

BOOK REVIEW

In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast, Sanjib Baruah. Stanford University Press, 2020. ISBN 9781503610705

In India's northeast region, the process of state building is still in progress. Sanjib Baruah, professor of political studies at Bard College in New York, is considered an authority on the region. *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* focuses on center-periphery relations, continuities between colonial states and post-colonial states, and the challenges of state building and enforcement of state sovereignty in this region.

India's northeast region includes eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura. This region has strategic significance as its borders are with Bhutan, China's Tibet area, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. During British times, the northeast region served as a buffer zone and factored significantly into British colonial rulers' frontier policy.

With the entry of British capitalism in the region, particularly in present-day Assam, with the discovery of oil and coal, and tea plantations, this area has become an enclave of global capitalism with consequences on traditional property rights. To protect tea plantations from the attacks of tribes, colonial rulers in 1873 introduced an inner line permit, which regulated the entry of outsiders in this region and has continued till today in a few states to safeguard tribal interests. In the context of national security, this area is extremely vulnerable, as insurgent groups receive sanctuary in neighboring countries such as Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. At the same time, China claims the state of Arunachal Pradesh as a southern extension of Tibet.

Baruah discusses the emergence of northeastern identity with certain hierarchy and power relations. The colonial ruler's policy regarding the frontier system was continued by the post-colonial dispensation as a sense of national insecurity prevailed. Here state authority and legal institutions are in existence with the insurgent groups. Baruah calls this area's unique pattern of governance a "hybrid political regime—where state and non-state armed entities are in de facto informal partnership." (pp.8) In this region, higher election voter turnout is considered as a consent to India's democratic institutions. Baruah considers that this higher voting turnout is consent "given to an actually existing political order" rather than "an idealized and abstract notion of democracy and rule of law."

The northeast region has served as a resource frontier of colonial rulers, and it continued as such in later years. For the protection of tribal rights and values, the Constitution of India, by its sixth schedule, has provided protection and greater autonomy to the tribal areas. However, Baruah shows that in the northeastern regions, elites exploit community resources without due care for the environment

and at the expense of the local tribal population. Using data, Baruah shows that a few elite tribal ethnic communities have occupied the civil services and state legislative offices, and few large agricultural estates have emerged with active state patronage and protection. With the discovery of new resource frontiers such as coal, hydropower, and agriculture, Baruah argues that there is an emergence of “new forms of exploitation, dispossessions, subordination and sub-citizenship.” (pp.99)

Baruah discussed the complex issue of migration and defining citizenship in the northeast region, especially in the state of Assam, and illustrates that demographic transformation has occurred with multiple waves of migration since the early nineteenth century. The partition of India in 1947 demarcated the international boundary. However, the migration of people continued from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, with consequences on society, culture, and politics. In response to it, the Assam Movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as was the radical separatist outfit, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which advocated armed resistance and demanded an independent Assam.

A hard state emerged in 1990 to control insurgency in Assam. The government deployed brutal counterinsurgency tactics against the ULFA, employing psychological warfare to win the people’s hearts and minds. Local icons and historical personalities were claimed as national heroes. Baruah delves deeper into this region’s religious dynamics. The region has Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian populations and multiethnic tribes. Proselytization by missionaries during colonialism spread Christianity in this region. In recent years, with the entry of Hindu nationalist organizations that equate India with Hinduism, the issue of Bangladeshi migrants has occupied the central stage. This Hindu majoritarianism considers Muslims as Bangladeshi and not Indians. Baruah terms this a “soft Hindu nationalist frame.”

A day before India’s independence from British rule, Naga nationalist Angami Zapu Phizo declared independence from British rule. After the failure of rapprochement with the insurgent groups, the Indian government used massive military force against them, during which tribals were forcefully displaced from their traditional villages. This further boosted Naga nationalism. After more than 60 years, the government’s peace process efforts are still ongoing, with the signing of peace accords. Yet these groups, like government institutions, enjoy shared sovereignty—attributes of statehood such as the use of violence and exercising authority over taxation. Baruah argues, “the post-colonial state in Northeast India has long made significant compromises on its claim to a monopoly of violence and a monopoly of taxation.” (pp.110)

In the book's last chapter, Baruah discusses the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and its consequences on this region. This act was first enforced in dealing with the Naga insurgency in 1958; through this act, the government gave special powers to the armed forces to combat counterinsurgency in this region. However, there have been many instances of human rights abuses. In Manipur state, in 2000, young Irom Sharmila initiated a hunger strike against the act. Her protest continued for 16 years till 2016. Irom Sharmila ended her strike without achieving her objective. The central government claims that the northeast region is returning to normalcy, yet there is no indication that New Delhi intends to abandon the AFSPA. Baruah considers this region as a "state in the waiting," and the major challenge remains "building a more responsive political process and strengthening state capacity." One shortcoming of the book is that Baruah could have written more about positive developments, such as infrastructure development.

In the Name of Nation is essential to understand the democracy deficit and challenges of state building and state authority in the multiethnic borderland of India's northeast region.

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