

## A Unique University in Northeast India:

# NEHU and its Possibilities

Report >  
South Asia

North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) was established at Shillong, Meghalaya, by an Act of Parliament in 1973, in order to provide the northeastern states of India with an academic window to the region and to the world. The University provides consulting facilities to various ministries of the Government of India, as well as to such international agencies as the IDRC, UNESCO, and the Ford Foundation. It has the infrastructure for sophisticated scientific testing on various chemicals and receives requests and samples from over forty universities throughout the country. Its record on international collaboration with various European universities, particularly in Life Sciences and Physical Sciences, is noteworthy.

By T.B. Subba and Jan Brouwer

With the withdrawal of the Restricted Area Permit for foreign nationals from the states of Assam and Meghalaya, NEHU is welcoming institutional and individual international collaboration in the disciplines of Anthropology, Geography, History, Linguistics, Philosophy, and Sociology. Within NEHU's general policy to transmit, sustain, promote, and enhance traditions of academic practice, the School of Human & Environmental Sciences (SHES) supports and promotes research, teaching, and training programmes with the dual aim of enhancing pure scientific knowledge as well as its links with applications for the development of the region. The School encourages interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional research work with the other Schools at NEHU. The various departments of the University offer MA, MSc, MPhil, and PhD courses in various traditional fields as

well as newly emerging ones in respective disciplines.

The Department of Anthropology within the SHES is now a full-fledged department with specialized courses in both Social/Cultural and Physical Anthropology. The Department imparts fieldwork training in northeastern and southern India to MA students and offers laboratory research projects to MSc students. The Verrier Elwin Memorial Museum is also being set up at this department. The advanced research programmes in Physical Anthropology include DNA research in collaboration with the Social Anthropology stream. Advanced research in the Cultural Anthropology stream includes interdisciplinary research programmes with a strong Indigenous Knowledge component.

The northeastern region of India not only offers a virtual goldmine for social science and humanities research, but also provides unique opportunities for comparison, both within and outside of India. The cultural and linguistic variation in the region is simply amazing and unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The (tribal) communities of the region are undergoing rapid changes as a result of Information Technology, and the resulting infrastructural and educational developments throw challenges to anthropologists to study how these cultures are facilitating and/or coping with the changes. In about half a century, various food-gathering and hunting communities have produced a well-informed and confident educated elite. This in itself is simply com-

mendable; and yet, the region still has almost half of its cultivable land under 'shifting cultivation'. The region is one of the richest in the world in terms of biodiversity, and the environmental richness is matched by the ethnic diversity and accompanying problems of political identity.

NEHU maintains an extensive network of connections for both teaching and research with the best universities and research institutes in India and abroad. In the thirtieth year of its existence, it now plans to extend this network to European universities and research organizations through its Schools and their departments. The University, with its dynamic faculty members, computer, Internet, laboratory facilities, and advanced programmes at MPhil, PhD, and post-doctoral levels, offers trained manpower, including anthropologists, who can collaborate with scholars from any university in the world. Such collaborations will be of mutual benefit to the participating scholars and institutions. <

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information regarding the social development. It has been stressed that despite the hiccups, the island society is performing well comparing with other South Asian Countries. Moreover and despite the social turmoil and violence in recent decades, poverty reduction has been sustained better than previously during the 1990s, which was due to the positive impact of the globalization process, thus suggesting that speeding up liberalization may alleviate poverty. However, these positive developments may well prove to slide down the scale and the future may well hold stagnation and mediocre results. These predictions are based on the acknowledgement of certain imbalances and inherent problems in both the socio-economic realities and the political changes that characterize the island society.

### India-Sri Lanka Relations

The asymmetry between India and Sri Lanka in terms of size, strength, and resources makes their relations at times problematic, particularly during the periods of internal crisis in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's internal power politics and its ethnic orientation have generated cracks in its moderate and composite nationalist worldview. The country's internal conflict has created space for international NGO's to play an important role in its foreign policy, which, in fact, is a step towards the privatization of foreign relations. The self-adopted role (of intervention) that NGOs play in Sri Lankan foreign policy should not only worry Sri Lanka but should also worry India which has always guarded against external interference in the island society. In fact, Sri Lanka occupied very important place in India's for-

eign policy calculations. Economically, Sri Lanka is greeted by profitable opportunities for trade and commercial intercourse in the Indian Ocean region. There is ample scope for developing a positive maritime relationship between India and Sri Lanka by expanding shipping facilities, port collaboration in shipyards and even cruise-ship tourism. The most important step for cooperation in South Asia has been taken with the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement. Whereas the sources of conflict between the two countries are gradually diminishing, the scope for closer cooperation is fast expanding due to mutual benefits and a growing understanding.

The conference concluded with an assertion that the island-society is a universe in itself for the social scientists for experimenting and evolving the-

ories and concepts for further study of any such society. It has provided an appraisal of the legacies, which the country has inherited and challenges emerging during the twenty-first Century and concluded with the understanding that the legacies are ambiguous and reality is complex but the challenges are clear and obvious. However, the legacies and challenges imply certain cracks and wounds, which are to be cemented and healed through innovative research inspired by a deep and abiding interest of the international community of scholars of Sri Lanka Studies. Only when using the appropriate methods and techniques of social science research, will we be able to underline and identify the challenges for the island in the twenty-first century. With such an understanding of Sri Lanka's legacies and reality, the policies

for empowerment, entitlement, equity, inclusion, and environment need reorientation in the twenty-first century. <

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#### More info >

During the conference, a committee of seven scholars was formed to coordinate the activities of Sri Lanka Studies during the two years till the ninth ICSSL. The committee kindly invites institutions and organizations interested in holding the ninth edition of this important conference to send in their proposals. E-mail: karsiapc@jpi1.dot.net.in