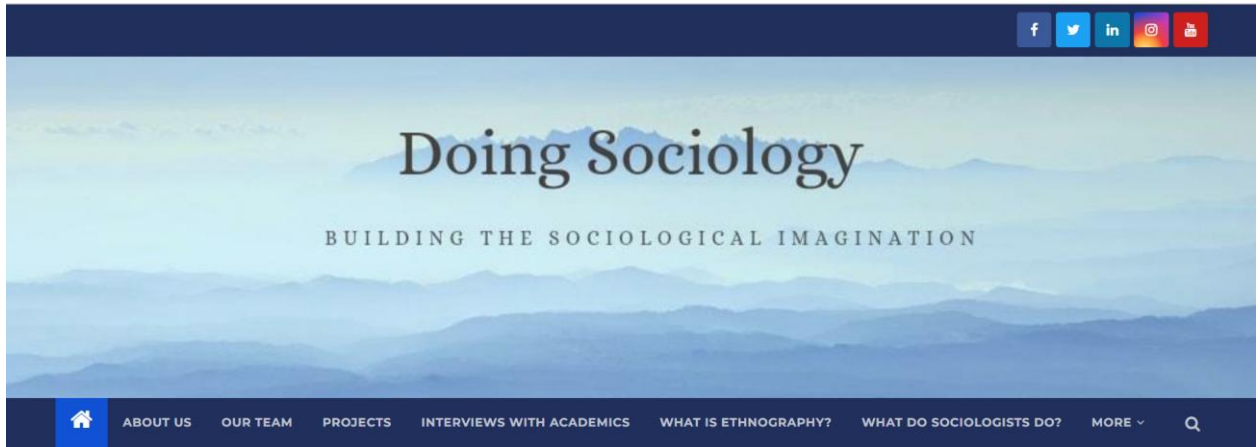


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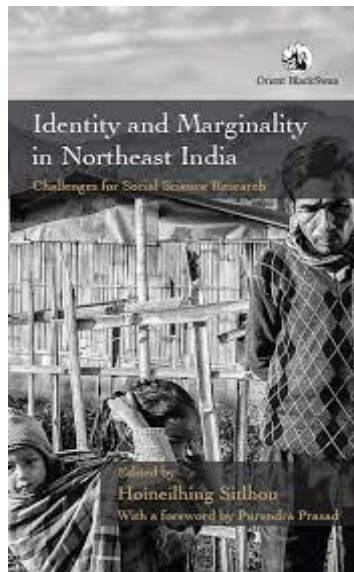


BOOK REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Identity and Marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for Social Science Research edited by Hoineilhing Sitlhou (2023): A Review by Vijitha Rajan



© JAN 8, 2024 Identity, marginality, North-east India, social sciences



Identity and Marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for Social Science Research edited by Hoineilhing Sitlhou and published by Orient BlackSwan in 2023, takes us on a journey through the diverse and complex landscape of Northeast India. By challenging the prevailing notion of the region and its people as homogenous, the book unravels the multifaceted tapestry of identities, experiences, and conflicts within Northeast India, questioning various stereotypical perceptions.

The book's thematic structure is divided into six parts containing 13 chapters. The introductory chapter by Hoineilhing Sitlhou sets the stage by addressing central concerns related to marginality and identity within Northeast India. It underscores the impact of spatial marginalization on resource access and opportunities, tracing these issues back to the colonial constructions of the centre and the margin. Sitlhou further emphasizes the significance of understanding internal conflicts within the region, particularly in terms of migration, gender dynamics, violence, and discrimination.

Chapters in the first and second sections further expound upon the introductory arguments. Sajal Nag's chapter delves into the transformation of once-powerful Naga and Mizo tribes into subordinate subjects due to colonial and missionary narratives that portrayed them as uncivilized. Papori Bora's chapter highlights the politics of knowledge construction in colonial anthropological discourse, illustrating how it has cast Northeast India as the spatial-temporal other of the Indian nation-state. Bora points out that these exclusionary narratives continued to influence nationalist Indian sociology.

Subsequent chapters by Malsawmdawngliana and Suryasikha Pathak examine problems associated with colonial historiography and classification systems. Malsawmdawngliana's analysis of Mizo history and evangelization efforts underscores the exclusion of indigenous oral traditions, constructing a homogenous Mizo subject from a Western standpoint. Suryasikha Pathak explores the relationship between the colonial census and identity formation in Assam, demonstrating the effect of this census on identity framing and its political distortions.

The third section, comprising chapters by Hoineilhing Sitlhou & Salah Punathil and Thanggoulen Kipgen, focuses on the experiences of discrimination and violence faced by northeastern migrants in Delhi. Sitlhou & Punathil not only highlight the various forms of violence experienced by these migrants but also explore the potential for addressing their discrimination, as exemplified by the Bezbaruah Committee. Kipgen's study, on the other hand, investigates the migration of Kuki youth from Manipur to Delhi, revealing the push and pull factors guiding their decision to move to the city.

The second half of the book, spanning parts IV, V, and VI, centres on three distinct themes. The first theme explores gender, culture, and identity. Lalhmingmawii's chapter delves into how civil society in Mizoram engages with alternative sexuality, highlighting the continued use of colonial tropes to discriminate against men who have sex with men. V. Sawmveli's chapter explores women's lives in connection with the church and its teachings, emphasizing the stereotypes surrounding gender and sexuality within the Christian tradition. Ruth Nengneilhing's chapter sheds light on the impact of the Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur on various aspects of women's lives.

The second theme revolves around indigeneity, land, and identity. Venusa Tinyi critiques the Western lens employed by colonial writers in understanding Naga culture, specifically in relation to the practice of erecting monoliths. Rekha M. Shangpliang discusses the differential impact of livelihood interventions on the lives of rural Khasi women and highlights the gendered customary laws in Khasi society that disempower women.

The third theme explores questions of borders, states, and markets. N. William Singh focuses on the marginalization of Chin migrants in the Mizoram-Myanmar border region, while Lalhmangaihi Chhakchhuak analyzes the deteriorating health conditions in Mizo society in the context of global markets and consumer culture.

In conclusion, the book's exploration of a diverse array of issues is an indication of the heterogeneity of the Northeast, both as an epistemic category and as a site for empirical research. While it offers a counter-narrative and opens numerous opportunities for social science research in Northeast India, it is important to acknowledge that the attempt to encompass such a broad spectrum of issues related to identity and marginality may appear ambitious and lacks a clear logic behind the amalgamation of specific themes. The book's initial sections offer valuable insights into the dominant epistemologies of the Northeast and their historical legacies, particularly relevant to scholars engaged in Northeastern research. Subsequent sections are based on specific themes, allowing scholars to select chapters relevant to their inquiries. Overall, the book breaks new ground in knowledge construction in the Northeast and raises awareness of the politics surrounding its appropriation. In doing so, it provides fresh perspectives and illuminates the complex landscape of identity and marginality in the context of Northeast India.

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