

**Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research
Jamia Millia Islamia
New Delhi 110 025**

(As part of the Centre for Excellence granted to the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, GOI)

Interactive Webinar

Topic: Methodological Concerns: Exploring the Tribal Context of India's North East in Times of the Pandemic

Speaker: Prof. Virginius Xaxa

Date: 14th September, 2020, at 10:30 AM

Report of the Webinar

(Prepared by Sunil Pradhan)

The Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (A Centre for Excellence under Ministry of Tribal Affairs, GOI), Jamia Millia Islamia, organised an Interactive Webinar Entitled “Methodological Concerns: Exploring the Tribal Context of India's North East in Times of the Pandemic” delivered by eminent social scientist, Prof. Virginius Xaxa on 14th September, 2020 at 10:30am.

The Interactive Webinar, attended by over 150 participants, is the first in a series of online lectures that is being organised under the auspices of Centre for Excellence (COE) status granted by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Prof. M. Amarjeet Singh, Director of CNESPR delivered the introductory remarks about the centre and its activities and welcomed the speaker. Mr. K. Kokho, Assistant Professor moderated the two-hour long session. The interactive webinar was convened by Dr. Chinmayi Sarma, Mr. Debojit Bora and Mr. Sunil Pradhan.

Prof. Xaxa in his talk highlighted the predicament research community across the country is grappling with pandemic situation on how to contextualise tribal question in North East India. His talk touched upon methodological issues arising out from COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on research ethics, modalities researching Scheduled Tribes (STs) in North East India. He highlighted the overemphasis of research on the colonial cartographic category of North East India which has led to erroneous construction of the region as a homogenous social construct thereby leading to anomalies in dealing with the heterogeneous social.

He suggested that the community approach concerning the region is replete with research on dominant communities thereby marginalizing the smaller tribal groups. He stressed on the need to focus on categories that are more embedded in social-cultural institutions of the communities.

In bridging research gaps widened during COVID-19 Pandemic Prof. Xaxa highlighted to the need to re-conceptualise the idea of “field” and Ethnographic research where observation is a central idea of collecting and analysing data there from. He pointed out that tribal Lifeworld is getting affected and altered during this time of pandemic. He drove the point by suggesting that entire social structure is in the process of transformation by means of getting restructured at the level of family, kinship, village, rights of rituals, economy, self governance, livelihood and politics etc.

In view of the above, tribal citizens as embedded cultural communities with distinct social, cultural and ecological embodiment calls for a review of methodological context of research in tribal studies which should begin at the level of family, kinship, village as unit of analysis. He addressed the issue of how online information can affect research on tribal context with overload of online information. He stressed on the need to verify the veracity of online information in the time of fake news, ideological political context and choose facts which matter most for the intended body of work. The most important recourse to methodology, he suggested and pointed was the number of universities from the region, academics and researchers engaging with North East themselves can emerge as a catalyst and repository of methodological concerns in tribal context.

In pandemic times, he suggested we should filter body of work conducted by universities in North East India, teachers and researchers for dissemination of knowledge from the perspective of methodology. Moreover, there are independent research think tanks, institutions and researchers, government agencies, government reports whose body of work can provide best alternative methodological practices in times of pandemic. This alternative perspective of looking at unpublished works, published works, government reports and research writings can it self emerge as a form of archival material strictly speaking from historical studies point of view, he pointed.

He suggested that it would enable one to make comparative studies on two or more states by choosing certain indicator such as education, environment, population demography as a research outcome. This would enable us to generate a desired knowledge as to why certain states in the region perform better than the other or why some state are better governed than the rest etc. He concluded the session by touching on the end to reflect on the contemporary concept and categories as in locating transformative shifts in the region. Lastly he suggested that in times of pandemic it is now time to read and write North East from what has been already been written on larger methodological engagement on the issue concerned.

This was followed by Q&A Session for more than 30 minutes where he focused mainly on methodological issues from ethical perspective.

The Vote of Thanks was delivered by Mr. Sunil Pradhan.