

Governing conflict and peacebuilding in India's northeast and Bihar

This policy brief examines peacebuilding initiatives adopted by the Indian government in India's northeast and Bihar. Peacebuilding in India is founded on the following doubtful political premises: (a) the state is strong; (b) conflicts may therefore be allowed to linger; (c) peacebuilding measures should not be initiated until a suitable moment arises; (d) the state's adversaries must be softened up through a mix of strong responses and delays in addressing demands; (e) peace accords work; (f) a limited grant of autonomy is the best solution; and (g) struggles for justice are in essence intergroup conflicts for parity. A chief casualty of this governance style is society's dialogic culture, while peace accords become part of the governance toolkit. Accordingly, processes and structures of governance need to be reinterrogated. An unthinking importation of conflict resolution models from Europe or elsewhere may not do the job, though a critical comparative approach may be valuable. A recognition that conflict prevention depends on notions of justice, particularly gender justice, and a commitment to respecting individual and collective rights is also essential. Grassroots human-rights organizations in conflict-prone areas need to be supported. Emphasis on awareness, advocacy, capacity-building, and programme design and implementation is also necessary.

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Perspective

The global preponderance of the democratic nation-state model in the wake of decolonization around the middle decades of the last century was expected to address the question of (internecine?) conflict fully, if not finally. Reality, however, turned out to be far more warped than expected.

At one level, colonialism's culture of governance hardly expired with the parcelling out of the world into independent nation-states. At least in India, colonial foundations continue to be actively invoked to resolve conflicts and build peace. The colonial history of peacekeeping, pacification (the colonial origins of various items of extraordinary legislation), limited franchise, techniques of negotiation, divide and rule, borders and boundary-making exercises, and finally constitutionalism (recall South Asian constitutional history from the Indian Councils Act of 1909 – that is, the Morley-Minto Reforms – to the Government of India Act of 1935) informs us of the colonial premises of 'peace'-building.¹ This problematic inheritance of colonial constitutional culture does not mitigate conflicts or encourage dialogues, but instead facilitates arbitrary measures and extraordinary action. Equally, this colonial history tells us how lessons learned from efforts to manage Irish dissent were implemented in India by colonial officials, and vice versa; similarly, Indian lessons in the colonial era were drawn on in efforts to rule Kenya.

At another level, as a system, democracy in India came to assume that conflicts are alien to the spirit of democracy; therefore, conflicts and the 'democratic spirit' are incommensurate with, if not inimical to, each other. A democracy can accept neither the fact that democracies can be violent nor that democracy is always yet to come, that democracy must constantly aspire to be democratic.² As a result, very much in the colonial mode, elections are enabled through the application of violent methods, and the usual logic is that resistance to the so-called representative system must be ill-intentioned. Thus, all calls for a plebiscitary culture and/or for permanent dialogue are frowned upon and rejected. (In this context, we might recall the arguments of Jayaprakash Narayan and the time of Emergency.)³ The assumptions made are both

cultural and political, and they lead to a securitization of democracy.⁴

Against this background, our research trained its attention on a particular region of India, the northeast, and one of the country's states, Bihar.

Field of research and scope of the problem

Bihar

Over the years, Bihar has struggled under the cosh of land problems, migration, floods, lack of access to natural resources, caste domination and indigenous people's rights. All of these issues have inevitably produced widespread problems, which successive governments have attempted to address in various ways. Our research under the aegis of this project has shown that the modes of conflict management adopted in those attempts gave rise to the next round of conflicts.⁵ We can trace the history of conflict in Bihar from the 1960s onwards through this sort of *longue durée* optic and see phases of conflict as alternating scenarios of insurgency and pacification aided by various counterinsurgency methods. Elections, administration of caste relations and conflicts, and deployment of private armies to quell insubordination are all parts of this alternating scenario.

