



## Civil Society in Transforming Conflicts and Building Peace: with Special Reference to Assam

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### Abstract:

*In some parts of the world, war is an on-going struggle. It is a way of life. It adversely affected the way in which political, socio-economic, and cultural components of society have developed. Indeed, conflict negatively affects all aspects of society- not only does it destroy buildings and societies, but it also leaves surviving individuals and communities with deep wounds that can last a lifetime. Many efforts have been employed around the world to build peace following a conflict. Some interventions have proven quite successful, while others have not. Notably, civil society involved in broader peace building processes. It is a pillar of democratic systems and, as such, plays important roles in democracy and good governance for pre- and post-conflict societies. Civil society contributes in a number of other areas of the peace building agenda, including facets of economic and social recovery, justice and the rule of law, and security and public order. Finally, civil society serves a number of important functions that span different peace building themes and institutions.*

*This paper examines the role of civil society groups in the peace process with special reference to India's Northeast- Assam. India's Northeast has been the theatre of the earliest and longest lasting insurgency in the country. The peacemaking and conflict resolution employed to date have not worked in the ways that had been expected. This paper reviews the diverse roles played by civil society groups and initiatives in the region in managing, wherever possible settling and in some cases even contributing to ethnic and community conflicts and concludes with recommendations for overcoming some of their limitations. Throughout the article, it highlights the important role that civil society plays in conflict peace building efforts. Otherwise, it will be impossible to break the vicious circle of war and peace.*

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**Keywords:** *Civil society, Conflict, Peace building*

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### 1. Introduction

Conflict not only destroys buildings it also negatively affects trust, hope, identity, family and relationships. Conflict is an extremely complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon which has occurred throughout history, and will likely continue as long as mankind exists. In order to reach peace and reconciliation after a conflict, it is necessary to establish legitimate centralized power; improve legitimacy of the state through civic participation; and provide funding supporting peaceful activities. Conflict peace building and conflict transformation require a wide range of actors, including: states and intergovernmental organizations; development and humanitarian organizations; international non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and individuals and civil society leaders in affected societies. Since physical infrastructures are often destroyed in conflicts, some argue that it is necessary for the international community to become involved in these goals. Although actors at various levels may work independently to promote peace, there is often overlap and coordination between various groups in peace building efforts.

India's Northeast has been the theatre of the earliest and longest lasting insurgency in the country. The peacemaking and conflict resolution employed to date have not worked in the ways that had been expected. A re-evaluation of the conflicts is needed. This paper reviews the diverse roles played by civil society groups and initiatives in the region in managing, wherever possible settling and in some

cases even contributing to ethnic and community conflicts and concludes with recommendations for overcoming some of their limitations.

## 2. Civil society and its organisations:

The terms 'society' and 'civil society', commonly used interchangeably, have acquired some degree of conceptual differentiation. Civil society refers to the arena of collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Despite the lack of consensus on 'what is civil society', its return and resilience transcends its many ambiguities and multiple meanings. Theoretical difficulties have led academics like **Sudipto Kaviraj** and **Sunil Khilnani (2002)** to explore the connections between the western traditions of thinking about civil society, its historical entry into non-western theoretical discourses, and its transformed emergence in negotiating the complex realities of conflicts.

Civil society means the phenomenon that arises when people organise themselves and act together in the space between the family, the state and the market. Civil society consists of formal and informal networks, organisations and institutions. People organise themselves on the basis of their common interests or needs, religious affiliations, for pure entertainment ... the list can be made long. In civil society one can also expect to find formal and informal institutions and mechanisms for peaceful conflict management. There is probably no society or culture that lacks mechanisms for handling conflicts of different types: village councils, ombudsman institutions, religious institutions and rituals, courts of law, democratic elections and referenda etc. Some of them are the responsibility of the state; others are part of civil society.

