

**REPORT ON THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE**  
**ON**  
**‘REGIONAL BACKWARDNESS, LANGUAGE PROBLEM AND**  
**ETHNIC IDENTITY CRISIS IN NORTH BENGAL’**  
**(AT JALPAIGURI FROM 26 – 27 NOVEMBER 2004)**

The dialogue was held under the **State of Democracy in South Asia Project** of the **Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, (CSDS), Delhi, North Eastern Foundation for Social Sciences Research, Jalpaiguri, and Samata Kendra, Jalpaiguri.** It was arranged in continuation of a dialogue on the same topic two years back in 2002 when as now the C S D S was the main collaborator in respect of funding and resource persons.

Dr. Girindra Narayan Ray, North Bengal University, acted as the Coordinator of the dialogue with active support from Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir, President, Samata Kendra, and Sri Naren Das, Secretary, North Eastern Foundation for Social Sciences Research, Jalpaiguri. The two days dialogue was immensely successful in that it could engage the audience in a lively dialogue and exchange of opinion with the speakers.

**Venue: Subhas Bhavan, Jalpaiguri**

**Day One: 26. 11. 2004**

**Inaugural Session:**

The inaugural session was chaired by **Sri Haripada Roy**, Editor, Baghdenuk, a journal published by North Eastern Foundation for Social Sciences Research. **Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir**, President, Samata Kendra, gave the welcome address. He referred back to the dialogue held two years back on the same topic and focused on the development of the situation since. He pointed out how the discontent of the indigenous people of the region had further increased leading to manifestations of militancy in some places. He denounced the brute repressive measures taken by the govt. without trying to understand the problems and resolve them. The region suffers from the required development but

whatever development is there is not directed towards the indigenous people of the region. Their ethnic identity crisis related to their language and particular cultural life has to be understood in the light of this deprivation. He hoped that the dialogue would open up these issues for threadbare discussion.

**Dr. Girindra Narayan Ray**, the Coordinator of the dialogue, welcomed the resource persons, participants and the audience to the dialogue and pointed out how it had been their effort all these years to fight the oppressive official discourses and articulate in the process the people's voices through alternative discourses of development, of ethnicity and cultural identity. He referred to the Govt.'s obduracy to go on denying the fact of the region's comparative economic backwardness, let alone the relevance of the cultural and linguistic movement that had been plaguing the region for a decade. All these are allegedly fomented by a part of the intelligentsia. All these are for the Govt. retrogressive and separatist and must be suppressed. Dr. Ray lamented that the so-called civil society could not break out of this ideology to take proper stock of the situation. He therefore stressed the need of such dialogue more and more for throwing up the right kind of discourses as deterrent to the oppressive ones.

#### **Inaugural Address by Prof. D. P. Pattanayak:**

**Prof. Pattanayak** referred to the question of identity and urged upon the audience to understand it as a layered thing – an approach that binds rather than separates. Or, it gives us both the necessary things, uniqueness and unity. This is a phenomenon that should be taken into consideration both by the communities and the Government. He laments that the Government, today confuses the contours between the cultural and the political and identifies all movements as 'Naxalite' movements and is out to demolish them. This he thinks bedevils everything leading to further chaos rather than proper handling of the crisis. What is thought to be a crisis is not really a crisis, he says. It is a sheer misunderstanding of the basic Indian situation. We have to accept the fact of the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Indian situation and solve problems of cultural or linguistic conflict or identity paying due respect to all cultures and languages however small

apparently. We have to negotiate the problems by properly balancing forces of the community and the nation or for that matter the global and the local. He also takes up the issue of the language and dialect conflict and pointed out that the boundary is never once and for all fixed. In the Indian context, he says, it has proved to be all the more open-ended over the years. Taking the Indian situation into consideration, he referred to the need of the 'bilingual system' of imparting education so that there could be a smooth passage for children from their home language to the standard one. With these words, he declared the dialogue open.