The northeast of India

India's northeast consists of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Of late, Sikkim is also considered to be a part of this region. The region is characterized by distinct ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic pluralities. It contains important natural resources, like oil, timber and hydropower potential. In the northeast, political premises of peacebuilding similar to those witnessed in Bihar and related statist assumptions are more pronounced. We might say that the northeast has been the laboratory where various counterinsurgency or pacification measures have been first conceived, tested and shaped.⁶ One may get a sense of this through an overview of the series of governing measures: territorial reorganization, peace accords, limited autonomy, protracted ceasefire negotiations, regrouping of villages, the raising of extensive para-police volunteer forces, privatization, money laundering and other deliberate measures to en-

courage corruption, elections conducted at gunpoint, etc. These are accompanied by rational modes of governance with an expansion of banking, the setting up of government offices with nothing to govern, recruitment into army and para-military services, ethnic management, anti-migrant measures, etc. Alongside these governmental activities and initiatives, one can say that the northeast has seen already two phases of insurgency and their 'resolution'. The first started in 1947 and ended roughly in 1975 with the Shillong Accord. The second began roughly in 1979–80 (the United Liberation Front of Assam, or ULFA, was born in 1979 and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, or NSCN, in 1980), when it began spreading in many places, and has now ended.⁷ The critical questions we consider in this research project are: What were the governing measures that tackled these two phases of insurgency? And, what has come after?

Modes of governmental rationale

The political premises of peacebuilding in India are: (a) the state is strong, and administrative and police measures work; (b) therefore conflicts may be allowed to linger; (c) peacebuilding measures should not be initiated until a suitable moment has arisen; (d) the adversary of the state must be softened up through a mix of strong responses and almost deliberate delays in addressing demands; (e) peace accords work; (f) a limited grant of autonomy is the best solution; (g) upholding constitutionalism and rule of law is the main plank for retaining stability; (f) a policy of territorial reorganization, including methods of partition and boundary-making exercises aimed at reinforcing control, is effective; (g) and, finally, there is support for the classic governmental assumption that struggles for justice are in essence intergroup conflicts for parity. These are the assumptions for the operation of postcolonial governmentality as a mode of conflict management. Premises and processes are mixed. In fact, we should not look too much for premises (that is, for originary motives or moments), but need to examine the relevant processes closely.

Upshot and recommendations

To enable the formulation of effective and enduring policy initiatives, focus needs to be directed towards the following issues:

First, one of the chief casualties of the aforementioned style of governance is the dialogic culture of society. As with all other societies, there are dialogic aspects to the culture of conflict resolution within Indian society.⁸ However, these dialogic aspects are not institutionalized in governance structures, or are institutionalized only to a limited extent. If we take up the need for legal pluralism – say, in matters related to common property resources or a uniform civil code – we can see the need for research in this field in the interests of conflict resolution. Society needs legal pluralism, while the governmental recipe may be the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996 with regard to common property resources. Or, let us take the theme of peace accords, one of the main features of the conflict resolution scenario in India, which forms the middle ground in a ‘no war, no peace’ situation. These sites of dialogue need to be thoroughly investigated.

Second, there is also a critical need to study how peace accords become a part of the governance tool kit. *Pace* Charles Tilly, who had famously spoken of ‘war-making as a part of the state-making exercise’, here, on the contrary, we have to see how peacemaking feeds into the state-making agenda.

The processes and structures of governance – *the science of governing conflicts* – need to be reinterrogated. In the development of this ‘science’, global trends are marshalled and implemented to grapple with local particularities. For instance:

- a) The policies of development aimed at curbing social unrest are built around global models.
- b) Similarly, restoration of government machinery also has a global model, though the latter has been a huge failure globally.
- c) The discourse of anti-terrorism again is a global discourse. Even 30 years ago, governments used to acknowledge poverty, inequality and injustice as causes of conflicts. Now, all insurgents are terror-



Women participating in a sweep campaign before local elections in Bihar. The campaigns motivate women to stand for elections despite the risk of violence or oppositions. Photo: UN Women/Ashutosh Negi

ists, all agitators are enemies of development, and all dissenters are enemies of national integration. Visits by counterinsurgency experts have become regular events.⁹

In this sense, governance policies today carry the mark of a globalization of politics.

