The role of peace education in mitigating ethnic conflict in Northeast India

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Abstract

Peace education, a powerful tool in fostering global and regional peace, plays a crucial role in promoting democratic principles. The war and conflict that have brought crises in the environment, economy, and inequality, as well as education on peace, act as a pioneering instrument to address the cause and effect of conflict. The Indian government's Ministry of Education (MoE) has been working to reform the curriculum's designs to promote peace principles. The intricacy of India's varied communities and ethnic groupings, however, continues to make it difficult to address the socioeconomic, cultural, and political situations unique to each group. More than 200 communities have been established in Northeast India, prone to ethnic strife because of cultural and other socioeconomic differences. Since India's independence, the area has seen ethnic conflict as every tribe and indigenous community has demanded identity and autonomy. India faced problems as a result of its diversified cultures and traditions of communities demanding recognition of identity. "Peace Education" is the one easy fix. A culture of peace is built on the beliefs and mindsets of its members. In the field of education, teachers serve as peacebuilders. So, what makes peace education special? Why should we not limit our perspectives and compulsive students to adopt new ones? This study will examine the ethnic conflict in the Northeast and how peace education might support democratic and non-discriminatory principles through various programs. In order to resolve ethnic violence in the region, peace education can support democratic individual perspectives, social inclusion, and community empowerment, as demonstrated by the body of research and thorough data now available. It also demonstrates the need for peace education to create a sustainable future.

Keywords: peace education, ethnic strife, future sustainability, Northeast India

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1. Introduction

Society around the globe has faced war, conflict and unrest in various ways. Conflicts unattended can become conflagrations, as happened in Rwanda in 1994, whereas conflicts that are managed nonviolently can be the source of growth and positive change, as in the case of Gandhi's salt march in India in 1948 (Harris, 2004). "Building peace through harmonious diversity" is a marvellous title, combining three words of honour: peace, harmony, and diversity. "Peace" is another word for equality, equity, equal rights/dignity, symmetry, reciprocity, diversity/symbiosis, etc; "Harmony" is creative cooperation beyond the absence of violence; "diversity" celebrates our manifold, within peace and harmony (Galtung, 1996). The learning and teaching have recently focused more on peace-building and sustainability. Peace education is defined as a form of societal intervention aimed at resolving different forms of violence, injustice, and inequality (Schultze-Kraft, 2022); it involves a diverse array of concepts and methodologies (Atsani et al., 2024). One goal of education is to create the conditions for peace, that is, a society where citizens can freely share concerns, be productive, make creative use of their time, enjoy human rights, and manage conflicts without direct violence (Harris, 2004). Peace education overlaps with and shares theoretical and practical ground with other types of "progressive education" (Toh & Floresca-Cwagas, 2000) concerning the will to take part in a dialogue and discussion to solve the conflict peacefully and to engage in reflective civic life (McLean et al., 2008; Harber & Sakade, 2009). According to Harris (2004). It also refers to teachers teaching about peace- what it is, why it does not exist, and how to achieve it- academic content that gets ignored in most education schools; for Mahrouse (2006), it is multiculturalism, tolerance, respect, appreciation of other differences as a production of peace. Peace education can be traced to Comenius in 1969, Kant in 1795 and 1970, Maria Montessori in 1946 and 1974, Read in 1949, Johan Galtung in 1969, Paulo Freire in 1970, Brocke-Utne in 1985, Reardon in 1988, Harris in 1988, Bowers in 1993, Huckle and Sterling in 1996, Verhagen in 2002, and Adams in 2002 (see Harris, 2004).

The emphasis of peace education is to build and foster understanding of differences, manage conflict, and respond to unrest in a non-violent manner. It is a way of teaching conflict resolution through tolerance, cooperation, empathy, and appreciation of diversity. The holistic approach engages students in comprehending the complexities of conflicts and their adverse outcomes towards peace and livelihood. It characterises steps towards designing non-violent resolutions against conflicts and building peaceful ventures among various groups and indigenous communities (Ay & Gökdemir, 2020; Mokotso, 2022; Benson, 2023). The Peace Education working groups at UNICEF define peace education as "the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to bring about behaviour changes that will enable children, youth, and adults overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, inter-group, national, or international level" (UNICEF, 2004; see Conflict Resolution Education and Peace Education). Harris (2004) notes five postulates of peace education: it explains the roots of violence, it teaches alternatives to violence, it adjusts to cover different forms of violence, peace itself is a process that varies according to context, and conflict is omnipresent. The best cases where peace education has brought reconciliation and change can be drawn from Rwanda's Post-Genocide and Northern Ireland's Integrated Education.