The Inaugural session came to an end with the President's speech. The President too stressed the gap between the home language and the standard one that bedevils the situation in North Bengal, leading to not merely difficulty in learning process but to a situation of cultural inferiorization and hence to a crisis of cultural identity.

The vote of thanks was given by **Sri Naren Das**.

**Business Session: 26. 11. 2006**

Chairperson: Prof. Yogendra Yadav

Speakers: Prof. Jeta Sankrityayana

& Prof. Bani Prasanna Mishra

**Prof. Sankrityayana** refers to his participation in the dialogue on the same topic two years back. He starts his discussion by explaining what development once meant in North Bengal given the resources that it had. It consisted in fact of forests, non-fertile lands and rivers. What we understand as development today was not there. The colonial pattern prevailed long in that revenue was collected but not reciprocated through a definite form of development of its economy. So far as the economy of North Bengal is concerned, it has only rural area and no industry area, and of the resources 1/3 consists of forest, 1/3 of tea garden and 1/3 of agriculture. Development as such is a recent phenomenon, and yet in North Bengal there is no homogeneous sense of development. In other words, development in one area does not necessarily link to the other areas. For example, development in agricultural area is self-contained and not related to the areas of forests and plantation. Again, when it is urbanization as in case of Siliguri, it has little to do with

the rural areas and the people living there. If this has remained a problem yet to be resolved, history of the region further queered it. The first 20 years were taken to restore the loss incurred through the partition. It was due to the partition that communication with the important neighbouring towns was severed and as a result market relations were severed too. The areas were surplus in food and other agricultural production but due to lack of marketing, farmers could not benefit – a fact leading to pauperization and other consequences. From 1971 onwards data in terms of Blocks can be studied. North Bengal has 69 Blocks (61 in the plains & 8 in the hills). Development pattern hitherto shows an uneven pattern, e.g., Darjeeling shows highest per capita income whereas North Dinajpur, an adjacent district, shows the lowest. It is due to the different resource pattern as mentioned earlier. This unevenness in development and empowerment is not only between the North and South of West Bengal, but also within North Bengal itself breeds lots of discontent and dissatisfaction. From the statistical point of view there is development in North Bengal, but what remains most disturbing is the matter of distribution. The urban-rural divide has increased. Education, health, service, work, wealth and affluence – all remain mainly within the urban areas for the benefit of the urban people. The people living in the rural areas and especially the Schedule Caste (SC) & Schedule Tribe (ST) people go on being deprived of these benefits still now. It can be said that we are yet to be rid of the colonial concept of development. The urban babus are the recipients of all the benefits, not the common people in the villages. This situation is further aggravated when it comes to another divide in North Bengal, that of the indigenous people and the migrants. At the sudden demographic change the indigenous people could not cope with the migrants to seize whatever opportunities were coming along. This led to their recession in every sphere and the consequent discontent over the years. Prof. Sankrityayana also refers to the plight of the people living in the plantation areas where the state had no role in the development. It is only recently that the Panchayet is introduced there.

**Prof. Bani Prasanna Mishra** was the next speaker. He also pointed to the existence of different types of identities – a fact that necessitates a plural view of development, that is, developments, not *the* development. But what takes precedence is homogenization everywhere as against decentralization and multiple approaches. There are local self-

governing institutions, for example, the Panchayets, but all these make a show of decentralization on the surface only. In reality, it is party politics that dominates the situation and the decentralizing institutions act merely as the disciplining bodies in favour of the party. This multiplicity is also evident in the society of North Bengal. This has to be taken care of rather than imposing a one-dimensional decision on the people here whether in respect of language, culture, development or politics. This applies to the question of language-dialect debate here. He appreciates what Dr. G. N. Ray mentioned as the present agenda of the people here: To go on developing their own language and culture without putting up any other language or culture as their opponent and without bothering whether one calls it a language or a dialect. He is critical of the present political idiom of the West Bengal Govt. It is responsible for the present cry for 'separatism' among the people here.

