



Framing Northeast India – Perspectives and Positions

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Reviewed works

Y. Saikia & A. R. Baishya, eds. 2017. *Northeast India: a place of relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 232 pp., ISBN:978-1107191297, \$99.99.

M. Vandenhelsken, M. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & B. G. Karlsson, eds. 2017. *Geographies of difference: explorations in Northeast Indian studies*. New Delhi: Routledge, 298 pp., ISBN:978-1138290198, \$120.00.

S. Hazarika. 2018. *Strangers no more: new narratives from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Aleph, 472 pp., ISBN:978-9384067441, \$29.99.

P. Singh, ed. 2017. *Centrepiece: women's writing and art from Northeast India*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 200 pp., ISBN:978-9385932410, \$35.00.

How does one study Northeast India? More specifically, where do we locate the study of this complex, often under- or misrepresented region? How should we locate the understanding of its politics—in which we choose either to understand the Northeast either as a place of difference, or as part of a broader Indian/South Asian political development. Scholars studying Northeast India have often (correctly) prefaced their studies with the observation that it has been neglected in academic studies, both within and about India. In the last couple of decades, there has been a slow reversal of this trend, especially with more scholars from the region writing insightful and critical narratives of how to understand the region's politics, and moving away from a defense and security-driven perspective that has moulded much of Northeast India's image in popular perception—as a place of violence and volatility. Today, it is routinely characterised as backward, remote, and 'cut off', but as Sanjib Baruah evoca-



tively describes in *India Against Itself*, it was, in the colonial period, at the forefront of modernity, a key hub of capitalist extraction in the British Raj (Baruah 1999: xixf.). The growing scholarship around the region, however, has not reversed its sense of otherness in 'mainland' India (which refers to the rest of India, to which the region is often contrasted), and raises the question of whether this difference persists in academic studies as well as popular perception. The introduction to a special issue on the Northeast in the journal *South Asia* (the result of the first in a series of international conferences that focused on Northeast India) makes the point that (as late as 2007) this is still very much the case—the study of the Northeast remains as marginalized from South Asian Studies as has the region from mainstream Indian politics and media (De Maaker & Joshi 2007). Four recent volumes on Northeast India, covering activist, scholarly, and artistic writings about the region, help center this question, more than a decade later, in the form of a review, undertaken here. Three of these are edited volumes, thus spanning a wide range of contributors and perspectives, and providing a fairly diverse and comprehensive set of answers (or further lines of inquiry) to the question: from where does one write about Northeast India?

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In the introduction to their edited volume, *Northeast India: a place of relations*, Saikia and Baishya explain the driving force behind their volume of essays, namely how the study of India's northeast has been, and largely still continues to be, peripheral within the study of India. In some ways this reflects the peripheral status accorded to the Northeast—both in spatial imagination (countless references to the "chicken's neck" corridor that connects India's Northeast to the rest of the country in many scholarly, journalistic, and other descriptions reinforce the point), and in political processes. The Northeast, the authors remind us, is seen as a zone of war, conflict, unrest, and in parallel, the mainland Indian tourist's exotic "other". Like other scholars of the Northeast, the authors attribute this, at least partly, to the colonial project of categorisation, fixing people (and ethnicity) to place, and seeing Northeast India's tribes as anthropological objects. Post-independence India continued this protectionist/paternalistic framing of the region's inhabitants, viewing with suspicion their challenges to the Indian national formation in the form of many separatist rebellions and movements for autonomy.