Accordingly civil society is an extremely wide concept. It is much more than civil society organisations (CSO's). Civil society includes, but is not identical to, CSO's. The CSO concept (or NGO, here the concepts are used synonymously and are interchangeable with each other) is sufficiently wide to include classical popular movements and voluntary organisations, churches, foundations of different types and umbrella organisations. According to the **Human Development Report 2000**, every fifth person participates in a formal organisation within civil society (**Human Development Report 2000:5**).

## 3. Role of civil society in broader peace building processes

Civil society activities can build bridges across divided societies. Civil society organisations participate in the effort to rebuild trust within and between communities, as well as to re establish the state-society relationship and renegotiate a social contract.

### 3.1 Civil society in democracy and good governance for peace building

Civil society has the capacity to serve a number of key functions in service of democracy and good governance in peace building scenarios. Civil society is envisaged as one of the pillars of any democratic structure, and thus is a paramount institution in restoring and consolidating democracy. Civil society may also facilitate participatory local governance mechanisms. Further, civil society can provide a check on political power. Finally, civil society strengthens elections, another pillar of democratic systems, by providing voter education. Civil society has the potential to play in regard to democracy and good governance in conflict-prone environments.

### 3.2 Civil society as a key pillar in a democratic system

A vibrant civil society is broadly considered one of the three main pillars of a democratic system, along with elections and capacity building for state institutions. The idea is to attain a diverse, active, and independent civil society that articulates the interests of citizens and holds governments accountable to citizens. Almost all international donors mention civil society as an important factor to influence decisions of the state, highlight civil society's responsibility for a democratic state and its

dynamic role in pushing for social, economic and political change, or stress its role in encouraging open debate on public policy. Major bilateral donors, as well as international organizations, engaged in democracy and governance work are now giving attention to civil society development.

The civil society is a key to the establishment and maintenance of competent citizen activity, a necessary component of democratic sustainability. These arguments are themselves often premised on **Alexis de Tocqueville**, who, in '**Democracy in America**', considered civic engagement in associations to be schools of democracy, capable of checking abuse of authority. Thus, civic virtues such as tolerance, acceptance, honesty, and trust are really integrated into the character of civic individuals through associations. Civic engagement in associations is thought to build confidence in democratic mechanisms, or, as **Robert Putnam** later described it, social capital. For Putnam, democracy may not be defined by associational activity, but such activity is what makes democracy work.

### ***3.3 Civil society and participation in local governance***

The notion of civic engagement of citizen organizations, associations, businesses, neighbourhood committees, and the like has become central to the concept of local governance. Civil society organisation's deliver services at the local level, provide information to the public, articulate interests in society, advocate for social needs and reforms, give opportunities for citizen participation and consultation, and provide technical services, such as gathering data on social problems. In post-war contexts, local government institutions may try to rely on more participatory and democratic governance models through partnerships with civil society organisations, which can introduce more participatory approaches to community level decision making. Building effective participatory procedures at the local level offers a strategic opportunity to build democracy and manage social conflict at the national level. Local governance with strong citizen involvement and meaningful participation forms the ground-level tier of democracy. Of course, the degree of application and impact of such mechanisms greatly varies from one context to the next, and often between regions inside the same country.

### ***3.4 The role of CSO's (Civil Society Organisations) in electoral processes***

CSO's generally playing a key role in voter information and education activities, in encouraging broader participation and turnout. Voter education initiatives are of particular importance in countries with a limited democratic tradition. CSO's also often participate in electoral processes through domestic non-partisan election monitoring, enhancing the transparency of the electoral process and public confidence in the credibility and legitimacy of an election. CSO's may also contribute by promoting codes of conduct for candidates, undertaking parallel vote tabulations, hosting public meetings or debates, and proposing and commenting on electoral reform.