#### **Business Session: Post-Lunch**

Chairperson: Dr. G. N. Ray

Speakers: Dr. S. Bhattacharya

Dr. S. N. Barman

**Dr. Bhattacharya** who as a linguist was with the Census, Govt. of India, started by giving his observation on the language-dialect debate. He lamented the situation that although there are ten thousand plus languages returned as mother tongues in India, only a few are treated as major languages, 22 scheduled ones to be precise. These could be called privileged dialects among other dialects. This happens due to many reasons, social, cultural and political. A process of standardization inevitably takes place. A lamentable side to this process of standardization is that linkages with the different local dialects are cut off leading to an impoverishment of the standard urban languages. In case of Hindi, if the Maithili or Bhojpuri sources are destroyed and instead if Sanskrit origins are given pre-eminence, then Hindi itself is bound to suffer. This he described as the steamroller action exercised by the major languages. It remains a challenge for each living dialect to confront this situation. He elaborated that the so-called divide is untenable. It has to be seen whether a dialect that claims to be distinct as a language has the necessary attributes, grammatical and otherwise, for being really distinct. But he refers to situations where both the possibilities have taken place. In one case, in spite of real distinctness a dialect/language may merge into the standard one, while in the other this kind of distinctness when inspired by a real existence of ethnic drive may lead to the rise of a separate language. He then referred to the problems related to the language enumeration. In case of a situation where uncertainty among a particular speech community prevails as regards the status of their language, sometimes a section of this community may not return its own dialect as its mother tongue. This picture is supported by what 1991 Census shows in case of North Bengal. Of course he mentioned that in case of a language where number of speakers falls below 10,000, the Census does not record as such.

The next speaker was **Dr. Satyendra Nath Barman** from Bhubaneswar. He referred to the recent resurgence among the people here for cultural identity and the concomitant cultural activities through different cultural organizations. Especially in the publication of books and journals in Kamtapuri language on the one hand and a renewed attempt to cultivate and popularize the different cultural forms here, which are indeed innumerable. Without going into the language-dialect debate, he emphasized that nothing could be more fruitful and necessary for a speech community seeking cultural identity than a creative use of their language.

As the speakers finished, general comments and observation were requested from Prof. D. P. Pattanayak and Prof. Ashis Nandy, the latter having just arrived.

**Prof. Pattanayak** referred to the question of the mother tongue, which runs to thousands as identity tokens. He also referred to the problems that crop up when it comes to the question of the medium of instruction. Dropout takes place after a certain stage. In some cases he spoke of the efficacy of the bilingual method. In other cases, the plural linguistic situation must be reckoned with for any important policy decision.

**Prof. Ashis Nandy** refers to a tendency towards the destruction of the language based indigenous cultures. He calls it a tragedy for ourselves because it necessarily leads to our own contraction in terms of breadth and variety. He notices this destructive process all over the world in the form of a language-dialect. It appears as if everybody wants the abolition of the local/regional dialects/languages; they are too many with too much diversity and difference. When leaders very glibly lecture in the standard language, shouldn't it glare them in the face that they are scarcely understood by their people in the villages? The importance of dialects or for that matter that of the colloquial languages is fast diminishing and it is surely a process of impoverishment. But this goes on all over the world. This language-dialect hierarchy works all over the world, and indeed there is always a play of politics in the maintenance of the domination of a language. Language is a dialect that has an army, a navy and an air force, he quips. He also explains this phenomenon in terms of the emergence of the nation-state as against the empire. The empire left scopes for multiple languages, for example, one for official language, the other for religion etc. In the modern state language question has become one of dominance and hence the ever increasing anxiety about identity. He relates this phenomenon to the other aspects of the nation-state, for example, development and modernity. The more of development and the more of modernity, the faster the process of abolition of languages. There is an inevitable link between modernity and the death of language. The predominance of English and Hindi is a case in point. In Nepal there are as many languages as Nepali, Hindi, Maithili and Bhojpuri, but it is Hindi that dominates the scene.