One of the seminal texts that often frames the study of this region is the aforementioned *India against itself*, a landmark book that, while dealing largely with the recent political history of Assam, nonetheless has helped illustrate what plagued India's Northeast (and its scholarly representations, among others), and



the link its present status as a "troubled periphery" has to its colonial past. Moreover, Sanjib Baruah was firm in his assertions about the Northeast's sense of difference about itself, and its ambivalence about being a part of the Indian nation- building project. This is illustrated in much detail in his book through the charting of the Assam movement, and Assam's ultimate transition from rebellious separatist aspirations to gradual (and often grudging) "integration" into India's political mainstream. Many other states in the Northeast have followed similar paths, with different timelines, and today, only a few regions, like Manipur and Nagaland, remain the last bastions of this resistance. These arguments were developed further in *Durable disorder*, a collection of essays where Baruah details not just how these insurgencies arose in the Northeast, but their management through a style of militarized governance in the region, often with former army Generals at the helm, creating a form of 'cosmetic federalism' that undermines the civilian government (Baruah 2005).

And yet, this slow assimilation has not been reflected in studies about India or even South Asia more generally. One illustrative example is a new addition to Oxford University Press's accessible *A Very Short Introduction* series, titled *Modern India: a very short introduction* (Jeffrey 2017). While such a volume, aiming for brevity and crispness, must necessarily omit some details, it leaves Northeast India out altogether, a puzzling choice for a place that is, as Saikia and Baishya put it in *A place of relations*, 'the original locus of sovereign power [...] in the postcolonial Indian context' (p. 8). Similarly, while elections are now common practice throughout the region, rarely do they feature in "comparative" studies on Indian electoral politics. Most recently, *Why India votes*, Mukulika Banerjee's important contribution to understanding meaning-making during elections, cites ethnographic research from nine different states, but none from Northeast India (Banerjee 2014), as has also been pointed out by others who study the region (Das 2016).

While some of this could be attributed to a fundamental difference in context, and therefore lack of comparability between the Northeast and the rest of India (as with Nagaland, for instance), Northeastern states have similar electoral practices as elsewhere in India, and campaigns are charged political moments, as Cornelia Guenauer's essay on Meghalaya in "Geographies of Difference" shows. In many ways she finds parties acting in clientelistic patterns not dissimilar to those elsewhere in India, with a key difference being the way in which tribal identity is flagged and indirectly worked into election campaigns. Other ethnographic work on political processes has also looked at the pluralistic meanings of elections and democracy in Northeast India (Wouters 2015, 2018). The point is not to call for tokenistic representations from the Northeast, but to examine its fundamental, often contradictory, place in the construction of the Indian nation. Even a volume on ethnicity and separatism in India, seemingly



concerned with the issues that Northeast India is most studied about in academic circles, fails to take a single case study from the Northeast as a reference point, a surprising outcome given the region's long history with separatism (Chadda 1997).

Following Baruah, much of the influential scholarly work on Northeast India, especially by scholars from the region or with long engagements with it, studies the Northeast as a category in its own right. This has not only gone a long way in filling an important (though still wide) gap in the dearth of scholarship about Northeast India, but has also enabled a better understanding of what was different about Northeast Indian politics and political history, and why a simple comparative perspective with another Indian state is not necessarily a straightforward or an honest analysis. In some instances, the application of the same categories of analysis as the rest of India to the Northeast has often resulted in the paternalistic, or security-oriented texts about the region, many of them written by former army personnel (Bhaumik 2009; Chadha 2013; Kotwal 2000; Singh 2008; various other publications from the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, a government-funded think tank; see also Saikia and Baishya's introduction in *A place of relations*, 7).

Such scholarship has drawn important links between the present-day region and its historical origins, particularly colonial ones. Colonial policy was to segregate the "savage" "hill tribes" (such as the Nagas and Mizos) from the "plains" people, through the introduction of the Inner Line System in 1873, which effectively cordoned off and restricted entry into the hill areas that these tribes inhabited. Ostensibly, this was done for the "protection" of the hill tribes, although it replaced a fluid system of exchange and interaction between inhabitants of the plains and the hills with rigid racial and territorial boundaries (Baruah 1999).

