, Sydney and **Dr. Dolly Kikon**, Lecturer at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, both leading experts in the area of migration studies on the Northeast will deliver plenary lectures.

Besides the academic programme, some cultural events, exhibitions and sight-seeing trips will also be organised during the conference.

#### **Submissions:**

##### **Panels:**

The call for panels is now closed.

The list of accepted panels (with abstracts) is appended at the end of this file. New panels can also be constituted on others themes for which we get good papers. Panel convenors of accepted panels please note that the organisers reserve the right to modify the constitution of your panels by accommodating the best papers received on the subject. Panels with less than three accepted papers will be cancelled or merged with others.

##### **Papers:**

Those of you who have already submitted abstracts of papers need to do nothing further. If you find a panel in the list appended that you would particularly like to join let us know.

Scholars wishing to present a paper at the conference can do so by sending us an abstract (of about 500 words) by **10 June 2017**, indicating which panel among those listed you would like to join, if there is one that fits your theme. Please send us your abstract even if none of the panels listed fit your theme but your paper is on a topic relevant to the theme of the conference (as described in the concept note available at <http://www.tezu.ernet.in/event/CONCEPT-NOTE-AND-CFP.pdf>).

We would like to invite in particular, papers on themes related to state policy, environment and ecology, economics and management. We also specially welcome papers on new emerging areas of research interest in the northeast.

All abstracts for papers should be accompanied by the name, address and contact details, institutional affiliation and academic status of the applicant. While a person is welcome to submit more than one abstract, he/she will be allowed to present only one paper.

All abstracts submitted for consideration will be peer-reviewed. Presenters of papers accepted for presentation will be informed latest by 1 August 2017. Each paper presenter will have at least 15 minutes for their presentation; each panel will have at least 30 minutes for discussion. The selected papers will be circulated at least within each panel, before the start of the conference.

### **Graduate Seminar:**

Prior to the conference, on the 8th and 9th January 2018, there will be a Graduate Seminar for PhD/MPhil scholars as well as for fresh postdocs pursuing research on the Northeast in a social science discipline. Distinguished experts from different social science disciplines including **Professor Virginius Xaxa** (Tezpur), **Professor Bengt Karlsson** (Stockholm), **Professor Apurba Baruah** (NEHU) and **Dr. Joy Pachuau** (JNU) have already agreed to act as resource persons. We foresee inviting around 30 participants who will work together on themes selected by the resource persons, in sessions lasting between 2-3 hours each.

If you are interested in joining the Graduate Seminar, please write to us before 10 June 2017, attaching (a) a brief CV, (b) a statement about your current research (not more than 500 words) and (c) your reasons in brief for wanting to join the PhD seminar.

### **Registration Fees:**

Conference registration fees will be Rs. 500 (Graduate students without fellowship, unemployed) /Rs. 1500 (all others). The registration fees for the Graduate Seminar will be Rs. 500. If any participant of the Graduate Seminar also registers for the Conference, the conference fee will be lowered to Rs. 300. These are the early bird rates and will go up after 1 November 2017.

### **Funding:**

The conference will begin on the evening of the 9th January and end by lunchtime of the 12th January 2018. All selected participants will be provided local hospitality in Tezpur, during the duration of the Conference / Graduate Seminar. Depending on the availability of funds, financial support for travel may be given for domestic travel to those who have no other sources of funding. Only those selected conference participants who have submitted their full papers within the deadline set (1 November 2017) will be eligible for consideration for funding. Names of participants who register after 1 November 2017 will also not be included in the conference abstract book.

## **Important Details:**

**Venue of the conference & Graduate Seminar:** Tezpur University, Assam

**Dates of the conference:** 9-12th January 2018

**Submission deadline for abstracts of papers:** 10 June 2017

**Decision regarding acceptance of papers by** 1 August 2017

**Dates of the Graduate Seminar:** 8-9th January 2018

**Deadline for submission of request for joining the Graduate Seminar:** 10 June 2017

**Decision regarding participation in the Graduate Seminar by** 1 August 2017

**End of early bird registration:** 1 November 2017

**Submission deadline for full papers:** 1 November 2017

For more information, please write to the organisers at **neconftezpur@gmail.com**. Please put 'abstract submission', 'Graduate seminar application' or 'query' in the subject heading, to help us sort your messages and to respond to them faster.

