

International Conference
Negotiating Ethnicity: Politics and Display of Cultural Identities in Northeast India
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Austrian Academy of Sciences (Institute for Social Anthropology and Phonogrammarchiv),
Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR)

Place and dates of the conference: Vienna – 4, 5 and 6th of July 2013
Submission deadline for abstracts: 31st of October 2012

Proposals for papers, with title, a 250 words abstract, author's name, email address and affiliation are to be sent in word or rtf format. Please mention the selected sub-theme. We will need your paper one month before the conference to circulate it among other participants, so that every discussing person has time to read it.

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Call for Papers

Collective identities and ethnicity are subject to changes in many parts of the world today as several scholars have highlighted. Through this conference, we wish to examine those changes, particularly the new forms and meaning given to ethnic identities, belonging, etc. today in various parts of Northeast India, as well as to practices related to ethnicity and cultural identities. "Northeast India" is the political unit defined by the Indian Government as the 'North Eastern Council,' which now includes Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.

We intend the conference to promote an interdisciplinary forum and invite proposals from scholars working in a variety of disciplines, including, but not limited to, history, sociology, economics, anthropology and cultural studies, to submit research paper proposals. We invite cross-theoretical examinations of the recent transformations of cultural identities and ethnicity in relation to inter-ethnic and inter-state relations, borders, politics, agency, migration and diasporas, globalization, and tourism, etc.

The debate that started in the 1970s (mainly with Fredrik Barth's, but with his numerous critics, as well) has enabled us to understand that the changes connected to ethnicity, culture, and collective identities, are not a result of the disappearance of culture, but a much more complex phenomenon. Since then, ethnicity and cultural identities have been much discussed in academic circles, and we propose to join this debate with studies and observations on Northeast India, as a starting point for comparison to a wider area.

Changes related to ‘ethnicity’, ethnic identities, and ‘culture’, raise several questions.

▪ **A first set of questions looks at how ‘transformations’ of ‘cultural identities’ can be analyzed:**

Do new forms and meanings given to ‘culture’ link to politics and to the social spheres in Northeast India, and how? What practices relate to new forms given to ‘culture’ and ‘identities’ in Northeast India today? In particular, how are culture and identity related to the religious sphere and to rituals? The role of rituals and religion is of particular importance, and the processes of turning culture into an ‘object of cult’ need to be studied further, as well as the practice and performance of cultural production. Aside from these questions, what are the place and role of commodification in the changes of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culture’? Claims for the existence of ‘primordial’ ties by the people should be questioned, along with the connection they make between those ties and commodification of culture, etc.

▪ **A second set of questions focuses on the relations between external forces and agencies that produce and shape new forms of ‘culture’ and ‘identities’.**

What are the role of politics related to collective identities and ethnicity? In this regard, the historical and formal relations between the Northeast and the Indian Central State are of great significance, particularly the reservation system, and more generally the ‘ethnic politics’. Additionally, actual ethnic classifications and social grouping that have been conditioned by history are of interest to this conference, including the role of colonization in shaping representations of the Indian population as a whole, and the objectification of culture, for example. Some recent changes however, cannot be analysed as a one-way process that merely involves the state. Groups’ particular histories and practices also need to be taken into account. People are certainly not passive in the processes of changing the forms and meaning of collective identities, and attention should be given to the ways they accompany, reinforce, use, contest, and divert, those changes. Power relations, hierarchy and gender must also be taken into account.

▪ **Role of globalization and trans-border networks**

Are globalization and the State mutually exclusive, or can they be combined to produce “vernacular” or “glocalized” forms of power organization and collective identities? Finally, how do migration, diasporas, trans-border networks and solidarities, and tourism take part in this process of changing the meaning, the forms and practices related to ethnic and/or collective identities? How do these fields interact to reshape collective identities in Northeast India?

Suggested panels:

1. Cultural identity changes in Northeast India (general/theoretical analysis)
2. Cultural/ethnic policies, separatism from Central India/ State governments, and insurgencies
3. Colonial and post-colonial knowledge of Northeast India
4. Public performances / display of cultural identities in Northeast India
5. Sacralisation of culture; ethnicity and rituals (place of rituals in new forms given to culture and ethnicity)
6. Ethnic and indigenous politics and cultural identities changes
7. Tourism, development and cultural identities changes
8. Role of migrations trans-border networks and solidarities in identities changes
9. Role of governmental agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations and media in identity-making