In his contribution in *Geographies of difference*, Baruah draws on this link directly, looking at the work of one of the earliest scholars of Northeast India, anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, whose work on Nagas, in the early twentieth century, is somewhat contentious despite being frequently cited. Much as he reinforced cultural stereotypes of barbaric and uncivilized tribes in Northeast India, he also served, Baruah admits, as one of the earliest chroniclers of Northeast India. Other examples of this form of scholarship also exist, written by scholars embedded within the colonial administration in some form—the reverend Sidney Endle's 1911 text *The Kacharis* (Endle 1911), for instance, or the civil service administrator Edward Gait's text, *A history of Assam* (Gait 1962 [1905]). De Maaker and Joshi have commented on the irony of these being the very first detailed ethnographies about India, and yet confined to the margins of Indian academic production today (De Maaker & Joshi 2007: 382).



Such characterisations from scholars embedded within the colonial regime went a long way in establishing fixed cultural identities as we see them today. This is the case with Zo identity in Bianca Son's chapter in *Geographies of difference*, who notes the importance of informants (whom she speculates were probably non-tribal themselves) in the construction of Zo identity in (erstwhile) Burma and India. Such incongruity also applies to the creation of borders, as Anandroop Sen notes in the case of Tripura. Government practices in Northeast India created and continually reinforced binaries between insiders and outsiders, hills and plains, a phenomenon Sen relates to Timothy Mitchell's idea of 'state effects' (p. 66), where such binaries are constructed rather than already present. Kaustabh Deka's contribution in the volume, on "ethnic massacres" in the autonomous region of Bodoland, looks at the persistent effect of the state in shaping ethnic conflict in what is seen as one of the most volatile areas of the region. In Deka's formulation, administrative practices and laws themselves emerge as tools of conflict management on the part of the state, with poor results. Melanie Vandenhelsken's piece in *Geographies of difference* shows the importance of interlocutors even in present day Sikkim, as she notes the role of ethnographers and ethnographic studies in claims to indigeneity in the state. Certain practices or rituals are 'performed' for the sake of the ethnographer, in the hopes of legitimizing 'tribal' status which, yet again because of historical precedent, is an important administrative category that brings benefits in the form of educational and job-related quotas.

The link between the state and the present condition of Northeast India is also evident in Baruah's contribution in *A place of relations*, where he critiques the Indian state's developmentalist approach in the Northeast as a form of conflict resolution. He argues that a conventional, modernist approach to development ignores the ground realities of a region while pushing forward a neoliberal agenda and creating new networks of dependence. In a similar tone, in the same volume, Mitul Baruah looks at the role of the state not just in promoting development agendas but also in constructing "natural" disasters like the floods that ravage the Brahmaputra valley in Assam each year. It is state-led projects, like the construction of embankments, and the determination of what goes inside or outside the embankment, that alters the conditions of flooding and their effects. Once again, the postcolonial state, in persisting with colonial ideas of boundaries, arbitrarily creates insiders and outsiders, and new geographies through hydraulic infrastructure.

The peripheral status of the Northeast as a region is paralleled by its marginalization in several discourses—scholarly, journalistic and public. The same is not true, for instance, of Kashmir, whose rebellion against the Indian state only fuels more attention, and occupies centre stage in the Indian imagination of sovereignty and its limits. The Northeast, on the other hand, while seen



as a region of "others", where violence can only be curbed with harsher, arbitrary state violence (as with the application of the *Armed Forces Special Act*, or AFSPA), is not central to the Indian imagination. The brutality of AFSPA is one of the central considerations of Sanjoy Hazarika's *Strangers no more*. The book points to the inability of the Indian state to repeal the act, despite recommendations from high level committees, judges, civil society organisations, and the gut-wrenching accounts of those who have lost loved ones in alleged "encounters". The defining feature of the act, as Hazarika stresses, and as have others reviewing its impacts, is impunity (Gaikwad 2009; Kikon 2009; McDuierra 2009; S. Saikia 2014). The lack of procedure and method, in stark contrast to what the civilian police are subjected to, is mirrored by the lack of any process of redressal or appeals.