-----  
**ACCEPTED PANELS:**

### **Panel 1: Transborder peoples in Northeast India**

**Convenor: Melanie Vandenhelsken, CIRDIS, University of Vienna**

This panel will focus on the experience of the border for people whose group – family, ethnic or village community – is spatially divided by an international border. In Myron Weiner's concept, for transborder peoples, the political border does not coincide with an ethno-cultural divide. This panel concerns any groups leaving across one of the international borders of Northeast India and intends to explore the interactions between border(s), social life, and the making of the political community at large. How living on/at a border works on people's social practices and on their perception of their local and national communities? How does living at the border contribute to make, construct or contest, local and national communities? The papers may focus, among other possible topics, on transborder peoples' practices to maintain connections across the border, on exchanges and disconnections across the borders, on transborder mobility, and so forth.

### **Panel 2: Ritual flows and ruptures in Northeast India**

**Convenor: Philippe Ramirez (CNRS Paris)**

Recent social scientific research has highlighted the centrality of movements, mobility, migrations, and even disconnections to locality of people and goods in social dynamics. These processes are grouped here under the word 'flow'. In the field of religious studies, connections, relations, linkages, exchanges and routes taken by religious traditions and teachings have produced the religious forms as we know them today. Flows of energy, wealth, vital or negative forces are also part of rituals themselves, which often aim at controlling them.

This new interest on fluidity, exchanges, etc. reflect a context of increasing globalisation and mobility of bodies and minds; but this context also underlines endeavours to produce higher degrees of differentiation between religious traditions and teachings led mainly by religious and ethnic activities. This tendency has been largely witnessed in the eastern Himalayas and Northeast India.

This panel considers the connections, networks, exchanges as well as the processes of differentiation as entry points to understand current religious dynamics in the region. It aims at understanding, for example, the production of new religious forms intended to represent indigeneity and cultural specificity through borrowing markers from the 'Great Traditions' such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

More generally, papers should explore the question of the role of the circulation of people, ideas, goods, money, fluid, forces and so forth in the shaping of religious and ritual forms. This includes the study of connections and networks created within religious traditions, of the circulation of ritual objects and money, of the mobility of ritual specialists, as well as of processes and discourses of differentiation. The panel will give equal place to historical and present-day case studies, and is intended to compare situations in various parts of Northeast India and its neighbouring areas. All papers should be based on empirical data (field or archival studies).

### **Panel 3: Looking beyond ethnicity**

**Convenors: Ellen Bal and Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (VU Amsterdam)**

In the last few decades, the notions of ethnicity and indigeneity have been used by different actors, including indigenous communities living in various parts of the Asian borderlands, in many strategic ways for achieving different ends. This upsurge of ethnic awareness has also spiraled a lot of research addressing ethnic identity formation, ethnic conflict and questions of how ethnicity is understood and used by the indigenous or 'ethnic' communities themselves, and how cultural representations of ethnicity have been 'strategically essentialised' and ethnic identity instrumentalised for larger political ends.

This panel starts from the assumption that the choice of analytical perspective is not an innocent act and always bears the risk of losing sight of the other issues at stake. In this panel we want to move beyond the ethnic lens and explore the limitations of using ethnicity as an analytical perspective for understanding day-to-day realities of borderlanders in South-and Southeast Asia. We wish to ask which critical issues, significant interactions, conflictual relations, or conflicting interests do we miss out when focusing on ethnicity as the key concern for borderland communities? In other words, which are some of the other issues that are important for the existence and continued survival of such communities besides the question of their ethnic recognition? And conversely, which factors contribute to their continued marginalisation?

In this panel, we invite papers that go beyond the ethnic lens and demonstrate both the value and the limitations of our dominant understanding of borderland communities primarily as ethnic groups. We welcome studies that address some of these new issues, such as migration, livelihood choices, land rights and state policy, that have become increasingly relevant so as to contribute to a broader, alternative and more nuanced understanding of the region as a whole.

