

Unveiling Northeast India: A Region Explored from Within

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Hoineilhing Sitlhou (ed.). 2023. Identity and Marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for Social Science Research. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, pp. 352.

Since May 2023, Manipur in Northeast India has been grappling with ethnic turmoil, resulting in nearly 200 casualties, widespread displacement, economic stagnation, and geopolitical setbacks. The unrest originated from clashes during a 'tribal solidarity march' organized by the All-Tribal Students' Union, opposing the Meitei community's bid to be classified as a Scheduled Tribe. The ST status would afford the predominantly Hindu Meitei people various benefits, but existing tribes, particularly the Kuki community, resist, fearing increased Meitei influence and land acquisition in Kuki-dominated areas. The conflict, if unaddressed, poses a risk of spreading to other parts of Northeast India. Mizoram has already witnessed the Meitei exodus due to escalating tensions, emphasizing the urgent need for intervention by central and state authorities to mitigate the crisis. Many states in Northeast India have similar tensions and conflicts.

In what ways is the Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur seen as a potential threat to other parts of Northeast India? What impact did the violence in Manipur have on other states in the region? How might the ongoing ethnic strife in Manipur impact the broader stability and geopolitical dynamics of Northeast India? Are there historical or cultural factors that could exacerbate such conflicts and potentially lead to similar tensions between other ethnic groups in the region? In the context of the larger Northeast region, how crucial is it for the authorities to balance the aspirations of different ethnic communities while maintaining overall peace and stability? Here, critical insights and perspectives from the region are very important.

Conceptualizing Northeast India as a unified and homogeneous region is a

challenging task due to the complex interplay of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and historical diversity among its population. The region is composed of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. In each state, a distinctive identity emerges from various traditions and historical experiences, collectively contributing to the region's unique character. However, the region continues to grapple with various issues, including inter-ethnic conflicts, atrocities against women, insurgency, state violence, militarization, migration (both legal and illegal), and marginalization. The diverse challenges underscore the multifaceted nature of the region's dynamics.

The volume under review originated from a national seminar held at the University of Hyderabad. The seminar, prompted by the turmoil in Nagaland surrounding the debate over a 33 per cent reservation for women in urban local bodies, highlighted the tension between the quota system and Naga customary laws protected by Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution. The editor of the volume, Hoinelhing Sitlhou, rightly emphasizes the absence of coherent perspectives, frames, or models for studying Northeast India's problems. She cites the complexity of understanding tribal societies, cautioning against approaching them through a narrow lens. Popular narratives, such as the glorified status of women in Manipur and the matrilineal structure of Khasi society, are deemed potentially misleading. Sitlhou argues that the conventional understanding of 'social marginality' often revolves around factors such as caste, class, race, ethnicity, and gender. She also introduces the concept of 'spatial marginality,' which refers to the physical or positional distance from centres of power, growth, and development. In acknowledging this multidimensional perspective, Sitlhou emphasizes that comprehending the issues of marginalization in the Northeast cannot be reduced to simplistic binary categories, such as colonizer and colonized or state and people. Sitlhou contends that these issues involve intricate layers of relations, some of which are more overtly oppositional than others. This complexity challenges the notion that the problems of marginalization in the Northeast can be neatly framed within straightforward dichotomies. Instead, Sitlhou suggests that understanding the complexity of social and spatial marginality requires a more nuanced and multifaceted approach that considers the various interrelated factors at play in the region.

The essays within the volume aim to engage the power dynamics at play in the Northeast, investigating the root causes of marginality. The overarching objective is to contribute to the reshaping of identity and the redefinition of marginality within

the region. There are six sections in the volume. The first section 'Politics of Difference and the Articulation of Identities' has two essays. Sajal Nag analyses the dynamics of tribes in Northeast India, examining their experiences during both colonial and postcolonial periods. Nag traces the origins of the identity crises faced by various tribes in the region, which led to their transition from "self-confident and powerful tribes" to subdued subjects. According to Nag, these once-proud and valorous tribes entered the postcolonial era burdened with a sense of shame and embarrassment about their past. In their efforts to adapt to modernity, they underwent transformations marked by the adoption of modern education, a more civilized attire, and a new religion. This desperate attempt to meet the demands of modernity resulted in a loss of their traditional valour and bravery, Nag noted.