The title of Hazarika's book, *Strangers no more*, references a previous book, published nearly two decades ago, called *Strangers of the mist* (Hazarika 2000), one of the better known collection of writings on the region, that is also known outside of it. Much as he argues in the last section of his latest book (discussed later in this essay) that there are significant changes that justify this title, the major part of this collection of writings seems to suggest that not much has changed, at least in terms of the militarized atmosphere that persists in Northeast India. Written in a narrative, journalistic style, *Strangers* weaves in and out of the history and present day contexts of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam. It illustrates how despite some progress and greater awareness about the region than twenty years ago, the fundamental fact, whereby the Northeast emerges as a zone of Otherness persists, where violence, especially state violence, can be carried out with impunity.

Colonial and postcolonial legacies have also served to marginalise and draw boundaries around the Northeast's most vilified inhabitants—its Muslims. Yasmin Saikia's chapter in *A place of relations* on Muslim history in Assam rightly describes this as present/absent history, and its virtual obliteration, save for the presence of Muslims either as invaders and producers of violence or as a humbled, defeated group in school textbooks. In each case, war and violence are sites of the production of this identity, and any other histories of cooperation, friendship or *xanmiholi* (Saikia describes this as a form of tolerant coexistence) are lost. Their reduction to a political category and the obliteration of Muslim contribution to Assamese architecture, agricultural practice, warfare or local cultural norms shape their representation in present-day Assam. Assam's subsequent recognition as a Hindu-majority state has also paved the way for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and similar Hindu fundamentalist organisations in gaining influence in the region today. This is emerging as a new dimension of politics in the Northeast, and is now beginning to be studied in its own right (Longkumer 2017). It exposes yet again the contradictory nature of the inclusion



of the Northeast in Indian studies. On the one hand, the spread of the RSS brings forth a (grisly) dimension of 'inclusion' in India's politics through the spread of right-wing Hindu fundamentalism. On the other hand, as Longkumer's study in Nagaland shows, the means of this propaganda is different in North-eastern India, especially in separatist Nagaland.

Where Muslims do appear, they often appear as villains (in the form of 'illegal immigrants') or as victims of violent massacres or ethnic conflict, as they do in *Strangers no more*. Hazarika revisits Bhagduba Habi, a village from where he reported in 1983 as a journalist about the large-scale massacre against Bengali speaking Muslims. The residents have chosen to bury the past and move on but the vilification of the 'Miyan' and the crude labelling of Bengali-speaking Muslims as illegal continues, more so with the ascent of the anti-Muslim Bhartiya Janata Party. This reflects in the more recent process of updating the National Register of Citizens, where a long-standing exercise of identifying and deporting illegal entrants from Bangladesh is enmeshed with xenophobic rhetoric that threatens to undermine the process. Equally complex is the geopolitical angle—Bangladesh has no intention of taking 'back' suspected illegal immigrants, and there is no agreement in place to facilitate this process. Hazarika also reiterates an argument from some of his previous writings—Bangladesh does better on human development indicators and has better economic conditions overall, why should migrants want to come to India's impoverished Northeast at all (167)? Instead his solution is more effective policing and border control.

Questioning the borderland—emerging perspectives

Part of the scholarly response to questioning the construction of the Northeast as a frontier region has been an attempt to re-imagine its geography. In recent years, another text finding increasing relevance in many Northeast Indian studies is James Scott's *The art of not being governed* (2009). This anarchist treatise of people in upland Southeast Asia (what Scott calls 'Zomia', which includes large parts of Northeastern India), who seemingly find ways to escape oppressive state control, has at its core a new geographical imaginary (Scott, 2009). Many northeast scholars (like van Schendel, discussed below), are asking the pertinent question—why study the Northeast as a frontier of India, as a borderland or periphery of the Indian nation state? Instead, would it not be more fruitful to look at the more contiguous histories of these regions and the areas they border in Myanmar and Bangladesh, even as borderland markets and insurgent training camps across borders prove the enduring nature of these cross-border links (van Schendel 2002; van Schendel in *Geographies of difference*)?