#### **Panel 4: Beyond Borderlands and Conflict : Women's Mobilisations in NE India**

**Convenor: Rakhee Kalita Moral, Cotton College (State University)**

This panel seeks to re-examine the condition of living not just in physical borderlands and frontiers by which India's Northeast has come to be typically defined, but more importantly the idea of being in transgressive spaces that situate women of this region in the aftermath of resistance movements which renders them less equal and marginal. Contemporary experiences however reveal new and growing multitudes of women, beyond boundaries, ethnicity and conflict, who come together as a tribe to protest inequities and injustice. Pushing not only for rights, but also for larger democratic ends, women here have mobilised against dominant worldviews, persistent patriarchies and have contested tradition and custom to emerge as stakeholders challenging society and state. In recent times, women in Nagaland, for example have both engaged with and confronted the state amidst much violence in a bid to claim their space in the civil and political domains. Such struggles connect women across borders and community on common issues of legal rights, property, empowerment creating patterns of mobility, significantly unique but not limited to the local. This panel will locate gender in NE India not merely as a historical category of analysis but accommodate feminist and poststructuralist trends in understanding how women have participated, protested against and intervened in the processes of governance and everyday life thereby building fraternities and networks defying accepted categorisations. Further, women's roles in protecting resources and the preservation of culture in dynamic ways apart from 'writing' the region call for closer attention towards how they collectively, and sometimes alone, transform the idea of the 'Northeast' in a wider globalising context.

#### **Panel 5: Bordering Northeast India: the region from its limits**

**Convener: Edward Boyle, Kyushu University**

This panel proposes to examine Northeast India from the perspective from its borders. The question of Northeast India's boundaries is an overriding one for Delhi, whose strategic obsession of the 'Chicken's Neck' has resulted in Northeast India festering as a "territorial phantom pain" (Bille 2014) for the state, despite the maintenance of Indian administrative and political control over the region. Such 'anxiety' is reflected in ongoing efforts to 'fix' both the borders of the region and its religious and ethnic composition through fencing the boundary with Bangladesh, and militarizing those with China and Myanmar.

By empirically exploring the realities of transborder trade and cross-border linkages existing across the borderlines of the Northeast, the papers of this panel will examine how the selective mobilization or bypassing of the nation's border serves to constitute the Northeast as a region. Local examples of border-crossing are either ignored or invoked at the national level, resulting in these circumscribed practices 'jumping scales' and being made to stand for the region as a whole. This panel will examine the region's borders from a "multiscalar" (Laine 2016) perspective in order to place the region's periphery at the center of Northeast India, and ground the localization of the region in its liminal spaces.

While primarily concerned with the international boundaries of Northeast India, with case studies from Meghalaya (Bangladesh), Mizoram (Myanmar and Bangladesh), Assam (Bhutan and Bangladesh) and Arunachal Pradesh (Bhutan and China), the panel will also make reference to the Northeast's 'internal' borders, which are as layered as its external ones.

## **Panel 6: Colonialism and its Encounter: Revisiting the History of Nepalis in the Brahmaputra Valley and Beyond**

**Convenor: Sangay Tamang, IIT Guwahati**

**Discussant: Dr Mithilesh Kumar Jha, IIT Guwahati**

The colonial rule played a key role in accelerating the spatial movement of people into the hinterlands of Northeast India. First of all this panel seeks to investigate the colonial government's attention to grazing amid intense competition between agrarian expansion, forestry and tea plantations. Grazing economy gained prominence when colonial administration's plans of generating wealth through agrarian expansion were frustrated due to resistance from nature along with persistent labour crisis. We seek to explore how the colonial government encouraged the Nepali immigrants towards grazing economy at this distinct historical juncture. But the ever increasing imperial demand of revenue and discovery of jute as a compatible crop for the riparian land proved to be a doom for the grazing economy. The ecological niche the Nepalis carved out for themselves and subsequent dispossession from it is intricately linked to the post-colonial questions on their citizenship, alienation and identity assertion. The panel will also explore the post-independence project of constructing 'Gorkha' (Nepali) identity among the Nepali speaking population of the Brahmaputra Valley with heterogeneous socio-political needs and ecological milieu. Beyond the Brahmaputra valley, the panel will also seek to understand the construction of Gorkha identity in the Darjeeling Hills, and the dilemmas and challenges that have come up in view of their demand for recognition as Scheduled Tribe. The panel will (re)visit the community's distinct contemporary political trajectory in the Darjeeling Hills through the lens of trans-national history.

## **Panel 7: 'Supernatural' Encounters in Northeast India: Belief-Worlds and Alternate Realities**

**Convenors: Claire Scheid, University of Cork & Margaret Lyngdoh, University of Tartu**

This panel examines the multiple vernacular expressions of 'supernatural' encounters in Northeast India. It explores individual and community participation within these belief-worlds and examines the manner by which meanings are derived from interactions with them. Non-human entities, the worlds they inhabit, and their participation in mundane reality offers insight into how such belief-worlds and alternate realities are created, performed, and lived out in everyday life. We welcome papers which describe 'supernatural' encounters in the Northeastern states and those that elaborate upon, theorize about, and attempt to make sense of such encounters.

