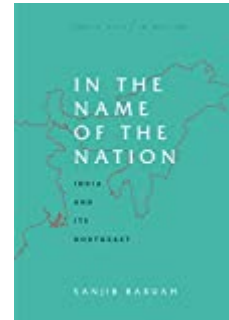




Sanjib Baruah. *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 296 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-1128-3.



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When Sanjib Baruah's *Durable Disorder* came out in 2007, it quickly established itself as an essential introduction to how northeastern India—a region that was historically a crossroads between the Indian Subcontinent, the Southeast Asian peninsula, and Inland Asia—became associated with seemingly unending insurgencies and other forms of “disorder,” seemingly directed against the Indian state.[1] Baruah's work helped the fledgling historian I was then make sense of the troubled relationship between “India and its Northeast” and raised urgent questions about how to historicize the phenomenon. I cannot be the only scholar of Northeast India to owe such a debt to Baruah. His work once stood out as one of the few book-length touchstones on Northeast India, alongside those of Amalendu Guha or Udayon Misra for instance.[2] Not least of *Durable Disorder's* strengths was how Baruah implicitly took South Asianists to task for their inattention to the Northeast, and thus their imbrication in marginalization processes.

Fifteen years later, it is encouraging to see how much has changed. Scholarship on Northeast

India is booming. The rise of interdisciplinary borderlands approaches, pioneered by the likes of Willem van Schendel, is redefining the study of South Asia from its margins in.[3] Understandings of contemporary India increasingly make space for Northeast India. Yet much has changed in another way, too. The Modi era has highlighted the Northeast's centrality to battles over the idea of India.[4] Delhi's “Act East” policy, the penetration of the BJP and Hindu nationalism in a region with huge Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and animist populations, ongoing tensions with China, and above all the fixation on rooting out “Bangladeshis” from the region through murky citizenship registration processes have made Northeast India a battleground for a new India.

In the Name of the Nation thus could not be timelier. In just under two hundred pages, Baruah distills decades of research to offer a powerful overview of the overlapping mechanisms that have made Northeast India “an exceptional example of the shortcomings and failures of the territorially circumscribed post-colonial nation-state”

(p. 3). Over six chapters, each rich in individual insights yet echoing one another, Baruah takes on the dynamics of region-building (chapter 1), the vexed issue of citizenship and belonging (chapter 2), the politics of development (chapter 3), the Naga conflict (chapter 4), and the entrenchment of the “security state” (chapters 5 and 6).

What gives the book its peculiar power is the presence throughout of four interlocking strands: the rejection of “insurgency” as a frame to understand Northeast Indian politics; the characterization of development as an ideology and practice rooted in unequal power relations; the entwined dynamics of incorporation and othering; and finally, the contested, protean nature of the subaltern in Northeast India.

To think of Northeast India is to think of AFSPA: the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. First applied to the Naga areas before being extended across much of the region “with remarkable casualness,” the act infamously grants exceptional powers and immunity to Indian armed forces in “disturbed areas” (p. 4). AFSPA, Baruah argues, is but the centerpiece of an “exceptionally harsh security regime” that entails the outsized assertion of military and police presence in a region deemed ever unstable, unpredictable, and disordered. The leeway this gives—not just to the military but to other armed forces and nonstate actors like plantation owners—to behave with brutality toward the entire population only ends up antagonizing *en masse*. Tactical “counterinsurgency” decisions to give de facto amnesties, protection, and license to bear arms to ex-militants turned informants (as was practiced against the United Liberation Front of Asom, in the 1990s), only increase violent crimes and destroy trust in India’s justice system and wider institutions.

Rooted in the assumption that political strife and criminality can only be dealt with through military means, the “AFSPA regime” is out of proportion with the strength of armed militancy in the Northeast; it also creates the very conditions it

is supposed to quell. Framing Northeast India in terms of “insurgency vs. counterinsurgency” is to miss the fact that so-called insurgents seldom have the popular approval, the reach, or the aim to topple the state, Baruah argues. For some, armed resistance is rather “a form of claims-making” (p. 4). What is more, in much of the Northeast, “state and non-state armed entities are in de facto informal partnership.” In this “hybrid political regime,” groups who make a show of their potential for violence are co-opted by state power and continue exercising their might over local society with the acquiescence, if not the cooperation, of that power (pp. 7-8). “Shared sovereignty” practices thus become the de facto norm in areas of Manipur and Nagaland where NSCN-IM, the main winner in the cease-fire between Delhi and militants for a greater, independent Nagaland, holds sway. The very structure of the cease-fire undermines the possibility of lasting, people-centered peace.

Such insights matter far beyond Northeast India. Baruah makes a powerful case for the need to stop analyzing democracy at the national unit. In AFSPA, India has devised oppressive legislation (inspired from colonial laws) whose power lies precisely in its ordinariness. That AFSPA does not fall under constitutional emergency provisions, but under ordinary law, means it is embedded at every level of the Indian state in the Northeast. Faced with “a security state that only seeks to offer protection and in exchange expects unquestioned acceptance of its decisions, arbitrariness, without accountability or democratic decision-making,” Northeast Indians assert their rejection of “securitized citizenship” (p. 162).