From the repression of the other languages/dialects Prof. Nandy moves to another sphere of repression. He refers to the question of caste discrimination in West Bengal. He explodes the myth that there is no caste discrimination in West Bengal that takes pride in its so-called progressive politics. Not to speak of casteism, the Bengali leaders would

claim, it is even not possible in West Bengal to organize the so-called lower class people as dalits. A Lalu Yadav will never be born here. The language of his politics that organizes people of the lower strata is an anathema here as against the so-called progressive ideology and respectability that predominates all discourses of protests. Unlike other parts of India where people of the margins could organize themselves in terms of regional parties to bargain for rights and power as depressed and dalits, West Bengal's politics and political discourse of the *bhadralok* absolutely preclude that possibility. Here the language of politics has remained *bhadralok* dominated and hence the ever entrenched discrimination of caste and class, more so because disguised. Here people have so internalized the given ideology that they fail to when Jyoti Basu claims that it is he who represents the dalits in West Bengal. Under the circumstances, dalit or Kamtapuri politics is hardly a possibility. At best some economic benefits might come along.

### **Day Two: 27. 11. 2004**

Chairperson: Dr. Satyendra Nath Barman

Speakers: Prof. Ashis Nandy

Prof. Rajatshubra Mukherjee

Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir

Sri Rupak Mukherjee

**Prof. Nandy** continues from the previous day and starts by speaking about the changing pattern of life, culture and identity in a globalized world. He refers to two kinds of people now claiming our attention. The first set he describes as having geography but no history. It is this set that now rules the world. He refers to America and Australia and explains with some illustrations his point. The second has history but no geography. He thereby refers to the large quantum of the world population, nearly one-third, that is uprooted and dispersed. Most of these people are indigenous or tribal people and they are dispersed for various reasons. If in our country partition was one of the reasons, then the other more ruthlessly persistent one is development itself. He refers to the evicted people due to the development projects under the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) and the Narmada Dams. He questions the validity of all developments as such. Development itself has become an autonomous area having its own self-aggrandizing economy and politics in which at least people are not the beneficiaries. Money comes from various sources but does not reach the people. During the last few decades' development, 6 crore people in India have been evicted and left floating. They generally take shelter in the city bustees where their life does not only degenerate and decay but what are destroyed along with it are their cultural life, their artisan skill, their science, music and literature. Incidentally, there are more than 100 medical sciences among the indigenous people of India, known as Lokvidya, says Prof. Nandy. We have never tried to use them. We have thrown them aside along the people in our stride towards modernity. It can be equally said about our folk culture. We forget that what we call folk cultures are really the cultures of the country. What goes in the name of culture as against folk culture is really the culture of the few, but the few being dominant do thereby suppress it. What happens here in North Bengal, says Prof. Nandy, is understandable in this light. There are many in the country,

academics, activists, intellectuals, who are fighting this situation and what is needed is to relationship with them. It is a common concern of all.

**Prof. Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay** focuses on the ethnic identity crisis as one of the issues discussed in the dialogue. He questions the way a crisis is assumed in the beginning. However, he explores it himself as he refers to the unavoidable need of identity in our society. And this identity has been created in terms of distinctive traits as regards religion, language, communal living, ritual and cultural characteristics. The Anthropological Survey of India has identified as many as 4694 such ethnic groups. He points out the problematic involved in such question of identity. It is not simply having one's own separate ethnic, cultural and linguistic traits but what matters most here is having a desired place within the given social structure. In determination of this place or hierarchy society at large or for that matter government plays a role. Dissatisfaction or discontent occurs often when this desired higher hierarchy does not come along. He implied this phenomenon of diversity and hierarchy and referred to the reality of a layered identity. He spoke of the problem of the identity crisis of the Rajbanshis from the same standpoint. The Rajbanshis' struggle for Kshatriyahood is a case in point. But they are identified as Schedule Caste (SC) in some states, Other Backward Class (O B C) in some others and M O B C in still others. Within themselves they are also divided on the issue of identity.

