

## Mapping a Contested Space: Northeast India Through the Ages

Debajyoti Biswas<sup>†</sup>

### Abstract

Northeast India, home to diverse ethnic communities, has often been described as the cauldron of ethnic violence and insurgencies. The ongoing crisis in Manipur (in the form of a fratricidal war between the Meiteis and Kukis) and the State's failure to contain it calls for deeper scrutiny of the geopolitics of the region. Whereas the region was once a crossroad that facilitated the movement of these ethnic groups, its transformation into a frontier area during colonial times and as a borderland after India's partition turned it into a contested space. Further, with the introduction of colonial modernity, the old socio-cultural and economic structures have radically altered the relationship among the communities giving space to necropolitics. In this context, by referring to Rituparna Bhattacharyya's edited volume *Northeast India through the Ages: A Transdisciplinary Perspective on Prehistory, History, and Oral History* and other research works, this commentary maps the transformation of the territory into a necrospace. In doing so, this study argues that while much of the complications had been foisted due to the colonial map-making process and immigration, an ethnic resurgence had further facilitated the growth of necropolitics in the region. Additionally, the study will focus on the representations of socio-cultural history and politics by relating those to the multifaceted aspect of necropolitics and its entangled colonial history.

**Keywords:** Biopolitics; Necropolitics; Northeast India; Colonial Modernity; Ethnonationalism.

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<sup>†</sup> Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam, India,  
Email: deb61594@gmail.com



# **NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH THE AGES**

**A TRANSDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE ON  
PREHISTORY, HISTORY, AND ORAL HISTORY**

Edited by  
Rituparna Bhattacharyya



## Introduction

Writing about the power and influence exerted by the European colonisers over their colonised subjects, Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* argues that “The Orient was Orientalised not only because it was discovered to be “oriental” ... but also because it could be - that is, submitted to being- made oriental” (Said[1978] 2001: 6). Following this Said goes on to explain why and how Flaubert could speak for Kuchuk Hanem and represent her, thereby asserting the position of dominance and power over the East. The same is true for India’s North-east (henceforth NE), a volatile and troubled zone that has been orientalist differently (Roluahpuia, 2020). The transformation of this region into a periphery and its misrepresentation, misappropriation and maladministration by the colonisers sowed the seed of violence that came to full fruition after 1947. There have been many published works on India’s Northeast that attempt to address the issues that afflict the region; however, very few works are as comprehensive as Rituparna Bhattacharyya’s edited volume entitled *Northeast India Through the Ages: A Transdisciplinary Perspective on Prehistory, History, and Oral History* (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003157816>).

Much of NE’s political, social and cultural histories have been written by “experts” who either do not belong to this region or by local experts who tend to focus on only a particular region or a specific issue. Bhattacharyya’s edited volume overcomes both these shortcomings as the contributors are not only familiar with the local issues but also speak for themselves. This representation should not be considered as a subjective projection; rather, these should be seen as an enabling discourse that moves from the erstwhile disability (or the inability) to the ability to speak for the ethnic self, the ability to dispassionately represent the genuine problems that afflict the region.

Furthermore, this also helps us in narrowing down the danger of a single story as the histories of the ethnic communities intersect with each other in the different chapters. The edited volume gives us an insight into the region’s

religious, social, cultural, political and linguistic history apart from the archaeological findings and reorganisation of territorial boundaries. Except for Arunachal Pradesh, all the northeastern states have been discussed from the perspective of history, culture, and conflict in the fifteen chapters. These varied chapters focus on issues like origin stories, religion, language, women, food culture, ethnicity and the causes of conflict. Like most research works of recent times, this volume undoubtedly introduces us to the “troubled periphery” but with objective scrutiny. It has been the trend of recent research works to describe the conflict in the Northeast as a conflict between the centre and periphery, between state and ethnic groups with the subversive intention of challenging the Indian state. This edited volume is a departure from this trend as it does not analyse the region through the lens of nationalism or ethnonationalism, rather, it is analysed objectively by examining the archaeological findings, ethnic histories, oral narratives, and ethnic affiliations. At a time when Manipur is going through a crisis, this book inevitably allows us to understand the causes and the nature of the ongoing conflict. By contesting the politics of misrepresentation, this review commentary foregrounds the necessity and importance of insider perspectives. As such, through these nuanced representations, one can understand how conflict and contestations afflict the lives of the northeasterners. This study will focus on the representations of socio-cultural history and politics in the individual chapters by relating those to the multifaceted aspect of necropolitics and its entangled colonial history.

## Socio-Cultural History

The introductory Chapter, *Northeast India through the Ages* by Rituparna Bhattacharyya, contextualises the purpose of this volume. By paying homage to Mohammed Taher and his pioneering works on the "geographical scholarship" (2) on the region, the author delves back into the prehistory and ancient history of Assam. This geographical region was much different from the present-day geospatial reality. Seeing through an anthropological lens,

