

Why the Northeast cannot be treated as a ‘single homogenous’ territory

The States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are home to numerous ethnic communities who have migrated from ‘all points of the compass’ and their heterogeneity and differing experiences must be highlighted

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[SUDIPTA DATTA](#)



Tiwa tribesmen perform their traditional dance as they take part in the Wanchuwa festival in Bormarjong village in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. | Photo Credit: File Photo

Identity and Marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for Social Sciences Research, Edited by Hoineilhing Sitlhou (Orient BlackSwan), 2023

The Northeast region, comprising the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, is home to numerous ethnic communities who have migrated from “all points of the compass,” with the majority of

them belonging to the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid racial grouping. In her Introduction to *Identity and Marginality in Northeast India*, Hoineilhing Sitlhou writes that the tendency of conceptualising the region as a single homogenous territory is problematic.

Not a single entity

Such a construction determines how the region was governed by British colonisers earlier and the Indian state now, by construing the idea of a shared identity among people from various parts of the region. The Northeast, considered a marginal geographical space, says Sitlhou, is as diverse as India itself in terms of linguistic, cultural and ethnic representation. The recurrent theme of the volume she has edited — a result of a seminar, 'Identity and Marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for Social Sciences Research', in 2017, organised by the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad — is that the region cannot be portrayed merely as a homogenous category. There is need to highlight the elements of heterogeneity of the different groups and their experiences, contestations and conflicts.

Social realities

She says to take into account social realities of the region, it is necessary to discuss issues like indigeneity, policy, economy, migration land rights, insurgency, militarisation, state violence and laws like AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), reservation and so on. If people from the Northeast as migrant citizens experience marginality — and sometimes violence — in cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Bengaluru, there is discrimination against outsiders living in northeast India as well, she writes.

With the aim to understand the underlying dynamics of the region, the book is divided into six main sections: Politics of Difference and the Articulation of Identities; Colonialism and Northeast India; Race, Ethnicity and Migration; Negotiating Gender, Culture and Identity; Indigeneity, Land and Identity; and Borders, States and Markets.

Sitlhou and Salah Punathil's chapter, 'Northeastern Migrants in Delhi: Racial Discrimination, Violence and State Response', explores the prejudice and hostility that northeasterners have experienced in the national capital in the recent past. The Bezbaruah Committee which was set up in 2014 to look into the various concerns of citizens hailing from the northeastern States living in various parts of the country had recommended reaching out to people from the Northeast via social media, and a special helpline (1093) was synchronised with the helpline number 100. Asked whether these were useful and if these had solved problems faced by Northeast migrants, 68.4% of respondents gave credit to the efforts made by the government, and only a few (12.6%) were sceptical about these provisions. A member of the Bezbaruah Committee, Alana Golmei, however said the results are far from satisfactory: "We are asking for the special helpline number to be made a national helpline instead of it being operational in Delhi alone...."

A 25-year-old research student from Jawaharlal Nehru University said education is the answer to the problems faced by people from northeast India. "Knowing the history of

Northeast India, and to be more precise, [the fact that] Northeast is in India, will really help in connecting people from different regions as citizens of one nation.”

Women in conflict regions

If we take a closer look at the region itself, several States, including Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, have seen waves of violence over ethnic issues, land, identity and so forth. In the 1990s, conflict between two ethnic communities, the Kukis and Nagas, led to massive displacement, and Ruth Nengneihing, in her paper, ‘Women in Conflict Situations: Experiences of Marginalisation of Displaced Kuki Women in Manipur’, looks at the consequences of such disturbances on health, food, livelihood and economic security, and the long road to rehabilitation.

In her study, she found that there were cases where a woman headed the household after being displaced and shouldered the entire responsibility of supporting the family. Women often became the primary breadwinners in their families due to forced displacement, and/or death of their husbands or other male members of the family.

Nengneihing’s study focuses on the Kukis, one of the three major ethnic groups in Manipur, the other two being the Meiteis and the Nagas. During the conflict, displacement happened among the Nagas too. With agriculture being the basic means of livelihood, land is a highly valued entity. The conflict led to the alienation of land from both the parties, and especially from the displaced population. There was a noticeable shift in the nature of occupation before and after the conflict, she notes. In the sample group from Chavangphai, which was inhabited by a fully displaced population, the majority worked as manual contractual labourers, while a few were skilled in handicrafts.

The women faced persisting health issues like malnutrition, post-traumatic stress or other injuries. The risk of contracting communicable diseases also increased due to widespread poverty, congested living conditions, lack of awareness and the absence of adequate healthcare services — these are issues which women are facing in the present conflict in Manipur as well.

In the Foreword, Purendra Prasad discusses the process of marginalisation within marginalised groups. For instance, tribal bodies of Nagaland, which elected its first two women MLAs this year, are opposing 33% reservation for women which they claim will infringe on Naga customary laws protected by the Constitution.

Similarly, even though “popular narratives glorify the status of women in Manipur and the matriarchal structure in Khasi society, in actuality, the system is only matrilineal with the power resting with maternal male members, and thus inherently patriarchal like any other society.”