Sri Rupak Mukherjee spoke mainly of the wretched plight of the Tea Garden people, their culture, education, health and sustenance being absolutely at stake. They are at the mercy and vagary of the Tea Garden owners who proved to be irresponsible. The introduction of the Panchayet has taken place only the other day. He referred to some conflicting situations. The region is inhabited by a number of ethnic groups who are equally wretched and neglected. But no unity among them has either formed or was forged for a united struggle against a common enemy. As against this picture of, he spoke of the accelerated growth of Siliguri.

The next speaker **Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir** spoke at length of background story that had led to the present situation in North Bengal. He referred to the post-independence period and problems that cropped due the refugee influx and the resultant change of the demographic picture. He analyzed the different movements that occurred and discussed the underlying factors behind them. He established the relationship between the identity movement and the recession of the Rajbanshis as a community from the spheres of employment, education and landholding. He, however, could not envision a success on their part if they fail to forge a unity between themselves and other such groups in the society. He further emphasized that what was needed is a political platform. Politics can help and show how power can be achieved.

The summing up of this session was done by **Prof. Yogendra Yadav** who referred to the three areas of crisis spoken of by the different speakers. These are around language, development and identity. He explained the problematical aspects of the so-called crisis related to these issues. So far as **language problem** is concerned, he says it crops up when speech community feels that its language is suppressed in relation to another

dominant one. He supports what Prof. Pattanayak said the previous day. Prof. Pattanayak called multi-linguality a strength, and from that standpoint the language problem should not exist. This is the Indian phenomenon as against the European tradition of domination of one language, or for that matter the concept of one nation one language. So Prof. Yadav concludes that multiplicity of language is not the problem; the problem lies in not accepting this multiplicity.

To the **question of development**, once again he referred to its relative nature, one region against another. He supported what Ashis Nandy argued in this regard. Ashis called development itself the problem so much so that one is always apprehensive of what problem is due to come if development comes. It is a problem of the development model that is followed. So what matters is not simply development but what particular model suits a particular region, community or time.

The third issue is **the identity crisis**. He explained that viewed from a larger perspective it remains a problem for all. Identity is everybody's problem, be it a case of an individual or a community. In a country like ours it is more so because it is a country of innumerable languages and communities. He accepts what Prof. Rajat Subhra Mukhopadhyay pointed out as the phenomenon of multi-layered identity. In fact, he says, all these problems have proved to be problems because we are still guided by the old European concepts of single identity, single language and single development. He explained how three 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century concepts were all along active among our leaders and us. These are those of political freedom, class struggle and decentralization. Our experience has been one of sheer futility of all these. As an example, he referred to the case of partition concomitant on independence and dispersal of the communities and loss of language, culture and identity. The Rajbanshis are a particular case in point. What he suggests in one voice with Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir is politicization of all these issues and seeking solution through politics, politics as a road to empowerment. Identity is in this respect has to be politically constructed, not to be retrieved as it is mistakenly believed.

Post-Lunch Session: 27. 11. 2006

Chairperson: Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir

Speakers: Sri Naren Das  
Dr. Dhiren Das  
Sri Bhaskar Nandy

**Sri Naren Das** referred to the different political movements that had taken place in North Bengal since independence or to be precise from the Hitasadhani onwards. He observed that in all cases these people's movements were either misunderstood or misinterpreted – a fact that proved to have caused harm to the interest of the people. The interesting thing is this that when with historical hindsight it is seen that the people were right, the time for the people was gone. He calls this a politics against the people. He hopes that the

awareness on the part of the civil society the way it manifests now may help the lot of the people to an extent. **Dr. Dhiren Das** who has to his credit a book written on the movements of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal referred to the identity movement of the Rajbanshis and justified it in terms of their distinct history, culture and language. **Sri Bhaskar Nandy** spoke mainly of the plight of the tea garden people of the region. He spoke of their common language and culture which need care and development. But they are left in wilderness. He also stressed on a common platform to fight for the rights of the different ethnic groups of the region, leading to a fight for a political and cultural autonomy for the region.