Bhattacharyya draws from mythological sources and archaeological findings to map the region's cultural, social and geographical history. She argues that the Kāmarūpa Kingdom encompassed the present states of Assam, Bengal and Bhutan. These findings give cultural contiguity to the region with its neighbours who were also a part of this State at some point in time. She gives a precise history of the Muslim invasions and brings out the lesser-known accounts of Vallabhadeva and Sandhya and the latter's role in the formation of Kamatapur. This Chapter also deals with the prevalence of Hinduism and its influence on communities. It will be pertinent to mention in this connection that Hinduism is often confused with polytheism. On the contrary, there is no rigid dominance of any ritual or textual authority; nor is there a linear genealogy to trace the development of rituals practised by the Hindus. There are opposed schools of thought and practices among the Hindus as has been the characteristic feature of this land. For instance, Shaivism, Saktism, monotheism, animism and even Buddhism are all accommodated within Hindu practices. Surya Pahar, an archaeological site, is a local example where the site is filled with "rock-cut sculptors of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina faiths" (54). The Pir Baba Dargah, located at Ulubari in Guwahati, is frequented more by Hindus than by people from other faiths. Even the Muslim invaders who settled down in the valley after facing defeat at the hands of Ahom have completely assimilated with the Assamese culture and tradition (see, Gait, 2001). Bhattacharyya's Chapter gives a precise account of the region's transformations due to colonisation. The next Chapter by Abani Kumar Bhagabati is also a tribute to Professor Mohammed Taher. The Chapter brings out the trajectory of Professor Taher's research works and his valuable contribution to the field of geography. Bhagabati's Chapter gives information relating to historical works, which will be helpful to researchers working in the field of cultural and geographical history of Assam. The third Chapter, entitled *Assam from Prehistory to History* by Sukanya Sharma takes a decolonial approach to deciphering the cultural

history of the region. Although much of the findings remain hypothetical, this is an important chapter that positions the Neolithic culture of Assam within the East Asiatic Neolithic complex. Based on archaeological evidence like pottery, household tools, bone and ivory, the Chapter goes on to analyse the items found in Daojali Hading. These findings reveal that the region was inhabited by people long before the known historical accounts, and as such the region cannot be termed as terra incognita. Although the region's material culture can be ascertained to some extent, information about the ethnicity of the people inhabiting the region could not be traced due to a lack of "skeletal data" (38). In a later chapter (see Chapter 7 on Meghalaya), Queenbala Marak assigns the reason for this lack to the acidic quality of the soil in NE India. The study also argues that based on DNA analysis, it can be surmised that society shifted from exogamy to endogamy over a period of time. Sharma's Chapter is a key to understanding the food habit, cultural and ethnic mixing and cultivation methods of this region. Like Bhattacharyya, Sharma also provides data linking the region's history to the Hindu culture from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD onward. She writes, "The state could afford to train its sculptors in the best sculpting schools of the period across India or sculptors from these schools came and worked here. That is how we have the ancient Kamarupa School of art with a strong influence of Gupta art here from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century AD" (52). Based on the rock inscription, temple histories and architecture it can be surmised that either Hinduism was localised in the region, or there had been sufficient influence of the region on Hinduism, as we can see in Chapter 12. Whereas this Chapter gives us a sketch of the Aryan cultural hegemony, Sangeeta Gogoi's essay, Chapter 4, shows the rupture in this tradition with the advent of Ahoms in the region from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century onward.

Sangeeta Gogoi's Chapter is crucial in understanding the region's social, cultural, economic and political transformation. By providing a detailed account of the migratory route of the Ahoms and their contribution to the

agro-economy of the region, she outlines how the Ahoms negotiated, dominated and also assimilated with the tribes and the local population of the region. She highlights the difference between Ahom's arrival and the alien intrusion from the west of the valley in terms of "imperialistic and commercial needs" (63). The Chapter provides interesting accounts of the Barahis, Chutias and Morans and their encounter with the Ahoms. In this instance, the Ahom Buranjis become a rich source of written records of the history of Assam. However, the Chapter delineates the cultural transactions by constructing a binary between tribal practices and Hinduism, differentiating racial and cultural practices. The undifferentiated animistic world of disparate tribal rituals is not different from the cultural practices of non-tribal people who worship trees, celestial bodies, and animals across the Indian subcontinent. While narrating the advent of the Ahoms, Gogoi gives a threadbare account of the roots and routes of Ahom immigration and their cultural ties with the other Tai groups living in North East India and other South Asian countries. The Chapter deals with the language, culture, tradition, and the two versions of the history of Ahom's arrival in this region, opening up the scope for further research in this area. Interestingly, the Ahoms had a very well-structured polity and a framework of state formation called Baan-Muang. This is precisely one of the reasons the Ahoms were organised and disciplined. The leader commanded the loyalty and respect of the subjects, and with only a small contingent of 9000 people, they could establish one of the longest-ruling kingdoms that defeated the Mughals seventeen times. Despite being powerful, they assimilated with the local culture and adopted their language and religious practices. The Ahoms contributed to the growth of agricultural technology for wet rice cultivation, introduced the tradition of Buranjis, affected the culture, created an administrative framework and maintained diplomatic relationships with hostile tribes. Gogoi claims that there was surplus food production in the region. But this claim appears to negate the official reports of Mills, who stated that

Assamese practised subsistence farming in the region. This Chapter brings out a very important aspect of naming the region and its origin. The Chapter critically analyses the factors leading to the rise of Ahoms and also their subsequent disintegration owing to internal intrigues, conflicts and politics. Apart from sketching the geographical extent of the Ahom Kingdom, the Chapter also highlights the growth of various religious sects in the region under the patronage of the Ahom king and the influence of a Bengali priest named Krishnaram Bhattacharya.

