**North East India Studies Programme**

**Jawaharlal Nehru University**

**New Delhi, India**

**National Conference on**

***Understanding North East India: ‘Exception’ and Beyond***

Understanding North East India has always been a daunting task for many – ranging from the colonial ethnographers to the administrators and the military, and still for the contemporary academics. Even today, there are books coming out on the region inadvertently objectifying the geography and population of the northeastern states irrespective of the focus of the book. This reflects the presumption of either how ill informed the readers are (or imagined), and also the vantage point through which the understanding (teaching and knowing) about North East is still being shaped. This trend of knowing, and making known, of the region is the result of a particular mindset through which the region is being conceived.

Methodologically the above trend is shaped by an ideology that treats the region as an ‘exception’. Immediate question that arises is – ‘exception to what?’ North East India is seen *as an exception* to a trend that *India is*. While the country is known for its plural characters – specificities of culture, religion, and language; these specificities in general are not treated as exception. India is projected as ‘unity in diversity’. However, the specificities of the North East are treated as an exception. This seems to be largely because the region is seen as ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘ungovernable’ that it remains an exception to the very idea and existence of India as a nation state. This is closely comparable to Zizak’s reading of Marx’s Asiatic mode of production as a ‘safety valve’ wherein by accepting the uniqueness of economic mode of production of India and elsewhere in the colonized world of Asia, Marxism as a grand theoretical narrative retains its logical arguments and legitimacy. Drawing from this analogy, treating North East India as an exception seems to serve the legitimacy of the position of India as a nation state – by excluding, yet including. Understanding the region seems to work through this paradox.

This way of looking at the region is highly problematic. Without endorsing or discarding the idea of the region as ‘exception,’ the seminar proposes to unravel this concept. Efforts will also be taken if we can move beyond the discourse of exception.

The idea of ‘exception’ is played out through a two-way approach; firstly, through our epistemic understanding of the region, and secondly, through state interventions that are being initiated on the region and its people. These approaches though closely connected can be witnessed in different fields – in history writing, anthropological reading of the communities, geographical mapping of the region, and even in state interventions on empowerment and development.

The above point can be illustrated through the following. Geographically, except for the 28 kms. Wide Siliguri corridor better known as ‘chicken neck,’ rest of the boundary of the region face international border with five countries. Historically, exceptionality can be traced in the writings of colonial ethnographers like Sir Edward Gait for whom lack of reference point makes Assam, and its rulers Ahoms, an exception to the mainstream historiography on India. While such a reading may be purely about methodological considerations, there are other epistemic understandings that show the region as ‘exception’ with negative connotation. Tracing from colonial time to the free India, mention can be made of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf’s‘naked Nagas,’ H. Onderson Mawrie’s describing the Khasis as ‘promiscuous hordes,’Ballabbhai Patel’s doubt about Manipuri King Bodh Chandra Singh as either ‘a fool or a knave,’ post-1950s media representation of the Naga fighters as ‘Naga hostile’. The list is long and each of these comes out of an inability to comprehend the truth about an ‘other’. Administratively, parliamentary enactment of 6th Schedule of Indian constitution, the Inner Line Permit, and continued application of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 show how the region is engaged as an exception.

This conference proposes to interrogate the idea of ‘exception’ through which the North East has been viewed and governed, and how one can move beyond these predicaments. There are few questions that need to be addressed. How has ‘exception’ as an ideational or institutional reality emerged as processes connected to the state making practices? What exactly is exceptional about the North East and how has it been exceptional from wider norms? How has this sense of ‘exception’ validated over time with a set of opinions, rules and policies? Does looking beyond ‘exception’ necessarily erode the idea of the North East and its identity?

The proposed conference therefore attempts to address the idea of the North East and its ‘exception’ through various fields such as cartography, political economy, governance and policy framing, culture and everyday life. There is need to revisit the methodology, historiography and philosophy that inform the idea of ‘exception’ of the North East as a region and people.

Following are the themes that may be taken up by the scholars for deliberation:

* Interrogating the idea of North East as an ‘exception’
* History writing exercise and challenges to knowledge
* Colonial projects, political geography, and cartographic exercises
* Governance strategies and policy discourses
* Identity politics, exceptionality and emancipation politics
* Thinking beyond the exception: Exploring different discourses
* Methodological Issues