



Cultures of Governance
and Conflict Resolution
in Europe and India



CORE Working Paper:

Preliminary field work report from Meghalaya

By: Luis Felipe Perez Torner

December 2011

	Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)	PO Box 9229 Grønland NO-0134 Oslo, Norway	T: +47 22 54 77 00 F: +47 22 54 77 01	www.projectcore.eu
---	---	--	--	--

Preliminary field work report from Meghalaya

Luis Felipe Perez Torner¹

The Meghalaya case was selected on the assumption that the State was comparatively more peaceful than its surrounding North-East neighbors and that it could therefore propose, from among its specific characteristics, an alternative for peace-building efforts in the region.

The State enjoyed a significant degree of political stability during the first years of its existence with neither violent local contestations of the decision to carve it away from Assam nor any substantial structural changes in local governance structures that were in place since India's independence. These structures were a blend between the modern bureaucratic state and a system based on tribal authorities, reflected through the existence of a three layered governance system:

- i. the “standard” layer of governance that rules State affairs through the executive, legislative and judicial powers
- ii. the ground-based traditional authority (*Lokmas*²) layer in charge of the common law, the administration of community lands, and the provision of community security and justice through the figure of the *Laskar*³;
- iii. the Tribal Autonomous District Councils that were established for “mediating” the relationship between the Federal governance apparatus and institutions and providing a “formal” structure to the traditional institutions. The ADC's are democratically elected institutions in which the executive, legislative and judicial powers are exercised within the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution.

This situation lasted until the late 80s. By the 90s, the region saw the birth and rise of home-grown armed outfits whose demands ranged from special provisions for a special ethnic group to breaking away from the Indian Union. However, their activities never reached the same dimensions as in Assam, Manipur or Nagaland.

Previous field work and news feeds undertaken during the summer of 2011 highlighted the existence of both emerging and long run conflict dynamics that have remained unchecked and are responsible for a significant share of the current violence in the region.

On the one hand there is an illegal, yet flourishing, extractive industry (mostly mineral, coal and limestone rat-hole mines, as also an open-pit uranium mine project stirring up divided public opinion) which profits from gaps in the national and state level legal frameworks. In many parts of the state, the activities of the mining industry are high risk environmental hazards, resulting in man-made disasters and the creation of new groups of IDPs that feed conflict in the new settlements where they move to and stay on. On the other hand, rise in regional cross-border dynamics and counter-insurgency activities in neighboring areas have significantly increased the strategic value of the Assam-Bangladesh corridor

¹ Malaviya Centre for Peace Research – Banaras Hindu University

² Village level traditional authority in the Garo region. The charge is inherited from mother to daughter and can comprise up to four villages.

³ Described as a “traditional superintendent of police” the Laskar is in charge of a voluntary and un-armed police force whose jurisdiction vary from four to five Lokmas.

and have allowed active illegal groups to develop collaborative networks for maintaining tactic predominance in the region. This conflict is being further aggravated by the successful infiltration, into State security forces, of an active group led by a Deputy Superintendent of the Meghalaya police who deserted office. The increasingly growing profile of this outfit is beginning to de-stabilize previous the peace accord made between the Union and State Government and the Atchik National Volunteers Council, since the latter group has begun claiming back their surrendered weapons for “self-defense”.

The long term conflict dynamics are deeply connected to vulnerable groups, access to justice and democracy issues, especially among the vast, largely neglected segments of the population. The non-tribal population segment, accounting for approximately 15% of the state’s inhabitants, has been living under structural economic, social and political discrimination and has been the recipient of sporadic, although sustained, acts of ethnic hatred and xenophobia fostered under the unofficial tolerance of the State government (at least since the communal riots of 1979, 1987 and 1992).

Regarding women’s empowerment issues, there have been efforts towards self-empowerment through massive demonstrations (2004 and 2010) and participation as peace mediators (such as Mother's Union contribution to diffusing violence among students and police forces in 2005). However, this matrilineal society still faces many challenges, including the lack of economic security, high rates of domestic violence, minimal participation in State governance structures and processes, and the lack of interest or support, among local decision makers, for gender equality issues (for e.g. the selection of a Chairwoman for the Women State Commission has been delayed for more than three months).

The methodological challenge of finding a common ground for such a diverse ongoing conflict / peace-building dynamics in the region, that could be *problematized* through the Foucaultian Government Analytics framework, leads us to look for responses in the narratives of governance in each of these issues. This framework was kept in consideration during the first field visit to Meghalaya, during the month of October 2011, that comprised interviews with local and union government officials, representatives of Students Unions, NGO's, churches, academics and casual conversations with the local population from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in the Khasi and Garo hill districts. Besides inquiring about local perceptions on the effectiveness of the official and non-official peace-building strategies and agencies, the field visit aimed at contacting local strategic stakeholders and obtaining first hand information regarding their attitudes, beliefs and concerns towards the above issues.

The interviews conducted and the media releases made by official and non official agencies revealed that identity politics played a major role on how actors understood and positioned themselves in relation with the conflict. Ethnic concerns seemed to eclipse any other element of their evaluation, i.e illegal mining as a magnet for illegal immigrants, the existence of armed groups due to the need to protect the rights of a specific ethnic group, the SC interpretations of the sixth schedule being a Union intent to take away the sovereignty provisions of the tribes, etc. The interviews also revealed the existence of tribal elite strata, acting as a power group within governance agencies, that exerts its influence through well connected power networks and uses the state as a strategic ground for pursuing its own interests. Furthermore, unofficial comments mentioned alleged links of this group and the unruled extractive economy and the outfits politics.

In the light of the above findings, MCPR proposes the following research lines under Theme A of the CORE work plan:

- Power Group Genealogy: What is the nexus between the post-independence power dynamics and the roles of the main official and unofficial governance stakeholders? How does this distribution of power influence the conflict / peace-building rationale in the region?

- Governance and illegal economy: What is the relation between the conflict / peace-building agencies and non regulated economic activities in the region? What are the economic activities and dynamics that influence peace /conflict, besides the illegal ones? Does the existence of these activities promote or hinder peace-building efforts in the State? How does the existence of these industries influence governance decision making and policies in the state?
- Sociology of subaltern groups: How do the forces of globalization and the governance initiatives influence the peace and social justice demands of the vulnerable and subaltern groups in the region? Can we find any process in which these subaltern groups undertake self-empowerment efforts? How do the official and unofficial governance agencies articulate ethnic discourses with the rise of the strategic value of the region (embodied in the “Look East Policy”)?
- Gender and Governance: How effective are state agencies in promoting women’s active participation in the governance initiatives and structures in the region? What narratives explain this? Is gender equity part of the democratic governance rationale of the State? How?
- Civil Society and Governance: How do the civil society actors conceive themselves vis-a-vis governance in the State? Does the dissemination of government knowledge influence civil society behaviour in the state? What is the rationale and ethos of the civil society as conflict / peace-building stakeholders? What is the government’s stand regarding civil society? Does it conceive them as allies for peace-building and development or as obstacles? Do these rationale support or hinder governance activities? How and Why?