The fifth Chapter, titled *Assam in the Colonial Period* by Barnali Sarma and Pooza Sharma, chronologically interrogates the changes brought about by the colonisers in Assam. The Chapter helps in understanding the biopolitics in the region and the introduction of the panopticon structures for the administrative convenience of the British. The effect of Britain's transition from merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism had a far-reaching impact on the culture, economy and society in northeast India as it turned the region into a colonial hinterland (see, Misra, 1980; Guha, 2006) of the tea-sipping Britons. These also induced the mass movement of indentured labourers, supporting officials, clerks and businessmen into the region from other Indian provinces causing a sudden demographic change. The discovery of coal reserves, oil and other natural resources attracted the political agents of the East India Company, and later the British government, to occupy vast swaths of lands and hand them down to British investors. To cover up their agenda of loot, they constructed a convenient narrative of civilising missions. The administrative and political interference of the British also ruptured the erstwhile trade relations which the hill people had with the plains. By introducing the Inner Line system, they isolated the hill people resulting in irreparable damage to their culture, tradition and economy. The strategies adopted by the missionaries to convert the hill people have been well documented and narrated in this Chapter. Sarma and Sharma have cited the report published by the State Reorganisation Commission (1955) to elicit the matter:

The results of the "Inner Line" Regulation policy, as administered by the British, illustrate the dangers of deliberate and complete segregation. That policy, however, was not enforced so much against Europeans and Christians as against other Indian communities. The broad effect of throwing the tribal areas open to some but not to all external influences during the period of the British occupation has been to divide the tribal people themselves to create, as a result of British and missionary influences, a new class, which has so far remained quite distinct from the general population either in the hills or in the plains (116).

The method of British rule was to divide the Indian population based on race, religion, caste and language, enabling them to rule over the fragmented identities. Furthermore, the religious conversions also resulted in the erasure of cultural identity through the imposition of new religious and cultural identities after their conversion to Christianity. Since the consolidation of the Indian nation would pose a threat to the British extractive policies, they went on to execute policies like the Partition of Bengal and the rearrangement of Districts in North East India. Furthermore, the conversion of tribal people has had greater ramifications on the relationship between the ethnic groups and their relationship with nature (Nukshirenla & Vulli, 2019; Angom, 2020; Ormsby, 2013; Joy, 2014). In the present Anthropocene epoch, the alienation of humanity from nature has accelerated climate change and global warming (Belcher & Schmidt, 2020). Tribal practices around the world exemplify how to live within bounds by respecting the world of nature. However, after conversion to modern religion and adopting a modern way of life, humankind's utter disregard for nature has resulted in the massive destruction of flora and fauna (see, Ghosh 2021). At a time when tribal people worldwide are returning to their ancient roots, it will be interesting to see how the tribal population in India negotiates with this phenomenon. By referring to the reports of RB

Pemberton, Francis Jenkins, and AJ Moffat Mills, in Chapter 5, Barnali Sarma and Pooza Sharma argue that the policies formulated by these officials decided the economic, cultural and political future of the hill people. Instead of working for the local people's welfare, the British administrators doubled the taxes and occupied 364,990 acres of tea cultivation land under the Waste Land Settlement Rules of 1854 (Guha, 2006). The lands occupied by the white planters were made tax-free. In popular culture and films, tea gardens have always been exoticised as elegant and romantic retreats. However, its underbelly houses a disquietingly squalid environment. These tea plantations could become profitable only by exploiting the labourers and by dispossessing the ethnic communities of their land (Hazarika, 2000). It is a matter of grave concern that many of these dispossessed indigenous people are landless in contemporary Assam. Sarma and Sharma's Chapter bring out the many such aspects of the colonial history of exploitation and extraction in India's Northeast. Whereas authors like Shashi Tharoor (2017) have quantified the amount of resources that have been drained out of India during the colonial era, a similar estimate is yet to be done at the regional level. The Chapter also delineates the various aspects related to the Indian National Movement and women's participation. Although it eulogises the role of women participating in rallies and organisations like *Mrityu Bahini* (Suicide Squad), the authors fail to mention the participation of Assamese women in the Rani of Jhansi regiment of the Indian National Army (see, Deka, 2013).

Chapter Six, entitled *Reorganisation and Changing Territorial Framework of Assam since India's Independence* by Das and Bhuyan, further reveals the fallout of the gulf created between the hills and the plains due to British policies. Whereas the conversion of the ethnic groups has already alienated them culturally from their brethren, the reorganisation of the traditional space through boundaries further crippled them economically. This Chapter deals with the complication and the politics related to the Sylhet referendum and the conflict between Assamese and Bengali. The exclusion of Sylhet

ever since has remained a controversial issue between the Bengalis of Barak Valley and the Assamese (see, Pisharoty 2019; Misra 2017). Udayan Misra has argued that Cachar and Goalpara had historical ties with Assam and, therefore, their inclusion in Assam is justified, whereas Sylhet had no such association (Misra, 2017). Moreover, its deficit economic status was a burden on the surplus economy of Assam, apart from causing a cultural and demographic imbalance in the state. Contrary to this claim, however, inferring from Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra, many research findings show that the geographical extent of ancient Kamarupa Kingdom had subsumed parts of present-day Bangladesh (till Karatoya River), West Bengal and Bihar temporarily (Bhattacharyya, 2023a; Nath, 2007) and that the historic relation between kingdom of Gauda and Kamarupa had been tenuous since 6th Century AD (Ghosh, 2010) which saw the shifting of territorial boundaries. It is interesting to note that while the political blame game on the Sylhet referendum had been one of loss and deprivation, similar to the official removal of the Assamese language for which the Bengalis have been stated responsible in a generalised manner, a scrutiny of the facts would reveal a different picture. Language has always been a contentious issue in India after the coming of the British because language gave access to the jobs which have been created locally by the British. Print Capitalism also facilitated power structures built around cultural and linguistic hegemony. So it became imperative for the ethnic groups to reclaim linguistic identity as a counter-hegemonic process. While the natives had been busy fixing language, the cultural transformation, the education system, and the resource extraction by the British had caused irreparable damage. Even post-independence, these power structures persist, extractive capitalism flourishes, and conflicts continue over who would control these structures and resources. Therefore, the focus is not on dismantling the oppressive structures but rather the control of the same. Secondly, the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam province had already created an identity crisis among the Assamese