It is drawing on James Scott's ideas that a 'de-partitioning' of Northeast India Studies is what Willem van Schendel calls for in his afterword to *Geographies of difference*. As a region, he reminds us, it did not exist before the end of the British Raj in 1947—he refers to the Northeast as a 'freak child of Partition' (273). Its existence at one corner of the Indian political formation now renders it territorially and politically isolated, its former connections and networks with neighbouring areas lost to the solidification of international (and sometimes hostile) borders. Not all these spatial imaginations are lost, of course. Calls for a greater Nagalim, greater Mizoram and Kamatapur all feature spatial formations that transcend national borders, though as other authors (like Hazarika in *Strangers no more*) point out, there is ambiguity about whether these political projects can be realized. Nonetheless, they challenge the idea of the Northeast as a fixed space, and it is here that van Schendel underlines the importance also of scholars in rejecting the idea of the Northeast as a self-enclosed geographical unit, and instead placing greater importance on the connections across borders and between regions. Efforts towards this approach have already been undertaken—for instance, by the Asian Borderlands Research Network, of which many of the contributing scholars to these volumes, including van Schendel, are a part. A variant of this has been the spatial imaginary of 'Northern South Asia' and the borderlands it contains (Gellner & van Schendel 2013). In a somewhat different vein, historian Indrani Chatterjee has also examined a historiography of monastic traditions, in particular, one that goes beyond what she sees as the work of both colonial and postcolonial historians and interlocutors in erasing a contiguous history, and instead conforming to the categories we see in the region till date (Chatterjee 2013, 2018).

Bengt Karlsson's introduction to *Geographies of difference* also questions the category of the Northeast, echoing van Schendel's call for a new geography, but equally, the importance of focusing on Northeast India *because* it remains, in many ways, a periphery, backwater and frontier. Noting its liminality, and uneasy distance from both South Asian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies, Karlsson sees contemporary scholars responding to this challenge and the need for greater engagement with the region. In particular, with ethnicity and territorial nationalism being the main themes around which Northeast India is studied, he urges a move towards more diverse themes like mobility, class, ambition and aspiration and themes around nature and environment, to name a few. Some of the work that has emerged on Northeast India, especially in the last decade, already looks at questions of ecology, for instance, on the central role of forest and land regulations in the history of the region (A. Saikia 2008, 2011), and Karlsson's own work on environment and politics in Meghalaya (Karlsson 2011).



Many of the contributions in *Geographies of difference* also heed Karlsson's call, stepping outside the traditional study of conflict, militarization, and ethnicity to study other dynamics that reveal unknown facets of what constitutes the Northeast. Iris Odyuo takes on this challenge by representing Nagaland not through the lens of violence or separatism, as it is often seen, but through its local and global connections through the market of Naga art. Looking at a wide variety of marketing practices among Naga artists, the author makes connections between art and ethnicity, art and everyday life in daily markets, art and state practice through government intervention in these practices, and art and the wider global economy, connected through digital media. Teiborlang Kharsyntiew takes on another meaning of art as identity. Looking at fashion as a form of resistance, he sees the influence of Korean fashion among young people in the Northeast as a form of resistance, and a means of setting themselves apart from their mainland counterparts. N. William Singh's essay looks at the role of the Young Mizo Association in crafting Mizo identity, and particularly, in marking ethnic boundaries through language, dress, and the rhetoric of insiders and outsiders in Mizoram.

Some of the essays in *Geographies* step outside the conventional means of studying the Northeast by adding a new perspective to existing concerns. Xonzoi Barbora's chapter on violence in Bodoland acknowledges, like Deka's, the importance of historical constructs and categories in shaping conflict in the region, then ventures beyond that explanation to also look at the role of present-day political economy. Politicised ethnic categories have always been important to the politics of the region, but so too has been the changing rural economy and agrarian practice. Mibi Ete's essay on hydropower dams in Arunachal Pradesh upturns the conventional developmentalist critique of large dams as leading to the annihilation of tribal societies. The essay shows how not all communities resist, instead negotiating terms for themselves through political clientelism, which in itself emerges as a means to manage dissent, by offering or withdrawing benefits or compensation. Hydropower companies often also become an alternative to the state, especially in areas where the state has not reached and where development has been lacking.