This paper highlights India's importance and, more precisely, the Northeast Indian region due to its frequent ethnic conflict and unrest. A separate section explains why peace education matters in India and is elaborated to draw India's multi-diverse society to foster peace education. Then, the paper is narrowed to Northeast India and its ethnic conflicts. A brief explanation of the causes and factors is given to emphasise why peace education is necessary in the region. As it is for peace research to answer the questions of 'why?' and 'what to do?' The definition of violence, consequently, is an important object of discussion and analysis in peace research, not only

for thinking about the causes of war but also for peace-building after a violent conflict (Wallensteen, 2011, p. 15). The data for such a study are drawn from primary resources, secondary resources, and artefacts (Dulic, 2011) while adding to the latest media reports on such cases (Oberg & Sollengberg, 2011). The data are primarily from secondary sources and desk research.

2.   Why Peace Education Matters in India?

Peace education is a curriculum-based approach that aims to teach students the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to prevent and resolve conflicts peacefully (Okpalaibekwe & Anikeze, 2024). By integrating peace education into the curriculum, students might develop a more profound comprehension of diverse cultures, religions, histories, and viewpoints, perhaps promoting tolerance and empathy. Teaching peace through education has a tremendous impact on the young generation. As Salomon (2006) mentions in the study of Lustig (2002)- youngsters learning about a foreign, remote conflict became better able to assume the perspective of their local adversary in a fair and well-balanced way; Biton (2002)- participation in a year-long peace education program served, among other things, as a barrier against the deterioration of perceptions of the other side, which afflicted nonparticipants; and Ajduković & Buško, (1997) - a school-based trauma healing and peaceful problem-solving program which decrease posttraumatic stress symptoms, to improve self-esteem, and to reduce negative attitudes towards Serbs, shows that peace education can make a difference. The significance of peace education has increased in recent decades and is now widely acknowledged as an essential and obligatory element of a genuinely democratic and progressive society (Atsani et al., 2024).

India's efforts to build a multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural democratic society, as well as the conflicts that arise along its many fault lines, attract significant scholarly and media attention (Baruah, 2020). Community conflict in India has been a long struggle as conflict arises due to differences in language, culture and religion. Okpalaibekwe and Anikeze (2024) assert that given the situation of inequality in urban and rural communities, there are tendencies for potential conflicts to occur due to bitterness, anger, frustration, or hopelessness incubating between communities, social relations and individuals' conflicting interests and goals. To mitigate such conflicts, the education system in India has been reworked and implemented a couple of times since its independence. The National Policy on Education (NEP) was first formulated in 1968 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, second in 1986 by Rajiv Gandhi and third in 2020 by Narendra Modi. Each new implementation has its inclusiveness, bringing the idea of inclusive education and imparting it in the local languages. The Indian society has diverse castes, classes, religions and regions that have challenges for ensuring equality, equity and social justice, for which education and education for peace play important roles to emphasise developing certain values among the students that help to promote a peaceful society (Pandey, n.d.). The latest policy, "The National Education Policy 2020", provides that the approach to teacher education itself should be integrated with environmental awareness and sensitivity towards its conservation and sustainable development. It also aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) of ensuring free, equitable, and quality education. As such, value-based education includes the development of humanistic, ethical, Constitutional, and universal human values of truth (*satya*), righteous conduct (*dharma*), peace (*shanti*), love (*prem*), nonviolence (*ahimsa*), scientific temper, citizenship values, and also life-skills; lessons in seva/service and participation in community service programmes will be considered an integral part of holistic education. Thus, such an attitude towards education could foster peace among the conflict zones or communities.   However, little complexity remains in the Northeast Indian regions, where "peace education" could help build sustainable development and harmony among various ethnic groups.

3.   Northeast India: "Land of Tribals," "Indigenous Communities" and "Exclusiveness"

With its many border regions with Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, and Nepal, northeastern India boasts a multi-faceted topography and long-inhabited indigenous communities. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim are the eight states that makeup Northeast India. There are culturally distinct tribes and subtribes in every smaller state and district, and their interactions vary.

