



Book Review

In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast

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Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Stanford University Press, 2020, Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-503-61070-5 Paperback ISBN: 978-1-503-61128-3, Ebook ISBN: 978-1-503-61129-0 Pp. 298

In his book, *In the Name of a Nation: India and its Northeast*, Sanjib Baruah extends fresh and diverse insights into the contemporary politics of the Northeast while exploring the relationship between the region and the country's centres of power as well as, the region and the rest of the country. He staunchly probes into the interplay of relations between the Northeastern region and the Indian state under the aegis of post-colonial nation-building and how it has transformed the region's fate in contemporary times. In the introductory chapter itself, the author positions the name 'Northeast' and asserts that the term is a post-colonial derivative of the 70s. Until recently, the name has carried no collective identity for the people of the region. They have always identified themselves as Manipuri or Khasi or Naga etc. However, today the term 'northeasterner' not only implies geographical identity but also has a strong racial connotation to it.

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Calling the Northeastern region a 'paradox' resulting out of failures and shortcomings in post-colonial nation-building, the author orients himself as a bridge in understanding as to what is and what could have been for the region's history. Tracing the various continuities and changes in various colonial mandates, the author strongly questions the regional identity of the Northeast which is laden with as the author describes as 'dominant representations and discordant political history'. Baruah is unapologetic when he calls out to the nation builders of the post-colonial Indian state who looked at the region only from the lenses of security which still lingers. Talking about long-running armed conflicts in the region and the imposition of the dreaded AFSPA and many other controversial security laws, the author boldly claims that India suffers from severe 'democratic deficits' despite flaunting itself as a successful democracy.

Baruah leaves no stone unturned when talking about the various narratives and perceptions pertaining to the Northeast which are also outside the parasol of politics. He has aptly identified and described the step-brotherly treatment received by the people of north-east India from the 'mainland' counterparts. His observation is on point when he says that the region is a casualty of exotic representations and internal orientalism which reinforces the region's 'psychological and emotional separation from the Indian mainland.'

Divided into six chapters, the book traverses from the invention of Northeast India as an ad-hoc unit solely for the purposes of administrative convenience and, eventually how partition cast the longest shadow upon the region's economy, identity, and demography which bears no rectification till today. Baruah candidly describes how the social, political, and economic reality of the Northeastern region altered overnight due to the sudden insertion of an international border and how an inexorable flow of immigrants was to be seen for years to come. The plight of the region further sunk as the legal status of these migrants from across the border could not be identified. He also highlights why the situation in the Northeast was different for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, unlike neighbouring states like Bengal, anti-migration sentiments were

prevalent in the region well before partition. Secondly, the Sylhet separation had significant repercussions in the collective minds of the Northeastern population which made them aliens in their own lands. Baruah also criticizes the current government's position on the Citizenship Amendment Act which he believes is devised by completely overlooking the region's history.

The third chapter deals with the development and making of the northeast as a post-colonial resource frontier as a result of which the region became an epicentre of new forms of domination and exploitation. The author talks about the ghastly politics behind the claims to the land and resources by 'indigenous' people themselves which ultimately results in the loss of the traditional livelihood of people. In the development-displacement debate, Baruah's views are quite stark and adamant as he writes without reserve that 'development's shiny side continues to have a dark side of displacement and disposition'.

In the next chapter, the author traces the history of the Naga conflict both from the civil society and armed conflict perspectives and provides a comprehensive understanding of the 'Naga Nationalism' and its various sources and aspirations. He begins his discussion with a brief historical overview of the Naga Nationalism which began with Angami leader Zapu Phizo who declared Nagaland's independence on January 14, 1947. Baruah meticulously traces through the various phases of the Naga Movement and also delves into the reasons for the failure of the peace processes. The author poignantly observes that the major deficits of the Naga peace process stem from the structural inadequacies of the peace plan. According to Baruah, the current model of the peace plan which is characterized by bilateral and secretive meetings between NSCN-IM leaders and the Indian government's interlocutors is not well suited to the resolution of such a complex conflict with multiple stakeholders.

The next chapter deals with the various discourses of insurgency in the region and the Indian state's reaction to it. Baruah begins by talking about the dark period of the secret killings in Assam which were essentially state-sponsored policies of violence in the name of counter-insurgency. The author boldly talks about these secret killings by referring to the Saikia Commission and underscores that

the main motive behind it was to induce defections from ULFA. He also provides glaring details of how the killings were scrupulously executed and yet the rest of India had no clue of the perilous socio-political life of Assam back in the day.

The last chapter makes a comprehensive analysis of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the context of the Northeast and how its implementation has created major ruptures in the social and political environment of the region.

All in all, the content of the book does justice to its title. The reader's mind is automatically captivated by the carefully chosen quotes that Baruah uses at the beginning of each chapter so as to set the tone. He writes like a true insider when making bold claims against state policies regarding the region and the precarious realities of the socio-political and economic life of people here. He emphasizes on the primacy of language and ethnicity above religious overtones which makes a thorough understanding of the region and the people here a crucial matter for any policymaker. His careful historical observations and critique of the post-colonial nation-building in the country as the prime factor for today's predicaments of the region is befitting. The book not only highlights the Northeast as the core area of study but also provides an international dimension when looking at the issues of the region, thus giving it a transnational character. Moreover, the timing of the book could not have been more appropriate as the region once again grapples with issues of identity and survivability as the Citizenship Amendment Act got passed recently. He digs deeper into the ethnographic and historical nuances of the region and how the majority of the centre's policies have only escalated the detachment of the region from the rest of the country. The book certainly is a must-read for people studying the Northeast and will be a worthwhile addition to any library.

References

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