Papori Bora engages in a critical examination of knowledge production concerning India's Northeast. Her analysis explores both colonial historical and ethnographic discourse shaping the region and the postcolonial interpretations of this discourse within the realm of social sciences. Bora contends that the Indian nationalist discourse tends to portray the Northeast as a region perpetually lagging behind the rest of India, both historically and in terms of modernity. This perception is not only upheld by the narrative of nationalist counter-insurgency but also finds resonance in the perspectives of social science disciplines like history and anthropology. These disciplines often approach the Northeast as an 'other,' viewing it through the lens of the Indian self. Bora's scrutiny sheds light on the complexities of how knowledge about the Northeast has been constructed and perpetuated, emphasizing the need for a more careful and contextually aware approach.

The section 'Colonialism and Northeast India' has two essays. Malsawmdawngliana sketches the evolution of Mizo history, transitioning from an oral tradition to textualization during the colonial period. He underscores the multifaceted impact of colonial agencies on historical writing, explaining their influences and the inherent problems and inadequacies within their initiatives. According to Malsawmdawngliana, the process of incorporating the Mizos into the broader global context, or the 'worlding' of the Mizos, resulted in a subjectivity that mirrored Western agendas. Notably, the few instances of resistance were overlooked or omitted by colonial writers and historiographers. He contends that the present imperative is a reevaluation and rearticulation of the Mizo people's position in history. This involves a shift towards narratives that allow the Mizos to tell their own stories, write their versions, employ their unique perspectives, and serve their specific purposes. Malsawmdawngliana advocates for a paradigm where the Mizo people

actively participate in shaping and narrating their history, thereby reclaiming agency and autonomy in the construction of their historical identity.

Suryasikha Pathak undertakes an examination of early census practices and the subsequent debates surrounding them, particularly within the context of identity articulation. She notes that while census enumeration and its awareness introduced a certain rigidity in defining collective identities, paradoxically, it also contributed to rendering nationalist, ethnic, communal, and other identities more fluid. In Assam, Pathak highlights the complexity of the situation, where the diversity of communities, coupled with a remarkably fluid demographic structure, made it challenging to categorically delineate these communities. Pathak concludes that the process of census enumeration played a pivotal role in transforming the identity of plains tribes into a political reality. Simultaneously, it served as a battleground for contestation and the redefinition of identity, owing to the official legitimacy it bestowed upon various communities. Pathak also observes that the nexus between census practices and political rights played a crucial role in the emergence of communitarian politics during the 1930s and 1940s. The enumeration not only shaped the political landscape but also became a catalyst for communities to assert their identities within the political sphere, leading to a complex interplay between census data and the political dynamics of the time.

The essays within the section dedicated to 'Race, Ethnicity, and Migration' focus on the experiences of migrants from the Northeast living in Delhi. Hoineilhing Sitlhou and Salah Punathil specifically examine the discrimination and violence faced by migrants from the Northeastern region in Delhi in recent times. Their critical analysis revolves around the state's response to the pervasive issues of biases and animosity as reflected in the Bezbaruah Committee of 2014. The authors scrutinize the reception and perception of the committee's implementation among the migrant population in Delhi.

The authors present empirical data with the aim of contributing to the development of a fresh theoretical framework addressing race and violence in contemporary India. The escalating incidents of discrimination and violence against Northeasterners are put across as a consequence of portraying these people as racially and ethnically marginalized within the postcolonial Indian nation-state. They argue that the comprehensive implementation of the Bezbaruah Committee's recommendations holds the potential to serve as a lasting remedy to the racial discrimination and violence faced by those from the Northeastern region.

Thanggoulen Kipgen explores the migration patterns of the Kuki community

towards the nation's capital, highlighting the compelling dynamics at play. Kipgen emphasizes that the interplay of poverty, unemployment, and socio-political instability acts as a driving force, prompting educated youth in Manipur to venture beyond their native state. Larger cities, with their diverse job landscapes and promises of an enhanced lifestyle, emerge as irresistible attractions for these people seeking broader horizons. According to Kipgen, in the face of manifold discrimination and marginalization encountered by the Kukis and other Northern migrants, the city of Delhi remains remarkably resilient as one of their preferred destinations. This suggests that, despite the challenges, Delhi continues to symbolize a mainstay of opportunity and the potential for a brighter future.