Yet, it is also true that civil society networks also learn reciprocally; and alternative policies of friendship are also a sign of the times. We have in the subcontinent the case of the Pakistan–India Peoples’ Forum for Peace and Friendship. However, the fact is that the divide between the world of dialogues and that of rule is too wide. Governments rarely learn from dissenters. This has to be remedied if effective policymaking is to be made possible.

Third, unthinking importations of models of conflict resolution from Europe or elsewhere may not do the job, though a critical comparative approach may be valuable. The existence of a divide between governments and dissenters is as true of India as it is of Europe. There is, as such, no classic ‘European’ archetype, as possibly there can be no ‘Indian’ archetype. There exists a wide diversity of types of conflict and a wide diversity of approaches to

conflict management (consider the different approaches adopted towards the Balkan problem and the Irish question in Europe, and the different approaches to conflict adopted with regard to the Maoists and the Hindu fundamentalists in India). Yet, it is true that these diverse approaches finally feed into a grid of power that operates through what are known as ‘democratic channels’. This is where we may find commonality – namely, studying how democracy manages and governs conflicts.

Fourth, a recognition that conflict prevention depends on gender equality and a commitment to respecting individual citizens’ rights notwithstanding their race/religion/caste/colour is essential. Coupled with this, there needs to be a true commitment to nonviolence. The northeast of India has shown how women’s groups –for example, the Meira Paibes or the Naga Mothers –have played a critically important role in bridging a three-way gap between the government, insurgent groups and the civilian community at large. Accordingly, funding and technical assistance for the implementation of existing national gender strategies, policies and plans of action, especially in relation to women’s economic empowerment, should be increased signifi-

cantly. The security organs of the state –the face of the state, so to speak, in conflict resolution –are extremely masculine (e.g. the Indian peacekeeping forces). Regular gender-sensitization and training programmes for the security forces are required. Good policies are preceded by good research. Accordingly, the government should encourage research on how to implement justice for women. Research should be undertaken to study the customary laws of different indigenous communities and to look for codifying laws that are most respectful of women.

Fifth, civil society groups and other activist and grassroots organizations in conflict-prone areas need to be supported, not just groups who are only visible in metropolitan zones. Emphasis on awareness/knowledge, advocacy, capacity-building, and programme design and implementation, with a focus on economic empowerment, is also necessary.

Last, the Indian nation, its polity, is constantly mutating by changing forms, reforming and renewing. This is possible because of new inclusionary and exclusionary strategies. Further, Indian democracy is marked by a grey theme of ‘no war, no peace’. These two features of the current situation in India suggest a necessary agenda for further research into conflict and governance. ■

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Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Samaddar (2012); Das (2012). See also Samaddar & Reifeld (2001).
- ² For a detailed engagement with the subject, see Samaddar (2007).
- ³ This point is noted also by one of the most astute analysts of Jayaprakash’s writings; see Prasad (2007).
- ⁴ See Upadhyay (n.d.).
- ⁵ See Kumar (2012); Jha & Pushpendra (2012).
- ⁶ A wide range of recent writings testifies to this. These include our research papers: Nag (2012); Banerjee & Dey (2012); Bhaumik (2012); Das (2012); and Samaddar (2012).
- ⁷ The accounts on ULFA and NSCN are many. For ULFA, one could look at Das (1994, 2012). On the NSCN, one could read Laishram (2004); Singh (2004); and Mukhim (2009).
- ⁸ For examples, see Rajagopalan (2008).
- ⁹ See Barbora (2006). See also Goswami (2012).

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THE PROJECT

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