population, later on when four districts (Patharkandi, Karimganj, Ratabari and Badarpur) of Sylhet were transferred to the Indian union, and the rest ceded to East Pakistan, it created a new set of problems. Although the transfer of Sylhet was a welcoming relief for the Assamese leaders, India's partition based on religion saw a huge-scale migration of Hindus to the northeast region, causing a demographic imbalance. Had Sylhet been incorporated as an Indian state (separate from Assam), the influx of Hindu Bengalis into Assam (including Tripura and Meghalaya) could have been contained within the new State of Sylhet. It would have also stopped the influx of Bengali Hindus into other Hill states like Meghalaya and Tripura, and with the sixth schedule provision, those areas would have remained protected. Further, it would have permanently averted the language census issue as the Assamese language would have remained dominant in Brahmaputra valley. Moreover, it is not alone the Hindus who have been displaced by the Sylhet partition; many Assamese "indigenous" people had to abandon the villages that were in the Sylhet district. Dipak Kumar Barkakati's (2002) *Upatyakar Para Upatyakalai* (From Valley to Valley) gives a fictional rendering of this crisis and deals with the issue with a broader humanitarian perspective which political rhetoric and non-fictional discourses fail to render. This Chapter is, therefore, crucial in understanding the administrative policies responsible for creating new territorial boundaries during colonial and post-colonial periods resulting in present-day conflict. The rise in ethnic violence over the issue of resource control, the first secessionist movement, and the subsequent imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers (AFSPA) Act have been contextualised in the Chapter with a historical overview. These contentious issues over identity formation and resource control have also led to the balkanisation of North East India and the creation of autonomous councils. Historians, social scientists and political theorists have tried to delineate these issues by relating to the process of immigration and migration, resource control, ethnic conflicts, state-centre relation and hegemonic relationships; however, there

have been fewer research works that address the role of modernity and extractive capitalism that had entirely transformed the mobility of the tribes giving rise to these conflicts. This present volume, to some extent, helps us understand that the nature of conflict and power struggle between ethnic groups have changed in post-colonial times.

Chapters seven and eight, respectively entitled *Prehistoric Dwellers of the Meghalaya Plateau* by Queenbala Marak and *A History of Meghalaya: A Saga of Three Fascinating Tribes* by Amena N Passah deals with the prehistoric dwellers of the Meghalaya plateau and the history of the three tribes that inhabit this region. These chapters give us an account of the traditional societies and the inter-tribal relation till present. Although chapter seven deals with archaeological findings, it helps us understand how the region's culture is shaped and determined by the geological characteristics of the region. Queenbala Marak writes that there is a "lack of paleontological remains and other organic matter" (156) which is why the archaeological excavations reveal poor data. The reason for this lack is the "high acidity of the soils in Northeast India" (156) that cause the fast decaying of organic matter. The author further writes that "[a]fter decades of research, we are still not in a position to say who the prehistoric people of Meghalaya are in terms of race or ethnicity" (165). The point I would like to make here is that although the ethnicity of the people who lived here cannot be determined through archaeological findings, one can nevertheless analyse the food habit that the people have developed because of climatic and geological conditions. The food habit is determined by these factors. As food habits evolve over a long period, the use of *Khar* in food as a plant-based alkaloid reveals the ancientness of the people living here. The tribal, as well as the Assamese people, have been using *Khar* in their food items (like *Maas* (Fish) *Khar*, *Jika* (Ridge Gourd) *Khar*, *Omita* (Papaya) *Khar*, *Onla*, a Bodo dish prepared by using a high amount of concentrated *khar* and pounded *Joha* rice and meat, etc.) as it helps in maintaining the pH balance (acid-base) of the body. The process of preparing the *Khar* is also very unique. It is made

from the ashes of the dried Banana peel and the plants that grow in abundance in the plains. This practice has been so ancient and scientific that the discontinuation of *Khar* consumption can invisibly aggravate health complications related to high acidic content in the body. The Chapter seven further goes on to explore the food habits of the Khasis to claim that they entered later on into the region as they quickly adopted rice cultivation from "some other band".

Chapter Eight discusses the living megalithic tradition and the matrilineal customs among the Khasis, Garos and Jayantias. This Chapter also informs how the Jayantias lost their original homeland in Jaintiapur (in present-day Bangladesh). The author explores the British interest in the resources of the region and the history of Khasi resistance. This Chapter further deals with the language, culture and tradition of the tribes. Writing about oral histories, the Chapter refers to the myth of the seven huts (hynniewtrep), which became the basis of the ethnonational resurgence of the Khasi tribe (Mukhim, 2006). The author brings out the challenges faced by the women and the social discrimination emanating from the patriarchal structuring of the society, as women tend to lose their inheritance rights after marrying a non-Khasi. Due to the introduction of Christianity, not only the traditional practices of the tribal areas had been facing erasure, but it is also changing the ethnic association amongst the tribes and relegating women to peripheral positions in the Church. Furthermore, due to the introduction of colonial modernity and the new religion, the traditional joint (extended) family set-up was fractured, and the transaction between the hills and plains was ruptured. It is therefore interesting to note that Christianity as a religion has always appealed for the liberation of women in Indian society; however, despite conversions, women in Khasi, Naga and Mizo societies continue to face social and political marginalisation (Ao, 2010; Syiem, 2010; Dena, 2010).