The section addressing 'Negotiating Gender, Culture, and Identity' has three essays, all exploring gender dynamics within the context of Mizoram and Manipur. Lalhmingmawii underscores that unlike in other regions of India where LGBT movements have spurred legal recognition of alternative sexualities, the liberation of the LGBT community in Mizoram faces constraints from civil society groups like the Young Mizo Association and certain women's organizations. Lalhmingmawii contends that the pervasive influence of Christianity in Mizo society results in the stigmatization of non-normative sexuality, branding it as deviant. While strides towards inclusivity are evident elsewhere in India, LGBTQ activists in Mizoram yearn for a future where community members can openly embrace their identity beneath the rainbow flag.

Shifting focus to Manipur, Ruth Nengneihling examines the plight of women displaced during the Kuki-Naga clash of the 1990s. Investigating into the experiences of resettlement colonies, Nengneihling reveals the profound impact of an inequitable system and skewed resource distribution on Kuki women. The Kuki-Naga conflict triggered extensive displacement, encompassing both spontaneous fleeing from life-threatening situations and organized, planned population transfers involving human rights abuses. Nengneihling delineates the divergent effects of armed conflicts on men and women, drawing attention to distinct vulnerabilities arising from societal roles and uneven access to resources. The study calls for a more gender-sensitive approach to comprehending the challenges faced by conflict-affected populations and addressing their complex issues.

V. Sawmveli unfolds the impact of Protestant Christianity on the perpetuation of traditional gender dynamics and inequality within Mizo society. Her study, conducted across three towns in the state, sheds light on the persistent gender disparities evident within the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, Baptist Church of

Mizoram, and Evangelical Church of Maraland. Despite Mizo women generally experiencing a degree of autonomy in specific facets of their lives, Sawmveli shows how these religious institutions contribute to the persistence of gender inequality. It highlights the complex interaction between traditional cultural norms, religious influences, and the varying degrees of empowerment experienced by Mizo women within the context of their faith.

Within the section addressing 'Indigeneity, Land, and Identity,' two essays offer distinctive insights. Venusa Tinyi contributes an ethnographic exploration of the Chakhesang Nagas, contending that colonial narratives often lack consistency, making it challenging to glean a holistic and comprehensive understanding from them. As a native insider, Tinyi challenges the tendency to categorize every practice and custom of the community as mere myths. Instead, he advocates for a careful approach that seeks to bring out the socio-cultural values and beliefs underpinning the practices of the Nagas, aiming for a more profound understanding beyond superficial interpretations.

Rekha M. Shangpliang investigates the crucial role played by women in natural resource management, with a specific emphasis on the forest rights of the rural Khasi community. Shangpliang highlights the state's efforts to assert greater control over the region's forests through the implementation of new laws and regulations. In doing so, she underscores how these measures often disregard the longstanding traditional rights of the Khasi community concerning their land and forests. Shangpliang's exploration sheds light on the complex interplay between evolving governmental policies and the indigenous community's established practices, emphasizing the need to acknowledge and preserve the unique socio-cultural fabric of the Khasi people.

In the final section, the thematic focus centres on 'Borders, States, and Markets.' N. William Singh provides an in-depth examination of the collective consciousness within marginalized communities and the intricate politics of marginalization that disavow the very individuals constituting a civic order. He focussed the roles played by media and civil society in the current flux of migrants. Singh also inquired into the marginalization experienced by Chin migrants in Mizoram, elucidating the reasons behind their peripheral status and the unfortunate reality of their voices remaining unheard.

Lalmangaihi Chhakchhuak explores the transformative shifts in the social and economic fabric of Mizo society over recent decades, resulting in the emergence of new relations and networks. Through a political economy lens, Chhakchhuak

scrutinizes the new hazards and challenges to social life, including the prevalence of fatal illnesses that have impacted the population in Mizoram. She contends that the risks accompanying economic development and modernization are frequently overlooked, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the implications of societal transformations.

In sum, the essays comprising this volume strive to construct a sociological inquiry into a range of issues impacting Northeast India. By incorporating diverse writings from various social science disciplines, the collection underlines the imperative for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and nationally oriented discourse. This approach is deemed crucial for identifying and implementing solutions to the enduring challenges faced by Northeast India. The compilation serves as evidence of the significance of collaborative and expansive dialogue in addressing the complex socio-cultural landscape of the region.

The authors perceptively analysed the complex social history of the region, contesting simplistic narratives that portray it as a monolithic entity. They have brought out the diverse experiences of ethnic communities, their engagements, conflicts, and contestations. The volume is not only a rich academic contribution to postcolonial studies but also a captivating repertoire for anyone interested in the multifaceted social life of the historically overlooked Northeast India.