

Book Review

Identity and Marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for Social Science Research. Edited by Hoineilhing Sitlhou. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2023. Paperback. Pp. xxviii + 324; ISBN 978-93-5442-387-1

Numerous works on the North East of India have attempted to define and analyse the region in its various aspects such as geography, politics, culture and society. While many have examined the region in the light of violence, turmoil and conflict, others have attempted to go to the root of the above issues, and have looked at the region's relationship with the centre, or what is often called mainland India. This relationship with mainland India is often seen in differential terms vis-à-vis its geographical distance, sociocultural and racial differences, and political and administrative aspects. Some such works published in the past decade are *Northeast India: A Place of Relations* (2017), edited by Yasmin Saikia and Amit R. Baishya. Sanjoy Hazarika's *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast* (2018), and *Geographies of Difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies* (2018), edited by Melanie Vandenhelsken, et. al. The year 2023 saw two works on the marginality of the North East: one on its marginality vis-à-vis the Indian nation state, titled *Marginality in India: Perspectives of Marginalisation from the Northeast*, edited by Kedilezo Kikhi and Dharma Rakshit Gautam; and the second, under review here, on aspects of marginality within the region titled *Identity and Marginality in Northeast India* edited by Hoineilhing Sitlhou.

Emerging out of a national seminar on "Identity and Marginality in North East India: Challenges for Social Science Research", organised by the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, held on 16-17 January 2017, *Identity and Marginality in Northeast India* contains chapters that were developed from papers presented at the seminar. The aim of the book, as pointed out by Sitlhou, is to rewrite identity and redefine marginality in Northeast India. In the introductory chapter titled "Identity and Marginality", Sitlhou revisits the definition of marginality to use it for conceptualising the North East as a marginal region. What makes the North East a marginal region is, according to her, its underdevelopment, and limited access to resources and opportunities. She attempts to understand this marginality in terms of various aspects such as the region's geographical and physical positioning. She also looks at this marginality as a British colonial legacy, where terms such as "tribe" and "backward areas" were used to conceptualize the inhabitants of the region, thus creating a concept of the "Other" vis-à-vis the rest of India. These perceptions of the North East and its inhabitants have, in contemporary times, according to Sitlhou, continued to adversely affect northeasterners in the various Indian cities. Thus, the marginalization of the North East and northeasterners is a result of not only spatial distance

but also their different physical and cultural attributes. Like many scholars and commentators on the region, Sitlhou also says that the North East cannot be portrayed as a homogenous category. While bringing up its heterogeneous character, she points at the various processes of marginalisation, including those that take place within the marginalised groups.

The book is divided into six sections, of which, the first is titled “Politics of Difference and the Articulation of Identities”. Sajal Nag’s “Tribes, Colonialism and Postcolonial Predicament in Northeast India”, the first essay in this section, traces the changing self-perception of the tribal communities of the region, under the influence of colonial and missionary writings. The essay begins by referring to a memorandum submitted by the Naga Club to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1930. This memorandum is a testament to the Naga’s pride, their high self-esteem and their low regard for the plainsmen whom they often raided and who appeared weak and lacking in courage. Since they have always been the conquerors, the Nagas refused to be placed under the plainsmen. However, by 1947, this rhetoric was replaced by the refusal to be at the mercy of far-advanced plainsmen, themselves being “backward”. Sajal Nag locates the cause of this changed self-perception in the numerous works by missionaries who were posted among the various hill tribes of the region. Citing from numerous such works, Nag goes on to argue how the tribals were painted as savage, unhygienic, “demon worshippers”, lazy and prone to drunkenness, while the missionaries carried out a rigorous project of detribalisation and Christianisation. He points to the civilisational discourse used by the missionaries and British ethnographers vis-à-vis their plains counterparts which resulted in the tribals losing their confidence, pride and self-esteem, and becoming marginalised.

Papori Bora refers to the emergence of various colonial ethnographic works on the northeastern tribes in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in her chapter titled “Interrogating India’s Northeast as an Object of Knowledge Production”. She argues that these early ethnographic works were instrumental in categorising the various tribes as the Mongoloid racial type. Placing Edward Gait’s *A History of Assam* (1906) within the discourse of Orientalism, Papori Bora argues that Gait’s book was instrumental in forming colonial Assam’s identity as the ‘Mongolian other’. She says that it is from Gait’s text that India and colonial Assam came to be understood as binary opposites, a perception that continued to define the postcolonial perception of Assam and the rest of North East India. Bora also refers to the assimilation versus isolation debate that dominated postcolonial India’s policy towards the North East. Referring to G.S. Ghurye’s assimilationist position regarding the tribes, Bora points to the continued influence of Orientalist perspectives in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology in postcolonial India. Thus, from a nationalist Hindu civilisational approach, the tribes were understood as backward Hindus. She traces the emergence of the North East as an object of study (lie India was for Indology), to the need for postcolonial India to know the region and govern its people. She concludes that the Northeast has always been perceived as lagging behind India in terms of history and modernity, and has always been studied as an ‘Other’ to the Indian self.

