

Identity, Indigeneity and the National Question in India's North East

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The north-eastern region of India, a construct of administrative convenience, is marked by internal diversity on linguistic, ethnic and cultural lines. Home to a myriad small "autochthonous" communities, the region has witnessed sharp conflicts along these very social cleavages. Even before India embarked on its journey to freedom, this region voiced unique concerns; demands for secession, autonomy, special status marked the region's history. The demand for a separate Naga nation goes back to the time when representatives from the communities submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission. Similar demands continue to reverberate across the region.

Of the many issues that have dominated both the academic and sociopolitical discourses around the region, immigration and rights of the indigenous population remain crucial to this day. Scholarship on the region has engaged with these issues from different perspectives. How is a "resource frontier" and a "settler frontier" managed? Resource frontiers do not exist in a vacuum. How the clashes between the new entrants and the existing people can be contained are issues that scholars have addressed through their works.

One of the latest works in this vein is Sanjib Baruah's *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. The author's earlier two books, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999) and *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (2005), have raised similar concerns. His latest book builds upon this earlier scholarship, broadening the metrics of engagement and can be safely considered the third in the series. The author has always maintained that the North East is a construct which emerged out of necessity—first for the colonial power and then for the postcolonial Indian government. This

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In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast by Sanjib Baruah, New Delhi: Navayana Publishing (by arrangement with Stanford Univ Press), 2021, pp. xiii + 278, ₹599.

was no result of a long-drawn struggle based on shared history. In fact, struggles have pulled the region in different directions. The resource-rich region, however, found itself deeply embedded in the colonial power's economic plans.

Baruah's book situates the region in the larger context of issues of contested citizenship and nationhood. The entire region has faced the impact of migration, which started as a colonial project to use wastelands for resource generation and later accentuated by two partitions—first the India–Pakistan partition in 1947 and second with the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. However, Assam has never been administratively isolated through any special provision and had to bear the brunt of an added pressure of migrating refugees. This started in colonial times and continued in the post-independence period as well. Another reason for migrants entering Assam was that other hilly areas were partially excluded and out of bounds. Livelihood options were also better in Assam.

A region which witnessed multiple waves of migration faced the test of citizenship based on documentary proof of indigeneity, which is difficult to provide. But Assam's politics has been overdetermined by the question of unmitigated migration, which led to the locals fearing minoritisation. The state witnessed a six-year-long sociopolitical agitation, the birth of an insurgent group, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and violent conflicts leading to loss of lives and livelihoods. As a measure of closure, the state decided to upgrade the 1951

register of citizens and the deciding factor was a cut-off date. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) was to be updated with the names of people who entered the state before 24 March 1971. However, the final list of the NRC left 1.9 million people in a state of limbo with their citizenship under question. Baruah's book becomes more relevant to understand the factors that led to this culmination.

The book, divided into six chapters along with an introductory chapter and a conclusion, deals with Assam's problems but also situates it in the larger regional politics, which raises some fundamental questions about the central government's "North East" policy. The introductory chapter introduces the reader to the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) and an atmosphere of impunity that has been put into place in the region. The region has witnessed the formation of hybrid political regimes bearing witness to a nexus between democratically elected governments and allegedly underground outfits. The successive union governments have not acknowledged that the region faces armed conflict and tended to have reduced insurgency to a mere law-and-order situation instead of being a political one. The introduction also touches upon how the armed personnel recruited from other parts of the country think and imagine the region to be. Baruah quotes a Border Security Force personnel regarding the region as *pardes* (a foreign land), showing a psychological distance between the region and other parts of the country (p 15).

Colonial Imagination of the Region

Chapter 1 places the north-eastern region in a critical moment of the 20th century. The region was imagined by the colonial government as being neatly divided into hills and plains. Retired Indian Civil Services officer Robert Reid believed that the excluded and partially excluded areas were very different from the plains and should be maintained as separate entities (p 27). He even went ahead to say that the British should have some stake in these areas after India gains independence. This view somewhat rigidified the differences