

**International Conference on
Northeast India and Southeast Asia: Exploring Continuities
Ambedkar University Delhi, New Delhi, 25-26 October 2018**

Synopsis

Northeast India, located on India's periphery, is a region whose socio-cultural world exhibits more similarities with Southeast Asia region than with that of South Asia. Such perceptive characterisation of the Northeast region, however, has had been scuttled by the constricted imagination induced by the nation-state paradigm and related ways of writing history. The uncritical reliance on colonial discourse to understand the region reinforces the colonial conceptions while simultaneously marginalising the cultural-historical legacy of resident communities. This has led to the creation of an idea of an insular (Northeast) region on the one hand while reinforcing the image of India as the mainland constitutive of a larger Indic/ South Asian culture on the other.

The proposed conference seeks to question this entrenched way of understanding Northeast India by way of situating it contiguously with Southeast and East Asia. In doing so, it will take a multi disciplinary look at lived reality, insider perspectives and experiences of transformation to identify the threads of interconnectedness between these regions. The conference will thus highlight the inter-regionality of Northeast India while culturally positioning it in a larger Southeast/East Asian tradition.

Concept Note

Human societies share common traits, including myths and values, materials and traditions, language and practices. The uniqueness of each arises partly from the way dynamics of power operate in the geographical spaces they occupy, and how societies negotiate, manipulate and control the direction of their development. The highlands of Northeast India, Yunnan and Southeast Asia offers a vantage point to look at this from the viewpoint of societies that till the 20th century stayed away from the statist political systems of a dominant mainland polity.

Referred to as 'people without history' due to the lack of written language, communities in these regions use orality as a conscious societal choice to transmit shared memories of an ancient past as well as the insights from the present. In a similar way, shaping the land through the widespread use of the *jhum* or swidden agriculture is a societal response for mobility and autonomy while maintaining food security. In the cultural sphere for example, many scholars of Northeast India suggest that the customs and traditions of many communities in the region in many aspects resembles those of tribal communities in Southeast Asia, from Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Taiwan. Similarly, the Tai-Ahom of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam finds many similarities with communities from Thailand. The shared palette of colours, patterns and motifs in textiles tells us how the rich cultural traditions of the peoples across the larger region have been intricately linked to the political economy at different points in time.

The study of cultures is today an interdisciplinary field incorporating a wide range of participants, approaches, and topics. The contextual study of structures, monuments, artifacts and oral literatures provides a methodology to understand the beliefs and attitudes of societies other than our own, and opens up possibilities for comparative investigation along the 'Asian axis'.

These and other connections between the main aspects of life in the Northeastern Region of India, and the larger Asian cultural landscape can be substantiated from a transnational perspective. Conventional representations of Northeast India glosses over this history of cultural continuity and its connections, that has remained partly because of being in a marginal borderland over time. Highlighting the cultural continuities in the larger region, it is important to look beyond political boundaries, and reconsider the manifestations of identities in terms of geographical continuities and cultural dynamics.

At a time when the study of multidimensional cultural aspects has been attracting scholars and policy makers across the world, an engagement with the cultural axis between Northeast India and Southeast Asia becomes indispensable. In this connection, the need for a cultural mapping of the region has been suggested by various academic and professional cultural institutions. This would include establishing linkages between researchers and scholars from diverse disciplines, and promoting communication between various communities across national boundaries.

Contextualising Northeast India to the contiguous regions of Southeast Asia and Yunnan (South China), the conference aims to develop a multi disciplinary appreciation at experiences of transformation, identity (re)construction and the threads of interconnectedness between these regions. The intent is to critically engage and reflect on the larger historical trajectories that shaped societies and communities in these spaces using a comparative lens. In the process demanding multi-level engagement that questions preconceived notions around nature, culture and people in today's politically charged environment.

Call for papers:

This conference invites scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds across the social sciences and humanities to share understandings of societies in the region. We invite papers embedded in empirical case studies which explore one or more of the following lines of inquiry.

- Material cultures of the past and present
- Orality, language and literature
- Performance, ritual and practice
- Trade, market and state making in the region
- Regional similarities and differences – aspects of traditional life
- Colonialism, globalisation and the process of modernity
- Identity construction and power dynamics.
- Post-colonialism and its impact on gender relations.
- Peace, conflict and governance

- Environment, society and health
- Biodiversity, conservation and society
- Culture, psyche, morality and innovation interface

Conference Registration fee: Rs. 500/- for research scholars and students

Rs. 2000/- for Faculty (National and International)

Submission Guidelines:

Abstract of 250 words along with a short bio-note of 150 words should be sent to nefaud@aud.ac.in on or before 30th January 2018. Full papers need to be submitted by 30th June 2018.

Young research scholars working in the area are specially invited to present their work. We will be organising a special sessions for their participation.

Poster presentations are also welcome. They will be displayed during the conference and time will be allotted for an interaction between the poster presenters and others participants.

Travel Support: Limited assistance for travel support is available and may be considered for research scholars, independent researcher and early career faculty. Please send your request by 30th January 2018 clearly mentioning Travel Support in the subject line, along with your name and abstract title in the body of the email.

Accommodation Assistance: Participants requiring help in finding accommodation in Delhi during the conference may write to the organiser clearly mentioning Accommodation Support in the subject line, along with your name and abstract title in the body of the email.

IMPORTANT DATES

Abstract Submission Deadline: 30th January 2018

Notification of Acceptance: 28th February 2018

Full Paper Submission: 30th June 2018

Email for Abstract Submission and other Information: nefaud@aud.ac.in