



NORTHEAST INDIA

A Place of Relations

Edited by
Yasmin Saikia
Amit R. Baishya

Northeast India

Can we keep thinking of Northeast India as a site of violence or of the exotic Other?

Northeast India: A Place of Relations turns this narrative on its head, focusing on encounters and experiences between people and cultures, the human and the non-human world, allowing for building of new relationships of friendship and amity. The twelve essays in this volume explore the possibility of a new search enabling a 'discovery' of the lived and the loved world of Northeast India from within.

The essays in the volume employ a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches – literary, historical, anthropological, interpretative politics, and an analytical study of contemporary issues, engaging the people, cultures, and histories in the Northeast with a new outlook. In the study, the region emerges as a place of new happenings in which there is the possibility of continuous expansion of the horizon of history and issues of current relevance facilitating new voices and narratives that circulate and create bonding in the borderland of South, East and Southeast Asia.

The book will be influential in building scholarship on the lived experiences of the people of the Northeast, which, in turn, promises potentialities of connections, community, and peace in the region.

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Since 2010, both the editors spoke of collaborating to produce a book on Northeast India. We have been particularly concerned that Northeast India has a peripheral position within the study of India, which has become a major field of research in the humanities and social sciences. We discussed and deliberated on the growing divisions between the people, communities and cultures of Northeast India, as each state has developed a kind of isolated view and the negotiations between the seven states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura) are being mediated via New Delhi. We were increasingly becoming uneasy with the partitioning of the Northeast into ethnic, linguistic, religious and political enclaves; our memories did not connect to the newly constructed narratives. While we are also aware that it was never 'one place', we were deeply concerned that the points of contact and connections were fast disappearing and the tendency of growing difference is generating a discourse of Otherness within the Northeast. In an effort to overcome the gaps created by the presentist and political approaches, we decided to generate multiple scholarly conversations on the Northeast. The Annual South Asia Conference at Madison, Wisconsin, became our initial venue. We are grateful to the organizers of the conference, our discussants, and, more importantly, our audiences at the annual conference that have engaged and encouraged us to take our project forward and conceive this book.

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We dedicate this book to the people of the Northeast who are our partners in our journey to seek, find and uphold a world of relations. We hope our contribution will be appreciated by our readers from the Northeast and beyond.

Introduction



Yasmin Saikia and Amit R. Baishya

‘Home’ but not at home

Sanjib Baruah in his book, *Durable Disorder*, recounts a curious tale of a man called Dindu Miri, a man ‘who came in from China’. Dindu was an Idu tribesman born in 1946 in what is now Arunachal Pradesh (Baruah, 2005: 55). In 1955, young Dindu went to Beijing to study. For the Idu, China and the Tibet region were closer to his village than any part of India. Dindu found employment as a ‘political interpreter’ and guided the Chinese in their advance to India during the Sino-Indian war. In 1963, Dindu, once again, returned to his village (now mapped in India). In 2000, Dindu worked as a political interpreter, but this time for the Indian government. The change of job did not mean an end of the relationship with his kin on the other side of the border, in China. The regime of rules between India and China, however, restricted easy communication and Dindu had to resort to ‘secret messengers’ to stay in touch with his relatives. Dindu’s story is an unusual tale of a man caught in the liminal divide between nation-states, his life and emotions resembling two separated parts that do not constitute a whole (p. 56).

Purnakanta Buragohain’s story parallels Dindu’s tale. Buragohain, an Ahom entrepreneur and intrepid traveller sojourned for a decade through Burma and Yunnan province in Southern China during the interwar period, 1933–42. In his travels, over and over again, he found remnants of connections between the Tai communities inhabiting these regions and the Ahoms of Assam. In his travelogue, he recounts the cross-cultural connections between the people

of Northeast India and Southeast and East Asia. In 1942, as the Japanese advanced into Burma, Buragohain fled on an elephant, in the process bringing back many valuable historical documents with him to Assam. In the post-war period, the gradual consolidation of the borders meant restriction of inter-state travel and Buragohain could not repeat his previous journey.