Other contributions, like Sean Dowdy's piece on floods and speciation in *A Place of relations*, seemingly retain a classical anthropological perspective, though by focusing on folklore and local materialist perspectives through objects such as sieves and containers, examining a lived narrative about ecology in Assam. Even through looking at questions of ethnicity and community, the focus shifts to the presence of this in an everyday social perspective rather than through the analysis of macro catastrophes and violent events. Amit Baishya's chapter in the volume takes a literary turn, examining the deconstruction of sovereignty through metaphor in Assamese literature written by former rebels.



In *Centrepiece*, literature emerges as a lens to examine contemporary North-eastern society. In a story about a domestic worker finding her curiosity piqued by the viral 'ice bucket challenge', the author navigates the multiple lines of class, caste and patriarchy in an Assamese city. While the story builds up to a satisfying final twist for Chitro, it explores the contradictory urban in Northeast India through her eyes, not yet often seen in academic research about the region. Exceptions exist, of course, such as Duncan McDuire-Ra's recent ethnographic work on the city of Imphal, in Manipur (McDuire-Ra 2016).

An important strand of emerging research looks at the numerous contradictions experienced by women in Northeast India. *Centrepiece*, edited by Parismita Singh, offers a rich variety of voices to this debate, pitched as a volume about women's work in Northeast India. While there is some work on women in Northeast India, it often focuses on their status as victims of violence (CNES 2011; Hazarika in *Strangers no more*). In *A place of relations*, Papori Bora looks at the gendering of politics in Northeast India and the paradoxical ways in which women are cast as agents or victims. For instance, their victimhood, especially with regard to sexual violations, is seen as a proxy for the violation of cultural nationalism, as in the case of Naga resistance. It is on their bodies, through ideas of honour and defilement, that culture is inscribed.

While women's groups have been central in resisting militarization in Northeast India, their symbolic power has often come from being cast as mothers, as with the Naga Mothers Association. Soibam Haripriya shows in *Geographies of difference*, like Bora, that while there may be a women's agitation in Manipur, its legitimacy is grounded in the identity of the protestors as mothers, as with the famous nude protest in 2004, following the rape and murder of a young Manipuri woman by the Indian army. Motherhood marks the safe containment a woman's sexuality and it is the same maternal instinct that Haripriya questions in a poem in *Centerpiece*, suspicious of her lactating breasts, asking 'Do you want to cut them off/place them in cups and run away?' (59).

In another one of Haripriya's poems in the volume, sexuality is tamed through the leering man's comment to the employee at the airline counter, 'Madam, you are beautiful'/She hates it/Hates it/Smiles and says/'Thank you' (77). Such behavior is especially common towards women from Northeast India, seen as a sexualised, racialized other, who are repeatedly harassed in service-related professions, in particular. Gertrude Lamare's piece on women street-vendors also explores the gendered nature of harassment, in this case of hawkers on the streets of Shillong. For many women, hawking on the streets is preferable to domestic labour and allows for reclaiming the traditionally male public space of the streets. Nonetheless, this is not without consequences, as a crackdown from



municipal authorities threatens their status, even as supposedly more empowered women in matrilineal Meghalaya.