Chapter Nine, titled *Incorporation of Oral Tradition in Archaeological Studies in Nagaland: An Overview* by Aokumla Walling deals with the



oral tradition and gives us some vital information relating to the ethnographic works from Nagaland. By foregrounding the importance of the insider's perspective, the author explores the seminal works of Vikousa Nienu and Tiatoshi Jamir. The Chapter establishes the link between oral traditions and ancestral sites through archaeological practices, thereby underpinning the importance of folklore in reconstructing the history of places. The author gives us the names of important village sites, which were the homes of the various Naga tribes. The author concludes by stating that "archaeological works produced over the years are not an end itself but just the beginning for more intensive research to gain a more comprehensive picture of the Naga's ancestral history" (208). It is to be mentioned that in traditional society, folklore, myths and stories become important sources of reconstructing the past. Not only it gives a sense of the place and a sense of belonging to the people, but it also helps them negotiate with the present. Even literary works widely draw from the reach store of folklore to re-imagine and negotiate social transformation. For instance, in the fictional works by Naga writers, especially in the novels of Easterine Kire Iralu, one can witness that she extensively re-invents Naga myths to bridge the gulf created by the loss of ancient culture and tradition. Since the Naga tribes have been converted to Christianity almost entirely, they have discontinued the pre-colonial rituals. To negotiate with this loss, authors like Easterine Kire Iralu have infused the Naga myth with Biblical undertones. This enables them to create a continuum of tradition and reconcile with the culture change. Such literature offers a unique understanding of cultural and religious mutation through syncretism. However, religion can also create a sense of otherness, as seen in Chapter entitled *03 August 2015 Framework Agreement, Naga National Movement, and confused road ahead*, which has been contributed by Rituparna Bhattacharyya, Ajay Prasad, and Sanjay Prasad. Religious fundamentalism has always remained a threat to a democratic society as ethnicity and religious sentiments are entangled with political assertions. A manifesto published by Naga

Baptist Church Council states that a Naga is a "Christian first, then a voter" and "Nagaland is a frontline of Christian Majority". This shows the religious overtones that challenge the secular spirit of the Constitution of India. While Hindu majoritarianism has been vehemently criticised and right-wing politics adequately cudgelled, questions of sovereignty and secessionist movements based on religion in India's Northeast and Kashmir have gained strong footholds. This Chapter further gives us insight into Nagaland's existing internal conflict and the factions with conflicting political agendas. The conflict is more discernable when one compares the political maps prepared by various insurgent groups, as these maps overlap each other. For example, the map of separate Bodoland, Nagalim, Ahomland, Kamatapur so on and so forth prepared by the respective organisations representing the ethnic communities overlap each other. These ethnic contestations and conflicts for territorial possession among the various groups can turn into a full-fledged war among them in the absence of military intervention. The present conflict in Manipur is a live testimony of this. What is surprising is that the civilians in these bordering areas have illegal weapons supplied by rogue nations. Moreover, the popular support the insurgent groups receive from their community makes it difficult to curb militancy in the region. It is also to be noted that most of these insurgent groups have bases in Myanmar as a section of these ethnic groups live there and keep infiltrating from time to time. Whereas news of illegal immigration from Bangladesh makes it to the headline every day, the illegal entry of ethnic groups from Myanmar is seldom discussed. One of the reasons for this illegal entry is that the tribal communities not only enjoy reservations in jobs but are also entitled to financial packages, apart from enjoying a tax-free income in the sixth scheduled areas. Furthermore, this Chapter elaborates on the Naga secessionist movements along with the internal discord among the various factions and concludes with the complications of the Naga Peace accord.

Chapters eleven and twelve, respectively, *Oral Narratives of Manipur as the Source of Historical*

*Reconstruction* by Thounaojam Caesar and *Manipur: The Sociocultural Continuum* by Vijaylakshmi Brara, discuss the oral tradition, history and culture of the Meiteis in Manipur. Manipur's historical connections with the Indian culture and its contribution to shaping pan-Indian cultural and religious practices among the Hindus have been outlined in these chapters. Vijaylakshmi Brara writes that "Raas Leela, the classical dance portraying Krishna and Radha's stories" is the contribution of the Manipuris (281). Although the Manipuris had the tradition of recording the royal chronicles of various clans, they also have a very rich oral tradition. While highlighting the literary qualities of the oral tradition, the authors also underscore the socio-economic and religious significance of the oral literature. Bengali language and literature also strongly influence Manipuri culture, and much of the prose and verse works centre around Vedic themes (252). According to Birendranath Dutta (2011), the Manipuris are a perfect example of the process of Sanskritisation whereby the mongoloid races have mixed with the non-mongoloid through cultural interaction. However, there have been attempts to reverse this process as efforts are made to explore the "independent script allied to Brahmi" and "search for the roots of the culture of the people" (254). The animistic practices among the Meiteis and the oral tradition of Lai Haroaba are instances of the multifarious nature of the fluidity of Hindu practices. The chapters explore the literary tradition and the function of myth in Manipuri society. The authors also highlight the ethnic ties Meiteis have with the surrounding tribal groups as they are either related through language, families or ethnicity. Chapter twelve also raises the issue of the armed conflict that has afflicted the region along with the causes of drug peddling, and growing cases of HIV/AIDS. A section is also devoted to the effects of religious practices in Manipur. According to the author Hinduism has created a cast consciousness among the Meities, and Christianity has destroyed the traditional belief system of the hill people: "In the case of the hill people, conversion to Christianity erased their earlier belief system and was banned from practising

them as these became paganistic...Nature, which was venerated once, is now only believed to be exploited" (287). Although the Chapter spells out the ill effects of religion in society, the author conflates Vaishnavism with Hindu cultural practices without realising that many contradictory practices have been accommodated within the umbrella term of Hinduism, and there is nothing called Hindu religion. The Chapter highlights two important issues further: The insider-outsider conflict and the racial prejudice; and the dominating role of women in Manipuri society.