In Buragohain's travelogue we find a rich account of the populations in Burma and their cultures that seems to counter the proscription of the Burmese as 'uncivilized,' rapacious other, as the Assamese public memory depicts them based on the three Burmese invasions of the Ahom Kingdom (1817–26). What is fascinating about Buragohain's story are the friendships and connections he forged during his decade-long sojourn. The ethnographic eye in his narrative is curious, interested and engaged, acknowledging the coeval relationship between himself and his hosts in Burma. In fact, Buragohain's travelogue could very well be described as a memorial of friendship. A recent Assamese travelogue to Burma by a contemporary commentator, Tapan Sharma, recounts how Buragohain's name has almost passed into legend among the descendants of the Assamese still resident in that country (2014). Dindu Miri and Buragohain's stories of solidarity and friendships with strangers, making kin with familial others, offer a new way to think of place and home, people and relationships that survive beyond and transcend the territorial divides of nation-states.

The geographer, Theano Terekenli, points out three constitutive factors that inhere in the concept of 'home': (i) a 'recurrent, regular investment of meaning in a context with which people personalize and identify with some measure of control': this serves as a stable interface between the self and the world, (ii) an unfolding in historical time – 'home' attains meaning through 'a passage of time linked to experiential consciousness', and (iii) the idea of home gets consolidated by being placed within a network of social relations that 'validate the individual as human being' (p. 325).

The stories of Dindu Miri and Purnakanta Buragohain are one among many such instances of homeliness (and homelessness), movements, interactions and friendships between people in Northeast India and those in South, Southeast and East Asia. Miri's story, in particular, illustrates and raises questions on what we mean by the term 'home' in Northeast India. For Miri, the 'stable interface' called 'home' in Arunachal Pradesh and its unfolding in historical time is repeatedly disrupted by modern border-making processes between India and China that have changed the very topography of this region and his relationship with people who validate his life and give meaning to him as a human being. To maintain the 'network of social relations' that defined

him as a person in his 'home' has to be done via 'secret messengers.' On the one hand, the existence of secret messengers is testimony to the fact that other modes of being and navigating borderland spaces still exist in this region; on the other hand, we are confronted with the tragic fact that social relationships pre-existing the consolidation of postcolonial state entities are now relegated to a secret, shadowy, paralegal existence. Family and human emotions have to be recalibrated as home becomes a category under construction.

Similarly, impelled by the desire to trace the genealogies of the Tais since the Ahom community to which Purnakanta Buragohain belonged claims its historical and cultural lineage to the Tai family group, Purnakanta travelled as far as Yunnan province in China. His travels predate the existence of state security regimes (such as borders posts, checkpoints, passports) and he could move freely between the regions without official impediments. We are not trying to project nostalgia about a border-less precolonial world here, but the astonishing thing about his journey is the absence of any mention of such commonplace obstructions to travel. He was even able to return to Assam once and resume his travels back to Burma after a brief visit. 'Nationalizing space' (Baruah, 2005) and the processes through which the colonial 'frontier' became a postcolonial 'borderland' (Bhaumik, 2009; Misra, 2011) have relegated the stories of such movements and of human connections to the realms of nostalgia and scarcely believable trivia. Purnakanta did not repeat his journey after the war and India was granted freedom in 1947. In postcolonial India, the people in the borderlands had to 'forget' their histories of connections with neighbours across borders, now mapped as citizens of another (perhaps, even enemy) country!