Hinduism is the predominant religion in the Assam plains and a few other states. In addition to Christianity, other religions include Buddhism, Islam, animism, etc. There are more than 200 tribal communities (Cline, (2006), some of the tribals are Monpas, Sherdukpens, Hill Miris, Nyishis, Apa Tanis, Adis, Mishmis, Noctes, Singphos, Khamptis, Boro, Kachari, Mikirs, Dimasa, Lalung, Jmar, Hajong, Naga, Kuki, Garo, Jaintia, Khasi, Lusai, Bhutia, Lepcha, Chakma, Liang, and so on. The region is in contestation and conflict for space in various forms: state vs. ethnic civil society, state vs. non-state actors, and among different ethnic communities (Ziipao, 2018). It has a long history of armed conflicts, though, in international forums, Indian officials avoid using this locution to reference this fact (Baruah, 2020) since most of the tribal society is in demand of "autonomy", "identity", and "recognition" examples of 'Home State autonomy' envisioned by Articles 371A and 371G in Nagaland and Mizoram respectively, decentralised autonomy of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and devolutionary autonomy of Manipur hill areas and Tripura tribal areas (Hausing, 2022). The race for recognition and identity has been a never-ending phenomenon in the region. Singh's (1987) two points are worth mentioning: firstly, the socialisation process in the region has been at a very low level compared to states with more hospitable terrains and movement facilities. Secondly, from 1228 to 1826, there was a limited and somewhat organised migration to Assam and other regions of northeast India, which was well managed by the respective societies. Even after India's independence, migration and border issues have been unending problems in terms of security and migration influx.

The creation of Bangladesh from East Pakistan has seen an influx of illegal migrants towards the Northeast region. It is worth mentioning that Bangladesh shares border with Assam (262 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Mizoram (318 km), and Tripura (856 km) (Mayilvaganan, 2019), whereas Myanmar shares borders with Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Manipur (398 km), Mizoram (510 km), and Nagaland (215 km). Assam has been in constant conflict among the tribals, indigenous communities and migrants. The 1998 and 2008 clashes with Bodo and immigrant Muslims and the 2004 Bodo and Santhal conflicts have displaced thousands of people (Phukan, 2013). The indigenous communities in the region have tried to remain aloof from the outsiders, fearing that assimilation with them would end their cultures and traditions. Each tribe and community have tried its best to keep their ancestral traditions intake among themselves. Here comes the exclusiveness among the communities in the Northeast region. The outsiders have always remained an outsider. Every government that has been formed has brought out new reforms to preserve its own interests and rights; for example, land rights in tribal regions are allowed to be sold only to the tribals and not outsiders.

The region has been actively under insurgency movements; there are some counts of up to 40 to 50 groups, and at least 14 groups are still active (Cline, 2006). Some factors that contribute towards such movements are social and cultural differences, illegal occupation of land by migrants, autonomy for land, economic underdevelopment, school dropouts of youngsters, and unemployment. Ethnic conflict has predominantly been active in the region, causing forced migration due to social and political problems (Das et al., 2015). Northeast India has frequent ethnic clashes with each other while attempting to assert their own identity. Thus, education and peacebuilding through peace education are the utmost necessary to coexist and develop the community. Creating a space for inclusiveness rather than exclusively asserting one identity needs to be brought out by broader ideas of social equality and peace education among different communities.

4. Ethnic Conflict and Current Situation

The history of the northeast India has changed its cartography since the independence of India (1947) from the British rule. The Central government to govern better the Northeast region has been separated into eight states over time. Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Manipur (1972), Tripura (1972), Arunachal (1987), Mizoram (1987) and Sikkim (1975), Assam become smaller in its geography. The race for ethnic identity and tribal land has led to the rise of violent protests and the emergence of various insurgencies. Since the 1950s, Naga sovereignty has been fought for in Nagaland by the Naga National Council (NNC) and, thereafter, the National Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Other factions were Khaplang (NSCN-K) and NSCN (IM), led by Isak Chisi Swu and T. Muiah. In the 'Life' magazine, Nagaland was described as Indian Vietnam. V.K. Anand has