The session ended with **Dr. Aditya Nigam's** observations

### **Valedictory Session:**

In the Chair: Prof. Yogendra Yadav

Valedictory Address by: Prof. D. P. Pattanayak

Observations from the Organizers: Dr. G. N. Ray

Vote of thanks: Sri Naren Das

### **List of all Participants in the two-day dialogue**

1. Prof. Yogendra Yadav, C S D S, Delhi
2. Prof. Ashis Nandy, CSDS, Delhi
3. Dr. Aditya Nigam, CSDS, Delhi
4. Prof. Rajatsubhra Mukherjee, North Bengal University
5. Prof. Jeta Snakrityayana, North Bengal University
6. Prof. Bani Prasanna Mishra, North Bengal University
7. Dr. Girindra Narayan Ray, North Bengal University
8. Prof. D. P. Pattanayak, Former Director, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore
9. Dr. S.S. Bhattacharya, Linguist, formerly with the Census Deptt., Govt. of India
10. Dr. Satyendranath Barman, Principal, Eastern Regional Language, Bhubhaneswar
11. Sri Bhaskar Nandy, Jalpaiguri
12. Sri Rupak Mukherjee, Siliguri
13. Sri Jugal Kishore Roy Bir, President, Samata Kendra
14. Sri Naren Das, Secretary, North Eastern Foundation for Social Sciences Research, Jalpaiguri.

15. Sri Haripada Roy, Editor, Baghdenuk,
16. Dr. Dhiren Das
17. Krishna Kanta Roy, Service
18. Ranjana Roy, Giashil Village
19. Rupak Mukherjee, Siliguri
20. Hemchandra Roy, Barobari
21. Tarun Roy, Denguajhar
22. Sushanta Dev Adhikari, Benghandi
21. Dhiren Roy, Hedayetnagar
22. Jayanta Chakraborty, Hedayetnagar
23. Ranjit Kumar Roy, Purba Mallick Para
24. Pravat Ch. Barman, Sahaber hat
25. Md. Pasarul Alam, Puratanpally Village
26. Chittaranjan Barman, Giashil Village
27. Kalipada Barman, Akhanagar
28. Indrajit Mukherjee, Amrai village
29. Ranjit Kumar Roy, Social Activist, Barobisha
30. Kalidash Adhikari, Shiv Mandir
31. Tarak Lal Singha, Shiv Mandir
32. Matiur Rahaman, Farrakka
33. Samir Chowdhury, Chachal
34. Arun Kanti Roy Singha, Daldali
35. Chaitanya Roy, Uttar Haldibari
36. Pradip Dutta, Bara Daldali
37. Jyotish Rava, Shibbari
38. Ramesh Chandra Roy, Shibbari
39. Budhaswar Rava, Shibbari
40. Amula Roy, Milan More
41. Shaktiram Barman, Bamra
42. Barnana Singh, Farmer, Karndighi
43. Bhural Chandra Singha, Karandighi

- 44.Saicta Singh, Farmer, Karandighi
- 45.Dipak Kumar Singh, Farmer, Karandighi
- 46.Santana Singha, Farmer, Karandighi
- 47.Geeta Singha, Karandighi
48. Dhiren Singh, Karandighi
- 49.Uuashi Singh, Farmer, Karandighi
- 50.Joguen Singh, Farmer, Karandighi
- 51.Phanish Chandra Sinha, Karandighi
- 52.Jiten Sinha, Khikirtola
- 53.Sastosh Sinha, Karandighi
- 54.Sagar Kumar Singha, Social Activist, Karandighi
- 55.Kistamohan Singh, Farmer, Karandighi
- 56.Paresh Roy, Teacher, Banshihari
- 57.Malin Barman, Political Worker
- 58.Bishnu Kranti, Social Activist, Bharatpur
- 59.Arun Roy, Social Activist, Goshanimari
- 60.Bibekananda Roy Singha, Teacher, Dinjata
- 61.Subhash Singh, Salampur
- 62.Swadesh Guha Neogi, Journalist, Alipurduars
- 63.Ananda Kumar Singha, Karandighi
- 64.Anima Roy, Hatayad Nagar
- 65.Naran Roy, Daldali