## **Panel 8. Raid as a Site of Historical Contestations in Colonial North-East India**

**Convenor: Sarah Hilaly, Department of History, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar.**

Since the decline of the Roman Empire, raids conducted by forces external to sedentary states have been seen as 'barbarian' by Western chroniclers. The historical trajectory of such raids is global in scope, and have always been a part of civilizational discourses. Simultaneously, they have also acquired tremendous academic scrutiny.

Colonial accounts often depict such raids in terms of essentialized categories such as 'rude' or 'savage'. However, studies have revealed that they were chiefly means for procuring goods, labour and other resources; and also for keeping the spatial buffer zones between different societies intact. In India's north-east, such raids conducted in the plains predominately

originated from the hills. Hence the politics of these raids needs to be decoded in terms of the specificities of state formation in the plains; without exaggerating a binary of terrains. There can be multiple templates with which these raids could be understood: as assertion or sharing of sovereignty, as a masculine practice, as means of procuring labour, or as modes of production, surplus creation and state formation.

Predatory raids originating from the upland regions were not infrequent in the pre-colonial states as well. However, their varying frequency and varying degrees of responses by the state (vacillating between negotiations and minimal use of force) beg larger questions about their sustenance and mutation vis-a-vis the colonial regime in the region. This panel would address certain concerns about such raiding, their politics and the discourses they engendered in the colonial period; as they were enacted in different foothill spaces of the region. The crux of the exercise is to understand raid both as a tool and as a site of encounters; and to understand how power, space and mobility were negotiated through such encounters.

### **Panel 9. Unpacking Objects: observing the frontiers of Northeast India through the tangled worlds of artefacts**

**Convenor: Aditya Kiran Kakati, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva**

This panel seeks to interrogate mobility and spatial connectivity through the paradigm of objects to reflect on processes of historical production *in* and *of* the northeast Indian frontiers. Approaches in studies of material culture have examined objects and their agency in making cultural worlds. Yet, it may be possible to further investigate not only the material and social life of the objects, but also locate the temporal nature of the life of objects and the multiple allegorical functions they may entail. In this sense, objects are entangled with the cultural and temporal worlds that are complicit in the processes of making and imagining frontiers.

It is to be recognised that objects operate on multiple registers, the most obvious one being 'resources' of material value, on whose bodies the circulatory histories of a peripheral region may be re-inscribed. At the same time, it is possible to examine objects as allegorical terrain to view processes of instituting frontiers. Additionally, objects may have agency in constituting cultural worlds of humans, but it is equally pertinent to question the culturally constituted world of objects. Frontiers are recognised as zones of fluidity and flux, where objects are often some of the mobile actors that bestow this received instability regardless of the grand narratives that have claimed legibility and control over frontiers. Despite the mobility and the relatively static 'immortality' of inanimate objects with respect to human life, the latter can also harbour certain unstable semantic possibilities in their afterlives.

The interdisciplinary approaches reflected in the papers will seek to engage with these various interconnected registers and disambiguate their relationships in attempting a better understanding of politics in borderlands and frontiers such as northeast India.

### **Panel 10. The importance of 'places' in 'flows' and 'mobility'**

**Convenor: John Thomas, IIT Guwahati**

Discussions on 'flows' and 'mobility' have often failed to pay attention to the importance of 'places' for various communities. As objects and people are perceived and understood to be in motion, the ways in which various communities settle down and root themselves in particular places and draw meaning from those places tend to get scant attention. Given that having a sense of place is one of the important dimensions of human experience, the objective of this

panel would be to understand the ways in which various communities in the region have constituted and given meaning to their places of dwelling, and how those places of dwelling have in turn shaped the moral and cultural world of various communities. Moreover, considering the myriad factors propelling various communities and people to shift out of these places of dwelling, both physically and conceptually, the panel may also look into the effects such shifting out have on their *sense of place*.

### **Panel 11: Setting the agenda for Traditional Knowledge utilisation**

**Convenor: TBA**

Traditional Knowledge (TK) is an interdisciplinary field of research of knowledge and practices available in the public domain. TK has been contributing to Local Innovation Systems and Regional Innovation Systems, thus encouraging economic, social, institutional and cultural synergies for a region into best practices of development agenda. Losing their TK is seen by indigenous communities as a first step towards losing their identity. However piracy of cultural heritage, misappropriation and economic piracy of TK has impacted on their identity and has also had economic repercussions. Many of these instances can be related to North East India such as the changing land holding patterns, compensation for mega dam projects, and sustainability of traditional livelihood practices, patent from traditional medicinal plants, cultural piracy of handloom skills and neo-societal norms post colonization. There are also some instances where ethnic communities have asserted and transformed their TK into development models of benefit sharing mechanism and identity management.