pointed out that "The Jungles of Malaya, Mountains of Greece and the slushy paddy fields of Vietnam can all be found together in Nagaland" (Singh, 2009). The Mizo National Front (MNF) operated in Mizoram until the arms struggle was put to an end in 1986 when it signed the Mizo Accord. It continues to be a peaceful and effective means of resolving conflicts. In Assam, grievances peaked during the 1970s after the formation of Bangladesh as there was an illegal influx of migration. The mass movement known as the Assam Movement took great momentum from 1979 to 1985 till the signing of the Assam Accord (Bharadwaj, 2016). Unsatisfactory with the agreement, an armed militant group known as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was formed. This insurgent group still remained active during the present day. Attacks were organised between various groups, such as the Tiwas group against the Bengali Muslims and attacks of Bodo against the illegal influx in the tribal land. Due to suppression from other communities, another new insurgent group, known as the Democratic Front of Bodo (NDFB), was formed in 1986, and the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force was formed in 1996 to fight for the Bodo identity. It was only after the signing of the Bodo Accord in 2003 that little peace was seen in the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) (Bharadwaj, 2016). Insurgency in the Northeast India region has been active due to various factors of ethnic identity. Each community or tribe has constructed their identity, and the struggle for recognition has been a history.
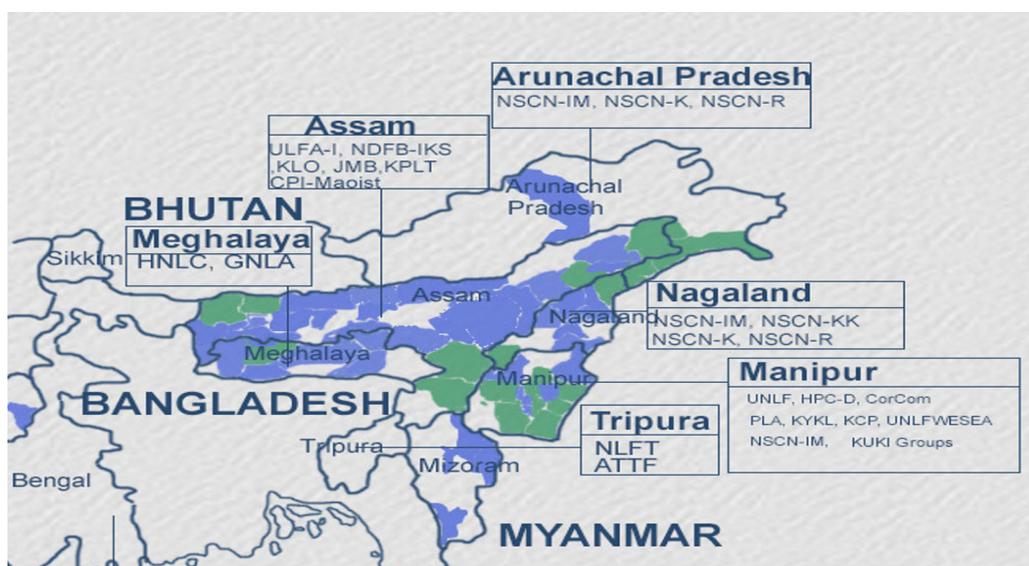

Figure 1: Insurgent groups around Northeast India (*Conflict Map, India*, n.d.)

Northeast India has been on constant ethnic acts of violence. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in 2008 triggered a serial blast that took place in Guwahati, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Barpeta, killing 88 and more than 500 injured (Karmakar, 2019). On August 15, 2004, during the celebration of Independence Day of India, a bomb blast took place in Assam's Dhemaji, killing 13 people, including 10 children ((The Hindu Bureau, 2025), which the United Liberation Force of Assam planted. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) recorded total fatalities of 12091 individuals from 2000-2025.