Buragohain's travelogue offers a fascinating description of life in the city of Taunggyi in the Southern Shan region, which like any other colonial city of the early twentieth century was a hybrid space peopled by a variety of communities serving the different purposes and needs of the city. Within this diversity, deep bonds of friendships developed among strangers creating and maintaining interdependent communities that at once made the place feel like home and also made home a place for new opportunities and the growth of the self and others. Buragohain remembers:

Bengalis, Hindustanis, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Madrasis, Maharashtrians, Pathans, Gurkhas etc. reside in this town. ...The year we spent in the Southern Shan town of Taunggyi will remain the most memorable among all the places in Burma, Shan etc. that we have travelled through up to this point. The havildar Mr. Hai Kang Singh, a Gurkha of the Rai caste, along with his wife Padmabati Rai and young son, Musi, who lived in the same house as us, almost became

members of our own family (*poriyal*). ... When my son (Solen) would be away for business, then Padmabati would cook for me and help me out. Moreover, the subedar of the Taunggyi corps, Major sahib Digbir Rai Gorkhali, was a dear friend. His wife, Chitramaya Debi, also helped our business a lot by selling a lot of stuff to the members of the forces. (p. 179–80, our translation).

The *poriyal* (family) mentioned here is contingent, mutually beneficial and warmly convivial – a memorable savour that Buragohain cherished dearly in his later days in Assam. The unknown in Myanmar (Burma) seemed familiar and connected to him, an expanding community of friends and family that straddled the entire region. Citing Leela Gandhi, one can say that Purnakanta's narrative 'privileges...the trope of friendship as the most comprehensive...signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside...possessive communities of belonging' (Gandhi, 2006: 10).

Home and friendship, friendship and home – variations on these notes mark our entry point into the terrain of scholarship on the 'directional category' called Northeast India (Baruah, 2006). Our approach is different and unique from previous scholarship in the field in that we showcase the abiding relationships fostered by human interactions and exchanges that lead to a culture of friendship. Friendship is a responsibility with different others that, in turn, promotes and facilitates peace at home. In Assam, this relationship is expressed within the cultural expression of *sinaki manuh* (known and familiar people). The *sinaki* communities form the fraternity of neighbours and friends. The politics of emotions that positions these interactions with others must be understood as flexible and in constant flux. It is decidedly connected to both ethics and politics, responsibility and questioning that is predicated on the situational location of friends becoming neighbours or neighbours becoming friends, between familiarity and enigma, as Derrida would argue. At times, neighbours and friends have transformed into strangers and political tensions have erupted accentuating the lack of familiarity, as is evident in the recent violent exchanges between the Assamese and Bodo, Assamese and Naga, Tripuri and Bengali, Khasi and Bengali as well as Khasi and Assamese. Politics of bordering and border making of space and communities have been at the root of these clashes. Without undermining the political concerns that are important to these communities, we also recognize that there are certain spaces and moments of transcendence that enable a reconsideration of affirmative forms of relationship building. These exchanges are not based on a form of compensatory transaction of political gains, but is developed through series

of human encounters and opportunities that allow for interaction to renew relationship with the other and, once again, the space of Northeast becomes the shared home of the variety. This perspective that situates the ethical relationship between the variety who are friends and are at home with one another stands in sharp contrast to the given in the current scholarship on Northeast India which, although rich and growing, gets caught in the trap of an assumed stereotypical representation of the people and place: in violence, exceptionality and security, in short, fear. This, in turn, makes the people and places of the Northeast a zone of control devoid of the possibility of positive human interaction. This is a repeated and dated theme, but it seems the narrative is stuck on this negative representation. Even popular imagination outside the region has become stilted and unimaginative.

The obverse of this representation of the region as a zone of war of all against all is the exoticizing, touristic gaze on the 'others' inhabiting this region. The genealogy of this gaze can be drawn from colonial museological orders that presented the 'tribes' inhabiting the region as either versions of noble savage or as 'bloodthirsty,' ferocious head-hunters and war-like people (Kar, 2013; Kikon, 2009; Saikia, 2005; Zou, 2011). While we have already mentioned how the region and its inhabitants are approached through the lens of violence and exceptionality, versions of the noble, happy savage persist in postcolonial India. In the pre-liberalization era, the national channel, Doordarshan, used to periodically broadcast a short, musical vignette on national integration titled 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara.' The only spoken language from the Northeast in this segment is Assamese. A smiling woman lips the refrain 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' in Assamese. This sequence cuts to a subsequent one where the *mise-en-scene* initially invites us to gaze at a crystal clear river with cloudy hills in the background. Thirteen smiling 'tribal' people in colourful costumes sashay *wordlessly* across the scene. The lack of voice provided to these thirteen individuals stand in sharp contrast to the panoramic touristic gaze in this vignette as it travels around the country showcasing different languages and cultures under the umbrella of the Nehruvian ideology of 'unity in diversity.'