The impossibility of democratic citizenship taints the vocabulary of development that forms the other half of “the postcolonial state’s approach to Northeast India” (p. 42). In one of the most fascinating chapters, Baruah draws on recent scholarship by Bengt Karlsson and Dolly Kikon to explore development as the central ideology through

which a host of power holders—from the central state to regional politicians, from militant groups to economic elites—can justify and maintain their hold over society.[5]

For 150 years, Northeast India has been simultaneously resource *and* settlement frontier. Even as the label “tribal” reduced millions to an unchanging, primitive identity, the region historically attracted migrants from all around South Asia, and as far as China. Some of the subcontinental migration continues. In this context, development becomes “a site of cultural politics and contestation” (p. 88). This new identity discourse can be deployed in the name of tribalness by ethnic elites (and by state authorities keen to bring them on board), so as to exclude entire peoples from the right to economic prosperity, access to land, or decent working conditions. In the hills of Meghalaya, coal mining has enriched Khasi and Jaintia elites who, co-opted by the state, use their protected status to sanctuarize their economic and political power while pristine “tribal” land is destroyed and the mostly migrant population working the mines is exploited. These issues of political economy deserve far more attention than has so far been the case in a historiography more preoccupied with identity issues, Baruah points out.

Through constitutional provisions guaranteeing special economic rights for “Scheduled Tribes,” development imaginaries betray another cornerstone of the Northeast’s relationship to India: over there, nation-state formation and internal othering go hand in hand. Much of the region was incorporated late into India, sometimes only after independence. Its inhabitants’ Otherness was assumed based on those same ideas of tribalness, along with specific (yet elusive) physiognomic types.

Seventy-four years after independence, none of this has disappeared. The postcolonial state has enshrined “Northeast India”—a directional, policy-driven place name inherited from colonial rule and laden with power hierarchies—as the

term to describe the region. The Home Ministry’s North-East Division and the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region mark out Northeast India as an “Other within,” which only “a prodigious ‘big leap’ in prosperity” can incorporate into the nation (pp. 44-45). Absent that leap, and given insurgency’s “illness”, Northeast India remains in the perpetual antechamber of India, its inhabitants an object of policy rather than fellow citizens (p. 13). Baruah’s point will find echo in scholarship on other parts of the world, such as Tibet.[6]

To grasp the most incisive point in *In the Name of the Nation*, however, one needs to read chapter 2 only after the rest of the book. The chapter explores how the legacy of colonial rule and Partition, postcolonial ethno-politics, and the advance of Hindutva in the region have combined to throw millions of people into a citizenship limbo and existential vulnerability. Baruah insists that the Northeast’s ongoing cultural transformation should not be read through the prism of Bangladeshization, vilified by Assamese nationalists and Hindutva supporters alike. The diversity of Assamese Muslim communities notwithstanding, Miya Muslims (of East Bengali origin) have traditionally adopted Assamese as their language and supported Assamese politicians. The problem for Assamese nationalists today, Baruah argues, following M. S. Prabhakara, is not that their culture will disappear, but that its standard bearers will be those of Bengali origin.[7]

Clashes around migration, citizenship, and belonging betray the most pressing question in the book: who exactly, in today’s Northeast India, is the subaltern? Constitutional provisions guaranteeing specific rights for “Scheduled Tribes” (like the prohibition to own land for nontribals in some areas) have permitted the commodification, if not the destruction, of tribal land at the hand of tribal elites allied with the state and “mainland” capitalists, even as “traditional” culture is rapidly changing. Tribal elites’ capture of claims to indigeneity, resources, and political capital bears the weight of

a century and a half of reducing many people to an unchanging, primitive, innocent tribalness. But in the present, it rubs against the widespread reality of a deeply uncertain, vulnerable life for anyone suspected of being “a migrant.” Baruah ends by warning us, via Mamdani, that if violence in Northeast India can potentially be an act of citizenship by subalterns, this same “subaltern identity” could, untransformed, “generate no more than an aspiration for trading places, for hegemonic aspirations” (p. 192).[8]

Such a short, panoramic book necessarily leaves things out. International and transnational dimensions are the most telling absences. The connection goes beyond the geopolitics-infused racialization of Northeasterners in “mainland” cities as exotic or Chinese-like (p. 17). It nestles within the very idea of “the mainland,” this place to which Northeast India is linked but by a tiny strip of land. It is there in the way Northeast India, ever since colonial and Nehruvian times, has been concurrently seen as a conduit for invasion and subversion, a buffer-fortress whose function is to protect India, and a conduit to the rest of Asia. And it is there in the way China’s nearby presence and deepening hold over Tibet, and sights over Arunachal Pradesh, condition Indian state-building. [9] Spelling out the impact of this geopolitical framing of Northeast India would have enhanced an already fascinating book.

My other quibble is one of form. While absolutely engrossing for the interested reader, the book may not be easily accessible for lay audiences. The book’s condensed and wide-ranging nature makes for a dizzying read at times, which makes it difficult to assign to students other than advanced ones. Since Baruah’s insights deserve the widest audience, this is a shame.

That said, *In the Name of the Nation* is a stellar exposure of the fractal nature of the relationship between India and its Northeast, one rich in insights for anyone seeking to understand not just contemporary India, but also the pitfalls of postco-

lonial, would-be nation-states. It will be read for a long time yet.

Notes

[1]. Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2]. Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2006 [1977]); Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, 1st ed. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000).

[3]. Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002): 647-68.

[4]. Arkotong Longkumer, *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[5]. Bengt G. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); Dolly Kikon, *Living with Coal and Oil: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

[6]. Dibyesh Anand, “China and India: Postcolonial Informal Empires in the Emerging Global Order,” *Rethinking Marxism* 24, no. 1 (2012): 68-86.

[7]. M. S. Prabhakara, “Of State and Nationalism,” *Frontline*, October 9, 1999.

[8]. The quote is from Mahmoud Mamdani, “Making Sense of Political Violence in Postcolonial Africa,” in *Fighting Identities: Race, Religion and Ethno-Nationalism*, ed. by L. Panitch and C. Leys (London: Merlin, 2003), 144-45.

[9]. Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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