Chapter thirteen, titled *Mizoram through the Ages* by Benjamin L Saitluanga, addresses the Mizo question, the rise of Mizo sub-nationalism and its connection with religion and the "environmental hazard called *Mautam* and its political ramification called *Rambuai*" (306). Benjamin L Saitluanga explores the past of the Mizo people and their settlement in the Northeast during the 18th Century. The Chapter provides ample information on the topography, flora and fauna, cultural practices, multilingual society, food habits and the causes of the conflict in Mizoram. The infiltration of the Chakma refugees from the Chittagong Hill tracts into Northeast India has been cited as one of the reasons for the conflict in the region. Like all other tribes of Northeast India, the Mizos were also animists; however, these cultural practices have been discontinued after their conversion to Christianity. The Chapter argues how the missionaries have evangelised the Mizos by using education and health as tools (schools and dispensaries were important sites for preaching and conversion) (314). Like the Nagas, the Mizos also augured their ethnonational consciousness based on Christianity: "With the slogan "For God and the Country", the MNF propagated the idea that "God is on their side to protect the Mizo Christians from the Hindu state through independence" (316). The Chapter also deals with the land use policies in Mizoram, the rising inequality among the Mizos and the failure of social mechanisms of modern society.

*Tripura's Nuanced History to the Present* by Mousami Debbarma in Chapter fourteen is one

of the most important chapters because it narrates the effects of demographic change and its relation to territorial alteration. If a pinch of salt makes the dish relishable, a handful of the same shall make it unpalatable. The same goes for Tripura. The once powerful kingdom of Tipra community is now reduced to a minority because of the British policies, partition of India and migration from Manipur, Bengal and East Pakistan following India's partition:

[f]ollowing the atrocities against the minority, Bengali Hindus a total of 6,38,976 refugees migrated from East Pakistan to Tripura from 1946 to 1971. Bhattacharyya (1977) and UN (1972) report that Tripura had sheltered around 1.3 million refugees up to the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 (337-8).

Besides, due to the intervention of the neighbouring kingdom and British administrative policies, the total area of Tripura has shrunk over a period of time. These issues have resulted in land alienation and have given rise to ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, a cultural transformation is also visible wherein the names of the places have been changed, and a linguistic and political hegemony of the Bengalis has become dominating. The Chapter concludes with the possible ramifications of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) unless there is a constitutional safeguard for the Tripuri communities to protect their land and culture.

The final Chapter, titled *Sikkim through the Ages* by Namita Chakma deals with the history and politics of Sikkim and its inclusion in the Indian Union. The Chapter explicates the indigenous administrative system and the demographic scenario of the region.

These chapters dealing with the varied aspects of North East India, its demographic and political history, the customs, colonial intervention, the role of women, territorial control, and causes of conflict help us understand the nuanced factors that shape the politics of the region. A flat or a homogenous representation and a simple solution to these problems can never exist. When films like *Dil Se* (1998) or *Anek* (2022) try to give a simplistic representation of the conflict

scenario, it not only makes a mockery of the region, it gives a false representation. The colonial mess that has been left behind is complicated further by questions of religion, ethnicity, resource control, cross-border terrorism and the influence of neighbouring nations. The existence of a parallel government run by the underground forces, the power exerted by the drug mafias and their political association with ethnic leaders have turned the region into a necrospace. The people in this region are stripped of all human rights due to the violence unleashed by the ethnic insurgent groups, as can be witnessed by the interethnic killings of innocent people (Bhaumik, 2007; Bijukumar, 2022; Kolås, 2017).

### **The Question of Belonging and Necropolitics**

The chapters discussed in the previous section provide a framework to understand colonial biopolitics and its postcolonial mutation into necropolitics in North East India. As the contestations are invariably related to land rights, resource extraction, and ethnic and religious identities involving various communities that migrated to this region, a discussion on the necrospace that facilitates violence would be fruitful. For colonisers, immigrants were resourceful as they maximised revenue collection by exploiting local resources. However, immigrants in ethnic spaces are considered liabilities as it would mean the diffusion of resources. Therefore the nature of biopolitics saw a tilt towards necropolitics in northeast India. If we analyse the term biopolitics according to the meaning suggested by Rudolf Kjellen we see its affinity to the Aristotelian view of society (Lemke, 2011). In Kjellen's organic concept, the State functions and acts like a super-individual. According to him, the natural form of statehood is a nation-state which expresses itself in ethnic individuality. He gave an organic concept where he views the state not as a legal construction but as "an original form of life, which precedes individual" (10). In Greece, the manual labourers or the aliens were considered essential in the polis, but they were not allowed to participate in the politics of the polis. This was a process of

regulating the people according to the requirement of the state. When India was conceived as a nation during the Indian freedom struggle, it, too, had an organic concept of state. The organic concept of a multiethnic Indian subcontinent has become problematic because such a paradoxical idea can be conceived more in abstraction than reality. Consequently, conflicting forms and concepts emerged, leading to the partition of India. Even after independence, the residual form of the organic concept persisted as we see today. In post-colonial nations, the idea of ethnic-individuality cannot function as socially cohesive, as seen in the case of North East India. With the vast flow of population during colonial times and after India's Independence, the idea of ethnic individuality became parochial in a post-colonial setup. Although a postcolonial nation is a hybridised nation and its people hybridised communities, ethnic nationalisms build a narrative based on the consciousness of origin and purity, which Patricia Mukhim is preposterous (2006) in the context of Meghalaya. In connection to biopolitics, Rudolf's analogy of life in understanding the nature of the ethnic state is worth considering (Lemke, 2011).