When not framed as victims, ideas abound of Northeastern women (especially from tribal communities) as having a more equal status, in comparison with the rest of India. Bora notes that for Naga nationalism, in particular, this is a means of distinguishing the Northeast from the rest of India—Naga civilization emerges as better because of its superior treatment of women. Yet, as Dolly Kikon argues in *Centrepiece*, this nationalism remains patriarchal at its core, willing to accept Naga women as administrators, entrepreneurs or doctors, but not as political representatives with decision-making power. Her argument on the violent resistance of Naga customary courts and tribal bodies (both male-centric institutions) against granting 33 per cent reservation for women in public office nuances the distinction between the patriarchal furore and moralistic imposition in the name of gender parity by the Indian state. The authority of male-centric Naga institutions arises in the backdrop of the Indo-Naga conflict, and is legitimized through Article 371(a), which governs Indo-Naga relations, and favours these bodies as representative of 'customary law'. Nonetheless, she argues, for a truly just resolution to the nexus of power and patriarchy in customary law, it will not do to label all critical, feminist voices as 'anti-Naga', be they from within, or outside Naga society. A genuinely representative political system must not just represent women as a matter of formality, but ensure that this representation comes from the most marginalised, oppressed sections of Naga society as well.

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Women's anger emerges in a myriad of ways in *Centrepiece*, for instance with Jacqueline Zote's half Mizo folktale retelling, half escapist fantasy of abandoning the homestead for the skies or Sanatombi Ningombam's frustrated writer's lament about the children, and man-child who will not let her story emerge into the world, her creative expression finally finding a release only in tears. In some ways these pieces find resonance with other feminist writings about gendered labour but in the specific context of the Northeast, they intersect with other ideas of indigeneity, militarization, racism and a complex notion of the more 'empowered' Northeastern woman.

Reorienting the boundary—The 'new' Northeast

In *Geographies of difference*, Dolly Kikon's chapter on doing fieldwork in the foothills of the Himalayas reminds us of the role of lived experiences in constructing boundaries around the place. In a place like the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border, these interactions illustrate that despite the historiography that has constructed it as such, the Northeast is not a monolithic entity. In Kikon's piece on the same region in *A place of relations*, the emphasis, as with



much of the rest of the book, is on looking at the Northeast not merely from the mainland, but also at the connections within the different regions, sub-regions, groups, communities, conflicts and friendships within it. She looks at the concept of love, or morom, in the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border and its centrality in formulating group identities. Intimacy, sometimes in violent and at other times in tender forms, finding different iterations through different uses of language, informs narratives of inclusion and exclusion, creating multiple senses of belonging in the foothills, where belonging itself is constantly contested. Bonds of friendship are also what Bengt Karlsson returns to, in *A place of relations* on Bonnie Guest House in Shillong. His piece observes that even as an older generation of 'rebels' in Northeast India still see themselves as outside of India, their children instead fight for space as Indians, within the nation-state.

Such is also the main contention of Hazarika in *Strangers no more*. A generation of educated, aspirational young people from Northeast India are migrating out of the region and into different parts of the country, in search of education, jobs, opportunities, and more crucially, recognition. Karlsson and Hazarika both reference the furore around the death of the young man from Arunachal Pradesh, Nido Tania, who was brutally beaten and fatally assaulted for being different, and for daring to call out abuse that was hurled at him as a result. As the ensuing protests made clear, however, young Northeasterners were not just furious about being treated differently given that this has been the fate of the region's inhabitants since the British Empire. Indeed, it is the *terms* of the protest that mark a new narrative—it is *as Indians* that they claim the right to equal treatment, and freedom from discrimination. Hazarika terms them the 'new Indians', well versed in the functioning of the law and constitution, and staking a claim from within, rather than outside of that framework.

Alyen Leeachum's text and tapestry contribution in *Centrepiece* also centers on this experience—of being home and not home, the drabness of concrete in the city contrasted with lush bamboo and snowy hills. Elsewhere in the book, Aheli Moitra makes the reverse journey, an 'outsider' as a journalist in the one of Nagaland's most influential newspapers, learning about the fragile process of 'reconciliation' within the many groups within Nagaland, even as they battle for justice with the Indian state. As with Kikon's reflections on the Assam-Nagaland foothills, such journeys complicate the idea of what 'the Northeast' really represents, and whether it holds any value to those who are categorised as such.

