IN FOCUS



Peacemaking in Multi-Cultural Contexts

In light of his experiences, peacemaker and Nobel Peace Prize nominee **His Grace Archbishop Thomas Menamparambil** writes about brokering peace.

The Need to Handle Differences with Wisdom

Inability to handle differences can be fatal. *Religious differences* partitioned India, kept Ireland divided, made Timor secede from Indonesia. *Cultural differences* separated East Pakistan from the West. *Ideological differences* broke Korea into North and South. *Ethnic differences* separated Yugoslavia into several different states, broke up the Soviet Union into pieces, Assam into seven states. *Linguistic differences* divided many states of India that were together during British rule. *Colour differences* kept the Whites and Blacks apart in South Africa. *Caste differences* keep India fragile.

Now, look at our situation in Northeast India. When neighbouring ethnic groups emerge from their *relative isolation*, there is a period of uncertainty. People feel that their *identities* have to be redefined and *relationships* with neighbouring ethnic groups sorted out. Competing interests of communities can lead to tensions.

Such tensions are built on perceptions of political, economic or *cultural exploitation* of one group by another. Some of these may be true and some exaggerated.

What we need in this context are peacemakers *sensitive to cultures,* who understand differences in the collective psychology of communities, vibrate with people in their distress and have a *healing touch*. In times of conflict, much service needs to be rendered in relief work, medical assistance, counselling sessions, and trauma treatment. But what is most important is cessation of violence, rebuilding of inter-community relationships, and re-establishment of normalcy. As the conflict intensifies and anger deepens, these goals look like distant dreams.

But *nothing is impossible* for those who trust in the Lord!

Christian Peace Efforts in Northeast India

Christian response to violence in Bodoland brought into existence ICPM (Inter-Church Peace Mission) and JPMT (Joint Peace Mission Team) because of Northeast India conflicts. An Inter-Faith Peace Forum was formed in Imphal in 2023 to handle the Meitei-Kuki conflict.

The ICPM was the immediate response of Christian Churches to the 1996 Bodo-Adivasi clash in the Kokrajhar area of Assam, which drove over 250,000 people into some 47 refugee camps. The tragedy took place soon after an election, and the Government was caught unprepared. The *Churches plunged themselves* into relief work and over time into peace initiatives as well.

The success of this Christian effort persuaded Ecumenical groups to create a similar body at the Northeastern level: JPMT. Because of the warm relationship people saw among Church leaders, the JPMT was invited to address more than a *dozen inter-community conflicts* in the region, each unique in its own way with its own causes and characteristics, and its own different path to reconciliation. We never claimed that peace came from our work alone, but we rejoiced that we made a small contribution towards the cause of peace. All we sought to do was *generate goodwill*, elicit cooperation, point the direction. Decisions were made by the affected parties themselves, generally under the guidance of the civil authorities.

Our usual strategy was to *avoid excessive publicity* lest we evoke jealousy or opposition. We neither built formal structures for the Peace Team, nor went for elaborate fund-raising programmes. We concentrated on strengthening our relationship among Church leaders and building brotherly bonds among community leaders as well.

Be sure, the path to *peace is painful!* But together we can succeed. We are happy to share here some of the *lessons* we have learnt during our united effort.

Reasons for Conflicts

Over 60% of the population in Northeast India are young. They are the ones who come forward to defend the interests of their people when there is a perceived sense of *injustice along ethnic lines*. The grievances may be linked to the claims of the 'sons of the soil,' ownership of land, crops, transit and marketing facilities, or political representation, majority-minority community tension, bigger-smaller group unease.

Unfortunately, some political leaders wish to use the exploding energy of youth to promote their own interests, often turning their anger against





'other' communities. They connive at their acquisition of arms. And young people who are dropouts from school, marginalised in the economy, ignored in society, suddenly feel empowered when they get a deadly weapon in their hands. Any exaggeration on one side leads to exaggeration on the other.

Nature has Given Us Many Reconciling Skills

We are in danger of losing certain basic human skills embedded in all cultures, like *paying respectful attention* to other persons' (tribe's, community's) point of view, trying to understand them, showing sympathy for their goal or at least some aspect of it; dialoguing, explaining, arguing amicably; negotiating, avoiding aggressive language, making an effort to convince; yielding, conceding, forgiving, evoking collaboration, insisting on *gentler solutions*, and inviting compromise.

We should bring these inborn skills to life. Excessive preaching and repetition of pacifist platitudes at the early stages of the dialogue, when the contestants are still in an aggressive mood, will sound extremely annoying and humiliating to them. Hasty condemnations will enrage them since both contenders in the fray are convinced that they're fighting for a good cause.

The Peacemaker Must Understand, Sympathise

The peacemaker will not be in a position to initiate conciliatory dialogue with contending groups, unless he/she has a *measure of sympathy* for their cause in his heart.

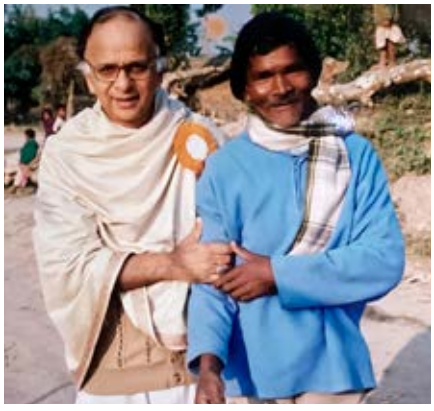
Even if he believes their claims exaggerated, unless he can *empathise with them*, is touched by their passionate convictions and the sense of justice that motivates them, or at least some aspect of their cause, he will not even begin to initiate dialogue.