The inception of modernity into the Indian scene gives it a valid ground for understanding how biopolitics has entered into the state functioning. In the Indian context, biopolitics has to be understood in contiguity to its colonial past, the role of the church and modern education. Foucault's analysis of the sovereign's power over life and death shall help us understand how it functioned in Europe and her colonies and how it was replicated in India. In *Madness and Civilisation*, we see how the church, the monarchy and, later on, the upcoming bourgeoisie exerted their power in regulating and controlling the socially 'deviant', which was a transformation from the medieval times where the deviant was cast into the 'ship of fools' to be lost in darkness and death (Foucault, 1988). During the post-enlightenment period, this schema had transformed because of several historical reasons. One of the reasons for this transformation could be the beginning of colonisation. The workhouses and factories in

Europe were filled with these 'deviant' people who were made to work for long hours without any remuneration. The pastors justified this as a way of deliverance for the deviant people and the work hours followed by the reading of the Holy Scriptures. The finished products from these workhouses flooded the markets in the colonised countries. So, on the one hand, the factories in Europe flourished. On the other hand, the local industries in India were systematically destroyed as they could not compete with the cheaply produced European goods. Therefore, the preservation of life as well as the elimination of belligerent forces, became more important under the utilitarian model:

It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendour; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemy of the sovereign from his loyal subjects. It affects distributions around the norm (Foucault, 1998: 144).

On the one hand, one can witness the mass annihilation of the aborigines in Australian, African and Asian continents; on the other hand, a huge contingent of enslaved and indentured labourers were moved across the continents to people the colonised countries. It was also replicated in India. A large number of indentured labourers had been brought to Assam to work in tea plantations and mines. Mbembe (2019) points out that colonial modernity triggered the voluntary uprooting of a considerable population to new settlements once inhabited by indigenous people during colonial times, and these new settlements were part of the "Colonial map-making" (Yumnam 2016: 159). This phenomenon is not exclusive to North East India either. Ato Quayson, in one of his essays, points out that the Indian immigrants who went to East African countries as indentured labourers during the colonial times and settled down had to undergo "a second process of migration" because of the "Africanization of the civil

service” and “the violent policies of Idi Amin in [the] 1970s” (2010: 246). This phenomenon is similar to what has been happening in North East India since the rise of ethnocentrism. It was also the time when the idea of race was making its place, and the concept of geographical origin, language, or religion was becoming important social markers (Mbembe, 2019).

On the one hand, the importance of life was recognised; on the other hand, the racial concept came up in Europe in the form of Eugenics, and so were modernity and industrial societies growing up. Foucault states in this context, “[h]ow can a power such as this kill if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings?.. It is . . . at this point that racism intervenes” (2020: 254). Therefore, one must understand the local histories of the places that have become a postcolonial necrospace in this connection. The cultural transformation of the ethnic groups by the missionaries had a significant role in this.

Achilles Mbembe (2019) talks about necropolitics in the context of colonial occupation; however, I have borrowed the term to interrogate necropolitics in the context of post-colonial India. The rise in insurgency and counter-insurgency violence in North East India and, more specifically, in undivided Assam is underpinned by apparent rhetoric on underdevelopment, resource extraction, immigration and language politics, as mentioned earlier. However, very little has been done to interrogate the multilayered historical circumstances that have caused underdevelopment or created a rift among the various communities. To understand the multifarious problems that exist in the North East India today, one has to understand how the structural changes gradually brought about by colonial rule paved the way for establishing the imperial structure espousing utilitarian principles and biopolitical exercise (governmentality) over its subjects. If we go back in history and identify how the colonisers systematically started regulating, controlling,

shaping and informing the very cultural and material foundation of the societies in the North East, we shall be able to perceive how there was a break from tradition into modernity and how the indigenous people were transformed into bare life by a new circuit of biopolitics. As an example, we can take a look at the official correspondence among the British officials published as *Report on the Province of Assam* by A.J. Mofatt Mills (1984). On reading the official correspondences, one shall see that the Assamese people lived through subsistence farming, and the entire area of Assam (which included present-day Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya) was rich in natural resources. The bourgeoisie enterprise of colonial expansion aimed to extract maximum revenue by exploiting the land and human resources (Guha, 2006: 16). Large tracts of dense forest, wrongly designated as ‘wasteland’, were cleared for tea plantation and agricultural activities. This brought at least two changes in the infrastructure that allowed the colonisers to control the mode of production: (1) The local people could not cultivate the lands like they used to do in the past, and different kinds of exorbitant taxes were levied on the possession of agricultural lands and homestead (Guha, 2006: 5). Before this, exchanges were done through a barter system, but with colonial advent, cash became the convenient mode of the transaction (Gait, 2001: 255). Also, the indigenous people were displaced from their land, and many of them were forced to work at the tea plantation as they could not pay the land tax. Through various instruments, the land was brought under the direct control of the colonisers and was allotted only to British agents or to those people who could pay taxes through the Zamindars. Secondly, to run the newly created offices in Assam, the British started hiring employees from Indian provinces. These two aspects initially affected North Eastern society’s cultural foundation because they created the necessary environment for an overall structural change.

