



NESRC peace studies series 4

Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution

In Three Tribal Societies of North East India

Editor

Alphonsus D'Souza

**North Eastern Social Research Centre
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**Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution in Three
Tribal Societies of North East India**

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Dr Walter Fernandes
Director

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Alphonsus D'Souza / 1

Traditional Methods of Conflict Management
among the Dimasa

Padmini Langthasa / 5

The Karbi Community and Conflicts

Sunil Terang Dili / 32

Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution
Adopted by the Lotha Naga Tribe

Yanlumo Ezung / 64

Introduction

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Social conflict is found wherever individuals or groups engage themselves in antagonistic or hostile relationships. Conflict can arise because of such reasons as differences in personal preferences, group interests and aims. It can take different forms like quarrels and disputes, feuds and armed fights. It is generally recognised that social conflict is destructive in nature. Therefore whenever a conflict emerges, efforts are made to resolve it before it does irreparable damage.

It is said that social conflict is universal in the sense that it is found in all societies. At the same time, it is acknowledged that also methods of conflict resolution are universal because there are mechanisms and processes of conflict resolution in every society. However, there are different ways in which conflicts are resolved.

It is worth noting here that in tribal societies governed by the traditional law, conflict resolution is within the context of a restorative and reparative

system rather than an adversarial and punitive system. In a criminal case, the goal is to heal and restore the victim's well-being, and to help the offender to save face and to regain dignity. In a civil case, the parties involved are helped to solve the dispute in a way that there are no losers, but all are winners. The ultimate aim is to restore personal and communal harmony.

The three essays presented here deal with the traditional methods of conflict resolution practised in three tribal communities in the Northeast. These communities have many features in common. All the three communities have their traditional habitat, distinctive social organisation and culture. But they differ among themselves in their history and present experiences especially in their relations with other tribal and non-tribal communities.

The Dimasa are found in Dima Hasao district of Assam and in the adjoining areas of other districts and in other places. Similarly the Karbi live not merely in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam but also in adjoining areas. More or less the same can be said about the Lotha Naga whose traditional habitat is Wokha district in Nagaland.

In situations of conflicts with other communities, the Dimasa and Karbi seemed to have avoided a confrontational approach because their leaders were concerned about the possible loss of life among their followers. They were concerned about the safety and welfare of their people. Though the Lotha leaders did not mind taking up arms in order to protect their interests, their ultimate objective was to ensure the safety and well being of the people. Wherever possible,

inter-tribal conflicts were resolved through negotiations and compromises so that peaceful relations could be restored.

In the case of internal conflicts, all the three communities adopted very similar, if not identical, mechanisms, methods and procedures. The elders played a leading role. The parties involved were given ample opportunities to express their grievances and to present their case. Witnesses were examined and cross examined. In extreme cases when evidence was not very clear, supernatural powers were invoked through oaths. The final verdict was given by the elders in such a way that the guilty were punished, injustices were undone and victims were suitably compensated. The ultimate aim was to ensure harmonious living within the community.

An attentive and careful consideration of the traditional methods of conflict resolution practised by the three tribal communities shows that those methods are relevant even today. Among other things, traditional processes show that leaders and elders must be genuinely concerned about the welfare of the people. They also indicate that the parties involved must be given ample opportunities to make their views heard in an atmosphere of freedom. Further, traditional methods point out how willingness to make compromises by the parties in conflict, and their readiness to abide by the common decisions can lead to solutions acceptable to all. This can result in lasting harmony and peace based on mutual respect and justice in this troubled land which is the home of so many tribal communities.

The three essays presented here are the work of young persons. They are not experienced "researchers", but have personally experienced conflict situations in their communities. Hence they provide an insider's view in understanding the traditions of their communities. They hope that their work will help other young persons to appreciate the wisdom enshrined in their traditions and to use it in dealing with conflicts in their own communities.

About the Book:

The three essays presented in this volume deal with the traditional methods of conflict resolution adopted by three tribal communities, namely, the Dimasa and Karbi of Assam and the Lotha of Nagaland.

The findings of the authors, each of whom has studied her or his own community, show that all the three communities adopted very similar procedures in resolving conflicts. In the case of internal conflicts, the elders played a leading role and adopted a procedure aimed at restoring personal and communal harmony. In situations of conflicts with other communities, wherever possible, efforts were made to find a solution through negotiations and compromises so that peaceful relations could be restored.

The authors feel that these traditional methods of negotiations and compromises are relevant even today and can be effectively used to secure lasting peace in this region plagued by conflicts of all types.

About the Publisher:

North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) is a centre of research, documentation and networking in Northeast India. Its mandate is to combine serious intellectual pursuits with involvement with civil society groups active among the marginalized in the region. NESRC has conducted research on issues ranging from gender to indigenous people and livelihood with an added importance to development induced displacement in the region. It maintains an extensive documentation of all these issues in its library which is open to all. It would like to support movements that work with groups to which it accords priority.



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