But if the peacemaker is profoundly struck by the magnitude of the people's grievances, and can *understand (not necessarily approve)* the excesses to which their 'legitimate anger' has driven them, they will gradually begin to respond.

Neither group is asking the Peace Team to condone their immoderation; they only ask that the defence of







their cause, at such painful lengths, be *understood*. They do not ask the peacemakers to say much, rather to *feel much*.

A commitment to humanity that comes through in the peacemaker's words, deeds and relationships is more convincing than techniques that he may have picked up in a conflict-resolution seminar. This should coalesce with *sensitivity to human pain* no matter who suffers.

Bringing Together 'Thinking People'

When an inter-community battle breaks out, the toughest challenge is to bring the 'right' people together for negotiations. Now, who are the 'right' people? It is not easy to bring frontline fighters together for peace talks; their skills lie elsewhere.

I would describe the parties who matter at the first stage of a peace dialogue as 'thinking' people, sensitive leaders, persons who are *respected on both sides*. It may include intellectuals, thinkers, writers, teachers, social workers and people who inspire society and whose words are noncontroversial.

The Peacemaker Remains a Facilitator

It is best if the Peacemaker remains merely a *confidence-builder, a facilitator* helping create a serene atmosphere for easy interactions.

He may suggest a step forward at key moments, invite deeper reflection, whisper a solution, allowing the

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contestants themselves to thrash out their differences. The less he interferes with the *natural flow of things* and the normal processes of discussions, the better.

Finally, a word about *making compromises* – one needs to be prepared for it. This is true of a family, a village, a nation and the international community. The most valuable contribution the peacemaking team can offer is to lead opposing parties towards a gradual understanding and acceptance of this great truth.

Winning headlines may be flattering, but the fruits therefrom may not be lasting. Premature publicity can be fatal. Those who oppose peace may track down the peacemaker at any stage and make him trip over.

Doing things without seeming to – that is the role of the peacemaker in complex situations. One should feel free from having to play to the gallery. That is why the JPMT is little known outside the Northeastern region.

The Peace Appeal Must Sound Sincere

What the peace team can do towards the end of the dialogue is to help the representatives of the two groups appeal for peace. Appeals that are *respectful*, carefully phrased, *well-balanced* and correspond to realities and needs usually evoke a good response.

Those who took part in the dialogue can make an effort to organise similar meetings locally and generate the same atmosphere of goodwill. A greater acceptance of the proposals by the communities can enable community leaders to move on to the final round of negotiations in the presence of civil authorities, where the Peace Team need not be present.

If, in the process, the Team is forgotten or marginalised, we rejoice, for it is in the order of things that ultimately peace is restored to a community by the concerned people themselves.

Healing of Historic Memories

The hardest to *heal* are memories of *historic injuries*. Memories of injuries received in the past can remain alive in people's hearts, and negative stereotypes of each other can haunt the minds of the two contending groups for a long time.

If no healing takes place, hostilities may be renewed at any time. That is why the healing of historic memories and the demolition of stereotypes form a great mission for the peacemaker.

A Peace Team will have to be Ready for Several types of Negative Experiences

Experience shows how several things in a complex situation can discourage the peacemaker. The representatives of the warring groups may refuse to appear for dialogue. Their ears may be poisoned against him and his initiatives. Follow-up efforts after reconciliation may never take off. People may get discouraged from the recurrence of violence even after a peace agreement.

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The Mysticism of the Brief Moment: In God Nothing is Lost

One last learning for a peacemaker who is a religious believer: he/she will have to have confidence in what I have chosen to call the 'mysticism of the brief moment,' in the power of prayer in contexts of intense agony. *Co-suffering is vicarious martyrdom!*

Prayer is the source of strength in moments of anxiety, tension, opposition, discouragement, failure and humiliation. It is with this strength that he/she builds bridges across communities and cultures, irons out differences, persuades people to forgive, join hands and strive to create a better world.

He/she also remembers that peacemakers in different parts of the world did not always succeed, that *some lost their lives,* and that some of their stories read like a tragic waste. Even with full awareness of these facts, the Ecumenical Joint Peace Team of Northeast has never lost hope. And when our small successes are added up, they do not seem to be insignificant.

People remember with gratitude how we intervened helpfully in the following conflicts: Bodo-Adivasi (1996), Kuki-Paite (1998), Dimasa-Hmar (2003), Karbi-Kuki (2003), Dimasa-Karbi (2004), Bodo-Muslim at Udalguri (2010), Rabha-Garo (2011), Bodo-Muslim clash at Gossaigaon, Lotha-Adivasi at Uriamghat (2015) and other places.

Br Roger of Taize used to say, 'In God nothing is lost!' Peace comes in its own good time. There are many ways in which God makes people *beat their swords into ploughshares* (Isaiah 2:4). Our Peace Team is immensely happy if they have made a humble contribution towards it.

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