Next, a new education system was introduced with the purpose of moral upliftment of the indigenous people. Since the medium of

education was Bengali, it brought more complications. It has time and again been alleged that the Bengalis had misled the British into adopting the Bengali language instead of Assamese as the medium of instruction in Assam. This instilled a sense of loss and deprivation among the Assamese community. But on examining the official correspondence between the British officials one shall see that it was some of the British officials and Missionaries who insisted on continuing the medium of education in Bengali because there was no printed literature in Assamese available at that time (Mills, 1984: 89-92). It is pertinent to mention here that the New Testament (*Dharmapustakar Antobhag*) was published in 1813 by Willian Carey; and the Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, was translated into Assamese by the Mission Press of Serampore in 1819 (Bhattacharyya and Sarma, 2024). Therefore the historic discord between the Bengalis and Assamese was premised on a misleading hypothesis, although the chauvinistic attitude of a few Bengali Babus cannot be overlooked. Next, the people who received an education started looking for jobs because they felt that the objective of receiving an education was to get employment in public offices, but reports show that there were not enough vacancies to absorb all who received an education (Bhattacharyya, 2023a; Ghosh 2013). Many of them who received education thereafter did not engage in trade or agricultural activities; thus, a new class of educated unemployed people was created. Furthermore, the British brought Bengalis to perform official work, and whenever any future vacancy came up, the Bengalis brought in their relatives to fill these vacancies. This obvious factor created much resentment and discontent among the indigenous people.

After India's independence, a sense of racial and linguistic consciousness started growing among the people in North East India, resulting in ethnic resurgence and ethnic cleansing of the immigrant population. Eminent journalist Patricia Mukhim frequently writes about the plight of "outsiders" in Meghalaya (Mukhim, 2013). She has been vocal about the atrocities

committed against the non-tribals for which she faced attacks on several counts. She writes:

In Meghalaya, in the late 1970s, the Khasi Students Union — a body that is anything but student-like and has in its fold members who have either dropped out of school or are too long in the tooth to be considered students — launched an insidious attack on the Bengalis living in Shillong...Claiming to be the vanguard of Khasi society, the KSU then went on a rampage, pulling non-tribals out of buses and lynching them. A pregnant woman, Gouri Dey was lynched in public but no one was nabbed and the case died a natural death since no one would give evidence. The next phase of communal violence saw a new set of victims — the Nepali settlers who have also lived in the State since it was a part of Assam, and the Biharis who kept cows and supplied milk to the residents. Another time, several Bihari families were burnt alive in the dead of night. The culprits were never caught and no one has been indicted in any of the acts of communal carnage that happened in Meghalaya...But the non-tribals continue to remain insecure and vulnerable. In the latest round of violence when several pressure groups demanded the imposition of an Inner Line Permit (ILP) to enter Meghalaya, along the lines of Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, at least two non-tribals were burnt to death. The police have arrested some pro-ILP activists but the case seems weak and the suspects are out on bail. Non-tribals have lost the right to speak up and dissent. They live like third-class citizens...Those with self-respect have left Shillong and other parts of Meghalaya to settle elsewhere (Mukhim, 2014).

This pattern of violence based on ethnic identity was replicated in almost all the North Eastern states of India. Such a regime of insurrectionary anarchism based on communal identity

underpins the operational mechanism of necropolitics in the region. Sanjoy Hazarika writes how Assam Agitation, which began on the "Gandhian model" (Hazarika 2000: 65) took an ugly turn and claimed many innocent lives. The inception of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) added another chapter to the infamous spree of killings in Assam, and what started as an ideological war ended up as killings for extortion (66). Sanjib Baruah quotes from D.D. Thakur to show the nexus among insurgents, students' unions and political parties: "[t]he loss of faith in the efficacy and the credibility of the government apparatus is so great that the distinction between ULFA, AASU and AGP, which existed at some stage, stands totally obliterated" (2005: 154). Later on, this situation was exploited by the political forces, which successfully drew a wedge within the ULFA by creating lucrative opportunities for the surrendered ULFA members. Gradually the surrendered ULFA became a dreaded entity to be used "as an ad hoc counter-insurgency force" and a powerful syndicate to control state resources (Hazarika, 2018: 146). These aspects make the North Eastern region a necrospace where individuals are turned into bare life. The underground as a parallel force and the insurgent groups' replication of the sovereign's power invites a new line of enquiry where the focus of research could be shifted from the composite state to the epicentre of the ethnic state.

## Conclusion

Considering the complex socio-political history of North East India and the impact of colonisation, proselytisation and immigration on the ethnoscape, one can gauge the daunting reasons behind the persisting social unrest. Bhattacharyya's edited book, therefore, offers an incisive trajectory of the ethnic histories connected to the geospatial realities of the region. As most research works on this region fail to connect the political and social movements with the landscape, this volume shall fill in that gap. The book will be of immense help to the research scholars and students who are interested in working on India's North East.

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### About the Author

The works of Dr Biswas have appeared in journals like *South Asian Popular Culture* (Taylor & Francis), *Postcolonial Studies* (Taylor & Francis), *English: Journal of the English Association* (Oxford University Press), *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* (Springer Nature), *Policing: Journal of Policy and Practice* (Oxford University Press), and *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (Nature). His edited books are *Nationalism in India* (Routledge, 2021) and *Global Perspectives on Nationalism* (Routledge, 2022). His research areas include Critical Theory, Environmental Humanities, Nationalism and Anglophone Writings from India’s North East.