It is, however, also migration that demonstrates the capacity of the 'Northeast' category not just to be one of oppression, but also of solidarity. Duncan McDuie-Ra's chapter in *A place of relations* asserts that while it is a tool of oppression, it is also a category of solidarity. Much as it is problematic and



homogenizing of a diverse set of cultural and social practices, its persistence can be attributed to the fact of lack of alternative categories. In particular, in continuation with his previous detailed ethnography of young Northeastern migrants in Delhi (Das 2016), he notes that experiences of racism especially serve as catalysts in binding migrants from different regions together, even in a 'northeastern' city like Guwahati. In contrast to Hazarika's optimistic framing of Northeastern migrants as the 'new Indians' following Nido Tania's death, McDuie-Ra notes that the media coverage framed 'Indian' and 'Northeastern' as oppositional categories. The coverage around the safety of Delhi took precedence, the protests in the Northeast itself went largely ignored, reinforcing an ignorance of the politics of the Northeast that shapes the experience of migrants elsewhere.

In *Strangers no more*, Hazarika speaks briefly of another form of Northeastern migration—to states like Kerala to work as manual labourers with several of these are young Muslim men, facing persistent underdevelopment and shrinking opportunities in Assam. Barbora's chapter in *Geographies of difference* also briefly mentions the migration of Muslims from Bodoland, and the push factor of repeated ethnic violence that has targeted them. Little research exists about this phenomenon, however, beyond anecdotes and stories that emerge occasionally.

Framing Northeast India

Studies about Northeast India have come a long way from the solely security-driven or exoticising perspectives that once drove academic and policy approaches to the region. Scholars, many of them from the Northeast, and some from outside the region, have looked at the historical construction of boundaries around people and places, and the impact that it has had on the people and politics of the region. Another, newer strand of research has looked at other aspects of society in the Northeast, deconstructing the idea of the 'Northeast' itself, in which women's writing and writing about women in the Northeast has been especially important. As young people especially leave the region in search of work and opportunities in other parts of India, a new Northeastern subjectivity has emerged, infusing a once oppressive category with the potential for solidarity.

The growing scholarship about the region, of course, has not yet covered the wide chasm that separates it from studies about India more generally. Even as representations of the Northeast do appear in studies about India more now than before, it is clear that the richest material has emerged from those who, instead of plugging the gap by arguing for more comparison with other parts of India, have taken the exceptional treatment given to the region as a cue to



understand its processes separately. On new forms of media, websites like Raiot¹ (to which several of the authors mentioned here have also contributed; Gertrude Lamare is a member of its editorial collective) also challenge Indian media's neglect of the region. Raiot is run from Meghalaya, and often features contributions in Khasi as well as English. While it does not confine itself exclusively to Northeast-related issues, it is nonetheless an important resource in making sense of the contemporary Northeast in the voices of its own people.

Yasmin Saikia highlights an important voice that has been absent among these, those of the Northeast's Muslims (both Bengali and Assamese speaking). With their legitimacy constantly in question, fewer accounts of their sense of being part of the region exist, at least in the English language. Along with Hazarika, others have also documented the attacks on Muslims in the course of various movements and rebellions in the region, framing them as victims (Hussain 2000). New media has again enabled some of these voices to emerge, such as through blogs of students and activists, again writing in languages other than English as well². This review has been fairly narrow in scope as it has only given consideration to publications in the English language on the region, though it must be added that given the structure of international academia, it is these that circulate elsewhere in the world. Equally, very often English enables conversation across Northeastern voices, like in *Centrepiece*, gaining in dialogue, to some extent, what it loses in representations.

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Each of these volumes represents a perspective or amalgamation of perspectives on where to study Northeast India from. From locating its present in its history to unpacking its complexity, to understanding a once fixed boundary as being rendered more fluid through mobility. What they all represent, nonetheless, is that despite the numerous adverse consequences of drawing static borders around a dynamic region, there is indeed a rich body of scholarship from researchers who have engaged deeply with the region, therein shedding greater light on a region that has far too long been neglected by those who study India and South Asia.

Endnotes

¹ <http://raiot.in/>

² <https://abdulkazad.wordpress.com/tag/tiss/>

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