

Geographies of Difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies

edited by Mélanie Vandenhelsken, Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Bengt G. Karlsson. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, xxvii+297 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-27790-1 (paperback).

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Geographies of Difference brings together scholars from diverse backgrounds to construct Northeast Indian Studies as a field of research in its own right. Most of the chapters in this book were first presented during the international conference 'Negotiating Ethnicity: Politics and Display of Cultural Identities in Northeast India', held in Vienna in July 2013. Following the recent major reconfigurations of Areas Studies in South and Southeast Asia, the volume approaches Northeast India as an emerging geo-historical entity. The book sets out to rethink the Northeast as a lived space, a centre of interconnections and unfolding histories. This approach is well encapsulated in the Preface by the editors, in Karlsson's Introduction and in van Schendel's chapter.

It is interesting to note that the pieces written by two academic stalwarts (Bengt G. Karlsson and Willem van Schendel) are strategically placed at each end of the book, as an alpha and omega. They lay out the key framework and direction of Northeast Indian studies. To illustrate this, Karlsson introduces the emergence, transformation and future of Northeast Indian Studies as an emerging field of research in its own right. He calls for introspection during the recent surge of research and urges scholars to pay critical attention to local voices as well as to indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. This he suggests as a way forward to emancipate or liberate Northeast Indian Studies from the shackles of colonial categories and modes of thinking. He concludes by suggesting a few themes through which to critically engage and further Northeast Indian Studies, such as mobility and migration, class formation, emerging urban space and the interface of society and the environment.

Part 1 of the book, 'Historical and Ethnographic Encounters', begins

with a powerful essay by Sanjib Baruah. He explores the colonial production of knowledge in the context of unequal power relations by assessing through the eyes of indigenous people the scholarship of Fűrér-Haimendorf, author of the rather controversial book *The Naked Naga*. While Baruah credits Fűrér-Haimendorf with skilfully writing the ethnography as a product of knowledge, he is critical of the author's silence on the political issues/turmoil of the people he studied. In short, Baruah states 'it would not be an exaggeration to say that Fűrér-Haimendorf did not have an ear for what today we would call the politics of equal dignity' (p. 25). Pursuing the colonial discourse on knowledge production and power, Bianca Son engages the process of categorisation and construction of Zo identity. She argues that much of the information used to construct the Zo was based on early accounts of colonial personnel and their (Bengali and Burmese) informants, and that the 'truthfulness' of these findings was created through the sheer tenacity of repetition and reiteration. Anandaroop Sen's chapter provides a historical account of boundary making in Tripura, a princely state at the time. This first part of the volume then moves to contemporary issues, as ably demonstrated by Dolly Kikon in her rich ethnographic account of everyday life in the Assam-Nagaland foothills. She unravels intimate relations across ethnic communities in the foothills and simultaneously charts out the 'different imaginations that fuel connections and contestations' (p. 87). Mélanie Vandenhelsken gives a detailed ethnographic account of the sociopolitical and cultural processes of Gurung struggles for recognition as Scheduled Tribes in Sikkim.

Part II, 'Politics of Land and Material Resources', engages with materiality, the question of land and identity, and resistance movements. Mibi Ete in her chapter unfolds the politics of hydropower projects in Arunachal Pradesh. She adds an interesting perspective on how, in some cases, locals seek to participate in these projects, which invalidates the popular discourse on dams. Sanjoy (Xonzoi) Barbora draws the reader's attention to the complex conflict of land ownership and belongingness, foregrounding identity politics that often result in violence and displacement in western Assam. In the following chapter, Iris Odyuo discusses Naga handicrafts and traces the changes and continuities in distribution by taking the case of three Nagaland villages. Teiborlang T. Kharsyntiew's chapter unearths the influence of Korean

street fashion, hip-hop and heavy metal among the young generation in Northeast India. He posits that fashion is an act of political protest by young people in Northeast India against the political domination of the Indian state.

Part III, 'In and Out of the State', comprises four chapters that deal with state-specific (Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and Mizoram) issues and a concluding chapter by Mark Turin that addresses the linguistic classifications of Northeast India. Kaustubh Dekha's chapter echoes Xonzo's chapter by addressing the conflict in Assam. He critically examines the electoral incentives and their correlation with the culmination of ethnic conflict in Bodoland, Assam. In the subsequent chapter, Cornelia Guenaur takes the readers to the election in Meghalaya, a predominately tribal state. She observes that during the election campaign, the idea of the individual mattered more than party ideology. The chapters by Soibam Haripriya and by William Singh respectively deal with civil society in Manipur (Meira Paibis) and Mizoram (Young Mizo Association, YMA). Haripriya problematises women's agency among the Meitei community in Manipur. She points out that not all women's organisations have a feminist agenda, but work instead according to the archetypal role of women as mothers. Singh's chapter historicises the YMA in Mizoram. He posits that even though the YMA's vision and mission are apolitical, its functioning lies at the centre of Mizo identity and the promotion of Mizo-ness. However, the author fails to delineate the YMA and the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA). What is central to both chapters is the notion of civil society in Northeast India. It is indeed pertinent to engage critically with the concept and category of civil society in Northeast India as they are intricately linked and affiliated with specific ethnic communities, such as the YMA with the Mizo, the Meira Paibis with the Meitei, the United Naga Council (UNC) with the Naga ethnic group, and so on. The final chapter by Mark Turin addresses language politics, policy and identity, taking the case of Sikkim and crisscrossing between Nepal and Bhutan.

The volume ends on a high note with the Afterword by William van Schendel. He sums up the chapters, theorising Northeast India, giving direction to future research and encouraging collaborative research on what van Schendel calls the 'Greater Northeast', with the suggestion that academics implement a 'Look East Policy'. He argues that the history of

Northeast India begins with Partition in 1947, which gave it a wealth of narratives. It is interesting to note how Northeast India has been conceptualised 'as a new space, a contested space, a vertical space and a fragmenting space' (p. 273), the multiplicity of conceptualisations making an important theoretical contribution to the emerging field of study.

Geographies of Difference provides an interesting framework to engage with the Northeast as an emerging geohistorical entity. And yet, just as this perspective/framework offers to unravel the intricate social reality and scope of theorisation through a new lens, it might also render scholars blind to the persistent issue of structural inequality and power relation dynamics within and across the region's respective states. Though the book makes passing reference to the emergence of a new post-Partition regional power hub, ie the Brahmaputra Valley, it does not address the question of unequal power relations between ethnic groups (ie tribal and non-tribal, hills and valley) in the Northeast. It is therefore equally important to chart out the different communities inhabiting the centre of power and the internal struggles that drive certain communities further out to the periphery where they have to bow to the dominant community's authority in post-Independence Northeast India, as is the case of tribes in Assam, Manipur, Tripura and eastern Nagaland. And all the more so since social reality stems from tribal society in Northeast India, whose complexities tend to defy the existing dominant social theories and frameworks and are consequently inaccurately situated and explained. Hence, it is imperative to situate what SR Bodhi and Jojo Bipin (2019) term the problematics of tribal integration into the Indian state – an approach the volume also calls for in underlining the plurality of perspectives on regional issues through an innovative methodology.

To conclude, *Geographies of Difference* is a welcome addition and timely intervention to theorising Northeast Indian Studies. It is a valuable resource for scholars and researchers whose research interests lie in Northeast India and Southeast Asia.

Reference

Bodhi, S,R, and Bipin, J. 2019. *The Problematics of Tribal Integration: Voices from India's alternative centers*. Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror.

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