## **4. Civil society and other specific areas of peace building**

Although the primary focuses of this sub-section is civil society as a pillar of democracy and good governance. It is important to highlight that this sector also plays vital roles in other areas of peace building. Within economic recovery, CSO's support poverty reduction processes, promote employment, engage in monitoring and advocacy around public finance and natural resources, and facilitate service delivery and socio-economic reintegration. Civil society also contributes to psycho-social recovery processes, such as dealing with the trauma and memory of violence, and community reintegration and reconciliation. Further, civil society is entrenched in justice and rule of law dynamics by supporting issues of human rights, justice assistance, alternative and traditional justice measures, access to justice, and transitional justice mechanisms. Finally, civil society may engage in advocacy and programming around security issues, such as security sector reform, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-combatants, and small arms and mine action.

### ***4.1 Support community reintegration***

Civil society organisation's (CSO's) support reintegration processes for refugees, displaced persons, and former combatants. In contrast to international actors, CSO's generally work to integrate the

different dimensions of community reintegration. Cooperation with CSO's, in particular at the community level, is also decisive in the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which increasingly relies on CSO's local capacities and offers support to CSO's in order to facilitate dialogue with and effective participation by different constituencies. In their work with ex-combatants, CSO's are generally better situated to maintain closer contact with ex-combatants, involving them in various community-based peace building efforts while simultaneously providing them with a range of services. Community-based organizations generally are key to ensuring that the different dimensions of the reintegration process are addressed for all and that these strategies integrate average citizens own resources. These projects are generally backed by activities supporting dialogue and local capacity building in the form of training.

#### ***4.2 CSOs contribution to justice and the rule of law***

CSO's generally playing a leading role in justice and rule of law issues. This is probably one of the sectors of peace building in which they are the most active. Human rights NGOs often form the most vibrant and powerful component of local civil society. They frequently are the first institutions with which outsiders interact at the different stages of a violent conflict. They are particularly involved in monitoring and advocacy activities, playing a vital role in drawing global attention to specific cases of human rights abuse in conflict situations. They can also assist groups in developing capacity to seek justice, and are involved in different types of public education and training activities around these issues.

#### ***4.3 Rule of law and justice assistance programs***

CSO's have been increasingly involved in a broader justice agenda. Their role is particularly crucial which focuses on civil society and local communities. The activities typically developed in such programs include legal aid in rural communities, monitoring of the justice system in order to strengthen its overall accountability, promotion of non-state mechanisms of dispute resolution, and training activities. Victims groups, legal reform advocacy groups, and groupings of lawyers, such as women and young lawyers or law students, as well as human rights advocates, are the most active in this field.

#### ***4.4 CSOs' contribution to security and public order***

CSO's can play an important role in enhancing security. Groups and organizations may patrol neighbourhoods in the absence of a functioning police force. CSO's may put in place alternative mechanisms that promote security, in particular crime prevention and victim support systems, in partnership with the police. CSO's often are involved in security reform processes, helping enhance results orientation and the transparency of reforms. Broad participation also minimizes the risk of setbacks. As such, civil society constitutes an important actor for security reform.

### **5. Background to the conflicts in India's northeast**

Only with the independence of India in 1947 and in its wake the reorganisation of international borders with eastern neighbours like East Pakistan/ Bangladesh, Tibet/ China, Burma/ Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan did India's Northeast emerge as a separate geopolitical region. The region has historically been one of the world's greatest migratory routes, cutting across such countries as Tibet/China, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As a result, the region has provided a meeting ground of many races and communities throughout history.

With the British discovery of tea in India's Northeast in 1821, the demand for plantation labour was met by encouraging migration mainly of tribal people from various parts of central India. As colonial rule was established in 1826, clerks and officers acquainted with English and the running of administration were brought into Assam on all sides by other territorially defined nation states. The region has become historically been one of the world's greatest migratory routes. It is essential to realize that the widespread identity crisis in Northeast India has been caused by the large scale migration of people from outside the region during past one hundred years and the total dependence

of people on the land and state's apparatus for a livelihood. The failure of various sections of the migrant population to adapt themselves to the local language, customs and traditions has further emphasised the identity crisis (**Singh, 1987**).