In the second section of the book titled “Colonialism and Northeast India”, Malsawmdawngliana and Suryasikha Pathak again look at the influence of colonial historiography, ethnography and administration on the history of the region. Malsawmdawngliana’s “Colonialism and History Writing: The Mizo Experience” looks at early historical and anthropological accounts of the Mizos produced by

colonial administrators, military men and missionaries to argue that those writings were responsible for uprooting many aspects of Mizo society, replacing them with colonial categories which continue to define Mizo historiography. The author states that most of those early accounts were mere descriptions of the community and its practices and carried no deep analysis of Mizo society. Malsawmdawngliana also brings up the debatable aspect of the generic name 'Mizo' and concludes by highlighting the exclusion of Mizo orality as the cause for the limitation in Mizo historiography. A similar limitation in colonial accounts of the North East is highlighted by Venusa Tinyi in "Megalithic Culture of Chakhesang Nagas" in the fifth section of the book. Tinyi examines the Chakhesang megalithic culture from two perspectives, namely that of the colonial outsiders and that of the Chakhesang people, the insiders, and highlights the discrepancies met by contemporary Naga researchers while attempting to understand their culture due to the inconsistencies in colonial narratives.

While Malsawmdawngliana traces back to colonial and missionary writings to make sense of the limited Mizo history and historiography, in "Census and Identity Politics among the Plains Tribes in Colonial Assam" Suryasikha Pathak attempts to make sense of the identity politics, the numbers game and the electoral politics of representation in the North East, and especially in Assam, by tracing back to the colonial census records from 1881 onwards which categorized the population according to religion and language. The census, which originated as a part of ethnographic enquiry, and the need to know the people for better governance, she says, went on to have a complex relationship with the colonial subjects who used the census in various ways. She argues that the census enumeration was instrumental in making the identity of the plains tribe a political reality, and thus the rise and fall in their number in the census were informed by the growth of political awareness. She concludes by pointing out that the communitarian politics of the 1930s and 1940s were to an extent, the result of the relationship between census and political aspirations.

North East India's complex dynamics with mainland India, issues of boundaries, language and identity politics have been the subject of many works on the region. What makes this book unique is the attempt to move out of the centre-periphery dynamics by looking at Northeasterners living in the 'centre' and exploring their experiences of marginality. Hoineilhing Sitlhou and Sarah Punathil dwell upon the racial discrimination and violence faced by Northeasterners in Delhi by surveying the various experiences faced by Northeasterners belonging to heterogeneous categories of state, language, gender, and occupation. They argue that the presence of the Northeasterners in cities like Delhi "blurred the prevailing boundary between the Indian nation state and its perceived essential Other, the Northeast" (p. 111). They became a visible category, outsiders living in the 'centre' which resulted in increased racial discrimination, abuse and violence. This discrimination, they say, questioned the identity of the Northeasterners as Indians. In "Northeastern Migrants in Delhi: Racial Discrimination, Violence and State Response", Sitlhou and Punathil also look at the report of the Bezbaruah Committee, 2014, as a form of state response to this problem of racial discrimination and violence. They point out that the recommendations made by the Bezbaruah Committee and the successful implementation of some of them have improved the situation for the Northeastern migrants in Delhi. Thanggoulen Kipgen's chapter "Northeast Youth Migration to Cities: The Kuki Case in Delhi" examines the causes of the rising rate of migration of the Kukis to the various metropolitan cities of India. It also explores the reasons behind

Delhi being the most favoured destination for Kuki migration. It concludes that apart from the lucrative job opportunities available, it is also the existence of a close-knit community of Kukis in the city that makes Delhi a preferred destination.