One of the states in the Northeast, Manipur, is still experiencing bloody conflict. The conflict started between the Kuki and Meitei ethnic groups on May 3, 2023. More than 75 persons have been killed. As a result, 1,700 buildings, including houses and places of worship, have been destroyed, and more than 35,000 people have been displaced and are currently scattered throughout 315 relief camps (Nepram & Schuchert, 2023). In Manipur, security forces killed 1528 civilians, including 98 children, between 1978 and 2012 (Misao & Patowari, 2014). To help the victims of violence, research found that yoga could help reduce stress and aggression and reduce negative affect in the current conflict region (Lakshmi, 2024). If yoga can bring a positive approach, peace education can be another approach to mitigate such conflicts.
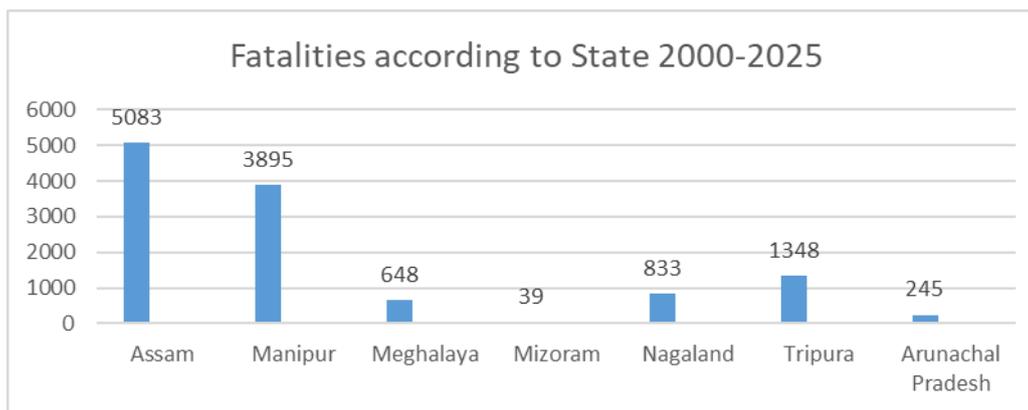
Figure 2: Fatalities according to the state from 2000-2025 ((*Datasheet-terrorist-attack-fatalities*, n.d.

5. Peace Education: Towards "Development" and "Sustainability"

The future world is more of sustainable development as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), i.e., goal 16: promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. This emphasises the necessity and importance of peace in global as well as regional development. Anand (2014) concluded peace is a conceptual truth that is universal for everyone, and we should try to achieve this through formal and informal education. He further brought up the dimensions of peace education: war control, developing tolerance in human beings, establishing positive willingness and unity for international society, promotion of human rights for solving the problem of social discrimination, conflict resolution, democracy, international understanding, environmental responsibility, coexistence and general equality and also spiritual dimensions.

Peace education can be achieved through the teacher's engagement in various activities and programs for the students. It is crucial, especially in Northeast regions, due to ethnic differences and other conflicts in society. The education policy in recent times has promoted education for peace in the curriculum to create peace and understanding capacity within the school curriculum. Peace education can take many forms, including workshops, seminars, and community-based programs (Okpalaibekwe & Anikeze, 2024). However, the tribals in Northeast India fear that education has also brought a lot of changes in their culture and traditions, as Ao (2006) asserts that the cultures of Northeast India are already facing tremendous challenges due to education and modernisation. As such, tribals fear the assimilation of other cultures and traditions, which could hamper their existence and identity. Therefore, a careful initiation to promote peace education in the Northeast region is much required. Drawing Eslami-Somea and Movassagh (2014), peace education must address fundamental personal or collective concerns rather than simply concentrating on superficial dilemmas in order to appreciate the nature and scope of a particular conflict or justice. Secondly, peace education must promote guided group discussion about values and beliefs related to conflict and violence. Such an approach depends on the educators and instructors inculcating a better approach to peace education in conflict-inflected zones. No doubt challenges still remain in the Northeast India.

6. Challenges of Peace Education

Peace education has faced many challenges beyond political opposition, contradictory collective narratives, charged negative emotions, severe inequalities, and more (Salomon, 2004, 2006, 2011). There are cases of conflict that are fueled by historical memories (Barton& Mccully, 2005; Roe & Cairns, 2003), as well as opposing identity constructions that, likewise, underlie the conflict (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004). The case of Northeast India ethnic conflict and promoting peace education has been quite challenging due to historical narratives and the cultural and identity affiliations of their own tribes. The United Nations called for the

promotion of a culture of peace by educating people to see themselves as peaceful with norms that emphasise cooperation and the resolution of conflicts through dialogue, negotiation, and non-violence (Solomon, 2011). Here, I have listed five common challenges faced by peace education in the Northeast Indian states.