## **6. Conflict and peace in Assam: the role of civil society**

### **6.1 A brief overview of conflicts in Assam**

India's Northeast has been the theatre of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency in the country. The fear of immigrants continues to haunt the minds of the Assamese. Immigration in Assam is believed to have created pressures on land, caused unemployment to the Assamese people claiming themselves as native to the region, fomented social tensions and created ethnic and communal riots (**Das, 1993**). No authentic estimate is yet available on the actual number of non-Assamese foreigners settled in Assam. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP; Assam people's council) that emerged from out of the movement and formed the government in 1985 did little to deport foreigners. The party's performance in deporting non-Assamese was dismal (**Das, 1998**). Many immigrants who settled in Assam several generations ago assimilated into Assamese society and report Assamese as their mother tongue (**Guha, 1980**).

The immigration issue had occasionally burst into the open in the politics of Assam state since independence. It was only in 1980 that the Assam Literary Society (Assam Sahitya Sabha), one of the organisations leading the Assam movement came forward, and changed 'bahiragats' (outsiders) into 'Bideshis' (foreigners). Sources said before any concrete headway is made, civil society groups such as the Axom Sahitya Sabha will have a very crucial role in aggregating and consolidating the many communities that make up the greater Assamese community. Axom Sahitya Sabha is a socio-cultural body dedicated to promote the state's culture and literary activities. It has over 1,000 branches in the state and was one of the first such bodies to oppose Ulfa's violent movement. The All Assam Students union (AASU), the organisation spearheaded the movement (**AASU, 1983**). ULFA was established in on April 7, 1979, it was not until 1983 that the organisation surfaced in the public arena and people become aware of its political presence in Assam. It started as a more militant stream of the Assam movement and gradually broke away from the moderate forces that were associated with it (**Das, 1994**).

North East India has been a hotbed of insurgencies, State action and ethnic violence over the decades. All these have resulted in the displacement of communities affected by violence and chronic insecurity. In most cases, the assistance extended to these displaced communities consists of poorly maintained relief camps and at best some monetary help. Left to their own devices by an unconcerned State, these displaced families diffuse into the landscape joining the troop of impoverished migrants. The multi ethnic Karbi Anglong District of Assam has been no exception to this violence after witnessing insecurity as a result of communal and insurgent violence. After the particularly violent period between 2003 and 2005 (where killings took place during clashes between Karbis, Dimasas and Kukis), there were a large number of families housed in relief camps; up to 40,000 people at one point. In this scenario the District administration came up with a scheme to rehabilitate families who could not return to their original villages. It involved relocating the affected villages around the District Headquarters of Diphu with an aim of providing a secure living environment. These mainly entailed reorganizing smaller villages scattered over a large area into a single large village unit which was located close to roads but far away from their old village sites and consequently their agricultural land. This rehabilitation effort is probably the only post conflict rehabilitation program that has been implemented in the whole of the North East. Over the years Northeast as a whole and Assam in particular has seen a lot in terms of violence and bloodshed. From armed struggle to ethnic clashes Assam has reeled under unprecedented violence. Armed revolutionaries and Government have an equal share in making Assam prone to such bloodshed every now and then keeping the common masses at the receiving end. If the armed organizations have spilled blood in the name of revolution and sovereignty, the government has got its license to kill in the name of bringing peace. The lawmakers have become the lawbreakers and the so called rescuers have also turned a blind eye

towards all the misdoings. From clashes in between the ethnic communities to vague killings in the name of revolution has long been a problem of Assam.

## **7. Civil society in Assam**

The rise of civil society groups as a critical force in the Northeast is a fairly recent development.