In Section IV titled “Negotiating Gender, Culture and Identity”, there are three chapters; “Alternative Sexuality and Civil Society in Mizoram” by Lalhmingawii, “Women in Conflict Situations: Experiences of Marginalisation of Displaced Kuki Women in Manipur” by Ruth Nengneihing, and “Christianity and Gender: A Study of Protestant Mizo Women” by V. Sawmveli. The first is based on research conducted on MSM (‘men who have sex with men’) in Aizawl, Mizoram. Lalhmingawii refers to Mizo oral history to highlight the possible existence of alternative sexuality in pre colonial Mizo society, which was subsequently criminalised during the colonial period. By elaborating upon the incompatibility of homosexuality and Christianity, and the attitudes of Mizo civil society groups such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) towards alternative sexuality and the scrapping of Section 377 of the IPC by Delhi High Court in 2009, the author examines the stigma and marginalisation faced by the MSM sex workers in Aizawl. Their non normative sexuality is stigmatised as deviant by the Mizo society where Christianity influences all aspects of life and where civil society organisations like the YMA entrusted with the duty of safeguarding Mizo society function as vigilantes preventing the MSM sex workers from earning their livelihood. The influence of Christianity on Mizo society and its role in marginalising Mizo women is explored by V. Sawmveli in “Christianity and Gender”. In this chapter, the author debunks the popular notion that Mizo women have a better status in society compared to women in other parts of India because of Christianity and literacy. By exploring the various ways in which the three main Protestant churches in Mizoram, Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod (MPC), the Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) and the Evangelical Church of Maraland (ECM) prevent women from occupying important positions within the church, and emphasize the submissive roles Christian women are supposed to play in the Christian family dynamics, Sawmveli argues that gender inequality and marginalization of women are perpetuated by the Protestant Christian Community in Mizoram.

The marginalised status of women is also explored in “Women in Conflict Situations” where Ruth Nengneihing studies displaced Kuki women in Manipur during the Naga-Kuki conflict of the 1990s. Some of the most enduring impacts of this conflict were the large-scale displacement of the affected, re-settlement in colonies and shift in occupation. In all of these, Nengneihing argues that women were affected in extreme ways. She looks at the vulnerability suffered by these women as they shouldered family responsibilities in the absence of their men, faced danger of sexual assault and trauma, and in the resettlement colonies, lived in congested spaces and suffered lack of privacy, malnutrition, and other health issues, and were forced to look for alternative ways of earning livelihood. Her chapter calls for understanding the various issues faced by conflict-affected women by considering the importance of women’s rights and gender equality.

In “Livelihood Interventions and Marginalisation in Land and Forest Rights of Rural Khasi Women” in the fifth section titled “Indigeneity, Land and Identity”, Rekha M. Shangpliang highlights the close affinity with nature shared by the Khasis, a matrilineal society, where women are considered central figures in the family, and yet have little power or agency outside the home. She elaborates Khasi women’s

important role in this close affinity with nature and ecological sustainability. However, she says, in the policies and schemes adopted by the Government of India towards rejuvenation of forests in the region, Khasi women have been severely marginalised. Re-iterating the fact that the matrilineal Khasi society is hardly gender egalitarian, Shangpliang shows that while the Government of India's control over the forest of the region has resulted in reducing the Khasi women's reliance on forest for livelihood, Khasi customary laws which allow women no role in village or resource management has further curtailed their agency by denying them any role in forest management.

The sixth section of the book is titled "Borders, States and Markets", and the two chapters in this section are both focused on Mizoram. The first of the two, "Marginalisation: Everyday Life Activities at the Myanmar-Mizoram Borderland" by N. William Singh explores the marginalisation of Chin migrants in Mizoram, who continue to live in the fringes without an officially recognised status, without any established agencies to voice their demands, and without any political rights. Singh examines their everyday life practices such as their attempt to find livelihood, their employment in informal sectors and their taking to illegal trades such as drug peddling, to understand their marginalised status. By tracing the history of cross-border Chin migration from Myanmar into Mizoram since the 1960s, he points out that assimilation of these migrants into Mizo society has taken place in varying degrees depending on the social status of the migrants. He also goes on to unearth the fact that underneath the façade of a peaceful Mizoram, there are various forms of marginalisation between groups that are in truth, ethnically one.

Lalmangaihi Chhakchhuak examines the relationship between the growth of global markets in Mizoram and the social risk faced by marginal communities in "Global Markets, Local Risks and Social Marginality: A Study of Cancer-Affected People in Mizoram". The chapter provides a historical account of how Mizo society evolved from agriculture to trade. This transition was, the author says, paved by colonial rule which transformed Mizo culture making way for global markets. The author shows that border trade has played important role for the Mizos. But it has also been accompanied by major complications for people residing near the border. Faced by illegal immigration, traffic of illegal items has adversely affected the social security of those people whose health and consumption cultures are severely impacted. By studying the presence of global market in Mizoram and the resulting change in its consumption culture, Chhakchhuak foregrounds the relationship between "changing material conditions, social marginality, consumption culture and disease-producing conditions" (297).

Identity and Marginality in Northeast India attempts to highlight the heterogeneity of North East India by looking at the different groups and their unique experiences and circumstances from colonial times to the present. It examines not only the diverse ways in which the North East and its people face marginalization vis-à-vis India but also how there also exist different practices of marginalization within the region. Although the book might appear to be more focused on Mizoram, as there are no chapters that look at how identity and marginality play out in states like Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, it is nevertheless a rich resource for scholars interested in the North East.

References

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