This panel seeks to address the risk of losing TK due to migration, proliferation of neo-societal norms, usage of traditional environment knowledge in extraction of natural resources, and loss of livelihood opportunities of handloom, handicraft due to changing norms of social acceptance. We call upon practitioners, policy makers, activists and researchers to come together to address the need for developing policy guidelines for documentation of local innovation systems and regional innovation systems of the ethnic communities of NE Region.

### **Panel 12. The River as Resource: Meandering With Flows, Space and People**

**Convenor: Parag Jyoti Saikia, Independent Researcher**

The rivers of Northeast India are the new frontiers of resource extraction for the neoliberal Indian state. Towards the end of last century, the Indian state has come to identify the region as India's Future Powerhouse with an identification of number of sites for the construction of large dams for hydropower generation. While rivers of the region carry the baggage of being a source of chronic backwardness due to its annual flood and erosion, the discourse of dams in this region presents a very linear understanding of what the state sees in a river— a source of resources.

Against this understanding of the state, this panel would like to highlight how the river exists for communities living by it, in its historical continuity. Such living presents a certain hybridity that makes the flow of personnel across social boundaries possible. Along with shrinking floodplains, the fluid space called Chars, within the river, continues to challenge the state's linear understanding of the river. For people living in these areas, rivers are a way of life and space where they live and die, and not just being a flow of resources. These fluid and hybrid spaces also challenge historical, social or political notions of citizenship, identity, and othering as done by the nation-state.

The panel, therefore, aims to compare, contrast and understand the diverse connotations of seeing the river as a source of resources. For this purpose, it seeks to take into account

anthropogenic interventions on the river, such as hydropower dams, as against geomorphological formations that are induced by the river, such as chars.

**Panel 13: Fringe views from the fringes – changing ethnographic narratives in the North-east**

**Convenor: Jan Seifert, CIRDIS, Himalaya Archive Vienna, University of Vienna**

The panel explores the shift in ethnographic narratives (and narrators) from the early 20th century colonial administrators to today's emic views on traditional and contemporary tribal societies – illustrating the emergence of new discourses shifting from the viewpoint of outsiders to those within the communities. It focuses on the ways local ethnographies – ethnographic studies carried out by 'indigenous' scholars – challenge, question, critic, identify with or even ignore 'outsiders' views on their own society and culture. This includes local research rethinking political/state ethnographic classifications (such as ethnic boundaries) and new forms of incorporating archive materials from the colonial past. It also asks for reflection on research methods, focuses and views of 'outsider' – including colonial – ethnographies. More generally, this panel seeks to explore continuities and discontinuities between outsider and insider ethnographic views on societies in Northeast India, thus highlighting a new construction of the area from within.

**Panel 14: Land Relations and Environmental Change: Custom, Culture and the Market**

**Convener: Erik de Maaker, Leiden University**

Land is an important resource throughout North East India, as well as the cross border areas adjacent to it. In this larger region most people depend on land for their livelihood. For many people land is their most valuable asset, and it has been suggested that contestations over land are the single most important source of conflict in the region. Land utilization is shaping occupational patterns, influencing migratory movements, and contributes to the definition of moral and religious geographies. In the uplands, notably, ownership, access and claims to land tend to be embedded in customary arrangements that are continuously in need of codification and reinterpretation in order to find an equation with state laws, constitutional rights, and the changing demands of markets. In what ways do land relations shape people's perspectives on economy, society, custom, culture and the environment more generally?

**Panel 15: Multispecies Lives: Human-Nature Entanglements in Northeastern Borderlands.**

**Convenors: Bengt G. Karlsson, Stockholm University & Alex Aisher, Univ. of Sussex**

In this panel we seek to explore how humans and other living beings co-create the environment or world through the unfolding of their lives. We ask for papers that address how animals, insects, plants, fungi and microbes develop in relation to, and with, humans. Theoretical points of departure could be Anna Tsing's concept of "species assemblage", Donna Haraway's notion of "becoming-with", or Tim Ingold's assertion of life as always unfolding. As nature evades nation-state borders, we also welcome papers that are not confined to the region of Northeast India alone.