### **7.1 Civic representatives**

The first approach to understanding the role of civil society in peace and conflict is refer to those civil society groups and bodies that make the claim of representing an ethnic community and thereby get involved in conflicts that afflict the region. Civil society is usually distinguished from ethnic groups and communities existing in any society. Civil society is regarded as a space where individuals and groups enter by free will and always retain the exit option once they enter into it. Literary bodies and organisations of students, teachers and workers, for example, fall into the realm of civil society. Such bodies as Vaishnavite monasteries (satra) and prayer halls (namghar) of Assam state are illustration of such ethnicity based organisations. The Assam Literary Society was formed in 1917 as the supreme literary body of Assamese intellectuals and litterateurs in Assam. These can be described as civic representatives (**Baruah, 1997**).

### **7.2 Peace groups**

A second category of civil society organisations are those expressly set up with the objective of making the necessary preparations for peace dialogues between two or more warring parties and therefore facilitating a process that often culminates in the signing of peace accords.

### **7.3 Bridge-builders**

A third segment of civil society consists of groups and organisations that play an active role in building bridges at the local level and thereby make coexistence of different communities possible. They play a crucial role in preventing conflicts between two or more communities from becoming full scale wars. These bridge building organisations want a political solution to the problem without indulging in violence and wanton killing. The bridge builders, like the civic representatives are rooted in the same ties that bind an ethnic group or community. Unlike, the civic representatives, however they work in a way that involves crossing the ethnic lines and thereby ensuring peace in the villages and neighbourhoods (**Das, 2007**).

### **7.4 Popular initiatives**

Civil society's role in making peace is also located in some yet unorganised, or loosely organise, popular initiatives that mark its emergence as a force autonomous from both the state and the insurgents. Neither the government nor the rebels can ignore the importance of these initiatives and they go a long way in creating and nurturing peace constituencies in the region.

## **8. Conclusion**

Civil society groups and initiatives play diverse roles in the conflicts afflicting India's Northeast. Civil society cannot be regarded as a magic wand capable of managing and resolving all kinds of conflicts in all situations. In many cases, civil society groups are an extension of these conflicts rather than a solution. By generally excluding civil society from the peace process, peace is obtained through the balance of power that exists between the conflicting the parties Moreover, there are issues underlying the conflicts in India's Northeast that the state can do little to resolve except by bringing the conflicting parties together around a negotiating table. The involvement of civil society groups and initiatives guarantee a durable and stable peace. These groups and initiatives play diverse roles, and some of them even contribute to producing and perpetuating conflicts. . In order to make conflicting parties reach middle ground, civil society groups and initiatives must establish them as a socially powerful force. Both state and civil society have roles to play its role in peace building process. Otherwise, it will be impossible to break the vicious circle of war and peace. Reforming civil society, in other words, is the key to ensuring its effectiveness in peacemaking in the Northeast. Both the state and civil society have roles to play in this regard. Otherwise, a failed peace process is

essentially a continuation of war- perhaps preparation for war at a more intense level. Simultaneously, the state has seen a mushrooming growth of civil organizations that have pledged to bring in peace in the state. The state has seen many civil organizations that have given loud slogans about peace and decried the violence. Such organizations have also tried its best in bringing both the armed organizations and the government to the negotiating table. But has it reaped the fruit that the entire state was expecting? Are the civil organizations serving its purpose? If yes, – then why the violence has not ended? If no, then where are the loopholes? It's high time the civil organizations should come together under one platform to resolve the issue. It's time to sit and discuss together than working for the cause of society.

Thus the article has provided an overview of various approaches to peace building following a conflict, and building a culture of peace to mitigate and prevent violent conflict in the future. In some parts of the world, conflict is an ongoing, endless struggle. The international community has been involved in conflicts throughout the globe, particularly since the Cold War ended. Civil society involvement is one of the most important factors in determining whether a post-conflict peace building initiative will be successful. Various studies have found that civil society involvement is one of the most important factors in determining whether post-conflict initiatives will be successful and sustainable. Various actors, such as states and inter-governmental organizations, development and humanitarian organizations, international non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and local nongovernmental organizations, work on various aspects of post-conflict peace building. Conflict is an extremely complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon which has occurred throughout history, and will likely continue as long as mankind exists.

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