

Book Review

Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.

Reviewed by Thongkhohal Haokip

The scholarship of Sanjib Baruah on North East India studies is well-known in India and beyond in the last two decades. Many benefitted from his earlier works on various issues of the Northeast – from the politics of subnationalism to citizenship, ethnic conflicts to peace process, territoriality and indigeneity. However, in this latest work under review he mainly draws from the existing studies on India’s Northeast to further explain the prevalent problems together in the region in the last one decade.

Baruah introduces the book by explaining the directional name “the northeast”, and its derivate term northeasterner as an expression of “a certain hierarchy and relation of power”, and the attempt by postcolonial Indian state to “turn an imperial frontier space into the national space”. In this process, through the imposition and creation of a special security regime, a situation of democracy deficits emerges in this regime of othering. Within the region, the “other others” responded by trying to identify themselves in certain terms, for example Gorkha, to assert Indian citizenship. Baruah continues the discussion on the colonial origins of indirect rule in the northeast frontier as a mode of governance during the British rule and its continuation in independent India.

In the second chapter Baruah looks into how the partition of India brought trauma for several generations, and the social, cultural and political effects of migration from Bangladesh, terming it as “seismic”. Chapter 3 discusses how the region has been “both a settlement and a resource frontier” for long particularly since British rule, and has percolated to the excluded areas of the colonial era in the new millennium where colonial administration once thought them “to be culturally incapable of becoming full market subjects and decided that they need protection”. In such spaces ethnic elites increasingly own lands for mineral extraction due to the unregulated law

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on possession of land and they demanded the implementation of inner line permit system for protection from outsiders particularly in “political claim making”.

The author discusses the protracted Naga insurgency and its predicament in chapter 4. In the following chapter Baruah emphasizes the structural violence in Assam to understand the rise of insurgency in the state and argues that psychological warfare has been deployed for counterinsurgency. Chapter 6 examines the reluctance of the Indian state to withdraw AFSPA, or the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, despite finding that “the situation is peaceful” in many of the areas where this Act is imposed and how AFSPA still operates in areas that the operation of the Act were withdrawn till “exemption was routinely circumvented in practice”, and learning to live with the draconian law has been a part of life in this region. Baurah reiterates on how armed conflicts in the region shaped the way the region is governed. He discusses how the region suffers from serious democratic deficit due to armed insurrections and the declaration of AFSPA “with remarkable casualness”. Despite the peace talks to most of the insurgent groups of the region after signing Suspension of Operations (SoO), the Indian government is reluctant to withdraw the Act. He also looks into the emergence and prevalence of hybrid political regimes out of the flawed peace agreements and those who are under the SoO.

While discussing “India’s Northeast Policy” the author seems to ignore the existing literature, despite extensive reference to published works while dealing with other topics. The reviewer has extensively done a research in this area and has published works on this topic a decade back.¹ If this publication falls within what Jelle J.P. Wouters (2020) calls “Their work may not have been published by fancy university presses or appeared in acclaimed international journals, but it is nevertheless widely available, carefully researched, informative and genuine”, the same work is republished in a reputed academic publisher as a chapter five years later. Perhaps this may be the case of the author’s refusal to engage with a particular scholar rather than “the author’s refusal to engage with the existing scholarship”, as he excessively depends on others while dealing with different issues of the region. However, Baurah must be appreciated for moving out from his comfort areas, the states of Assam and Nagaland, for the first time to look into other Northeastern states such as Manipur and Meghalaya in this book.

For scholars who work on North East India studies, the issues dealt with in this book and the approach adopted to understand such issues may not be new. Nevertheless in this work Baruah puts together some of the persisting and complicated issues of the region and make them simple to understand. The book will be handy to those who are not from the North Eastern region of India or those not familiar with this region and its problems.

Note

¹ The reviewer has published works on this topic in 2010 and 2015. See references for details

References

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