- ➤ Cultural Difference: The number of tribals and communities residing in the same region, which at times creates misunderstandings and erupts ethnic conflicts. According to the 'People of India' project sponsored by the Anthropological Survey of India, out of 5,633 communities living in India, 635 are categorised as tribals, of which 231 are in the Northeast Indian region where 325 languages are listed, and 175 belong to Tibeto-Burman group and Mon-Khmer group (Phukan, 2013). Such a large number of tribals makes it difficult to include each tribe elaborately in the academic curriculum, and it increases the chances of conflict when giving special recognition to a particular group or tribe.

- ➤ Lack of Educators: Ethnic conflict has often destroyed and damaged social infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals (Das et al., 2015), which creates fear among educators about working in such circumstances. This makes the lack of trained educators to teach peace education becomes a hurdle to promoting peace education.

- ➤ Educational System: The educational system and the curriculum have been focusing on bookish ideas rather than creating a space for coexistence. While books have focused on major tribes in their academic syllabus, the minor groups feel neglected. It also becomes a challenge for the academic reformers to include all the tribes in the educational system.

- ➤ Lack of Resources: Other than academic challenges, the special awareness program needs financial support and other resources. Such special teaching and learning on peace education at the grassroots level lacks financial resources.

- ➤ Political Resistance: At times, the ruling party has much to do with politics rather than building peace and sustainability. Political leaders and groups might view peace education as a threat to their interest in controlling the tribal communities. Therefore, little interest in building a peaceful society with education is perceived as a threat to their power over the tribals.

7. Recommendations

The following is a list of suggestions for initiating peace education in Northeast India.

- ➤ Community involvement: To bring peace and mitigate conflict, the involvement of local individuals and tribal groups can create a space for decision-making as well as problem-solving. This empowers marginalised communities and promotes equal inclusivity, accountability, and local ownership. When such platforms are created, it ensure better culturally responsive solutions and is community-driven. The cultural differences among the communities build trust, which enhances collaboration in peacebuilding. Thus facilitating long peace and harmony through sustainable projects.

- ➤ Capacity Building and Faculty Development: The enhancement of skills, ideas, and knowledge among resource individuals and educators to achieve a peaceful society through peace education and well-structured training must be organised. This will equip educators with all the necessary tools to address the ethnic problems while giving formal education. There have to be workshops, seminars, and conferences for the faculty members on how to handle sensitive issues and engage in peaceful discussions on various issues related to ethnic conflict. This will create and promote problem-solving, respect, non-violence, and tolerance among the learners, contributing to common development.

- ➤ Policy Integration: To mitigate the ethnic conflict, there has to be policy integrated with the governmental policy, traditional norms, academic curriculums, and local values. The policy made by the policymakers should promote inclusivity and equity to subside the probability of ethnic conflict.

The inclusivity among the tribals will create a sense of belonging and equality when the policies recognise their traditional norms and values.

➢ Inclusivity and Parallel Development: The ethnic conflict in the Northeast region as been due to exclusion and unparallel development as a major factor. Therefore, to ensure peaceful coexistence, every program and development should be parallel and include all the regions without excluding any minor communities. There should be balanced development to bring equality, reduce socio-economic inequalities, and mitigate the chances of conflict.

➢ Evaluation and Monitoring: Peace education and conflict mitigation need to be evaluated and monitored in a timely. Such measures should be systematically assessed for their relevance and effectiveness and to ensure that the goals of peace education are archived. There have to be regular surveys from the grassroots level as well as listening to the common problems of the local people. Thus, a committee from the government should be formed to evaluate and monitor the peaceful coexistence among the tribal people and for equal distribution of development to reduce the chances of ethnic conflict.

8. Conclusion

Peace education is one of the ways to fight against war and conflict and look forward to future development and sustainability. The political instability, environmental crises, and economic crises can be better handled by prioritising peace education to face such challenges. The Northeast can be a better place if peace education is effectively taught, which will foster inclusivity and a harmonious, non-violent society towards a prosperous society. Policymakers should focus on mitigating conflict as well as policy to mitigate poverty (Das et al., 2015). Youth must participate in a variety of skills and professional training programs in order to reduce the number of dropouts and illegal activity. In addition, training that promotes development and long-term growth in society must include peace education. The curriculum should give equal importance to all the communities and tribes to bring inclusiveness despite differences in traditions and cultures. The education imparted in Northeast India needs peace education for future growth and sustainable development.

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