The post-liberalization era hasn't witnessed a significant change in this stock of representations. Popular Hindi films like *Dil Se* (1998) still represent the Northeast as a cloud-capped, hilly region that is concentrated symbolically on the figure of the mysterious feminine (the 'north-eastern' girl in the film is played by the Nepali actress, Manisha Koirala) that provokes mainland male desire. On the other hand, egregious films like *Tango Charlie* (2005) represent the region as a sinister forested area inhabited by 'Bodo' militants who like to

chop off people's ears as trophies.¹ The adoption of the Look East Policy also saw the institution of carnivalesque events like the Hornbill Festival. Kikon (2004) writes: 'Showcase events like the Hornbill festival, with catchy slogans coined in sanitized offices of the tourism department, hide a murky story of the hegemonic control of the military establishment in civil and political affairs in the Northeast.' In festivals like these, the threats and challenges of cultural difference are micromanaged and packaged in an exotic, domesticated register as alluring spectacles of cultural diversity that define the space of culture for both the inhabitants and mainlanders (Longkumer, 2014).

The limited and enclosed spaces of discourse – scholarly, popular and commercial – challenge the capacity to know the Northeast and its multiple communities and histories from the location of their own experiences that are developed through deliberations, debates and even discord within and outside the region. These exchanges are spaces for opening and not closing relationships. We focus on these possibilities of openings and interactions between people, cultures and histories in the Northeast that lead us on another pathway, to find positive, enhancing and robust relationship-building among the people of the different communities who, time and again, have forged friendships and associations beyond religious, linguistic, ethnic and class divides. We read the Northeast as a fertile place of human relations that are interdependent and intertwined, despite the many conflicts and violent uprisings that the locale has witnessed. This is not a new happening but is woven into the fabric of history of the place and people in our investigation.

Situating the history of contemporary scholarship on Northeast India

The skewed epistemological frames we mentioned above are the legatees of two particular ways of looking at and studying the region, both of which have a fairly long history: (a) the colonial anthropological² and (b) the security-oriented. The category of 'race,' we suggest, is the hidden motor that connects these two frames and provides the foundation for studying the representations in scholarship concerning the Northeast as the 'wild,' 'frontier' region. It was not surprising that colonial anthropological studies of the region posited the fixed, unchanging category of the 'tribe' as the antithesis to civilization, (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1943; Hutton, 1921; Mills, 1935). This frontier region was a home to 'tribal' (and by association, 'primitive') societies, who were deemed 'noble' or 'savage,' given their cooperation with or resistance to British

colonialism. Thus while certain populations in the region were projected as 'noble' or 'subservient,' other recalcitrant groups were 'pacified' through brutal campaigns on the frontier (Pels, 1999). This anthropological trajectory of the 'tribe' in the Northeast Indian context has a distinct racial tinge. Sanjib Baruah, for instance, mentions the case of Olaf Caroe, a foreign secretary in the British government, who authored a paper titled 'The Mongolian Fringe' in 1940. Caroe's paper was written within a known context; his formulations were the legatee of a long history of anthropological studies of the region in colonial times. This anthropological trajectory has been fundamental in framing the colonial and postcolonial policies for the governance of this region as the 'tribal' other territory inhabited by 'hostile' groups. This way of thinking has also cast its long shadow in certain contemporary studies (Sengupta, 2003; Stirn and Von Ham, 2003).

In postcolonial times, the 'frontier' may have 'become' a 'borderland,' but a similar attitude of othering and framing the people through narrow epistemological parameters have persisted (Bhaumik, 2009; Misra, 2011). The 'wild' colonial frontier was recast as the 'violence-ridden' borderland inhabited by disgruntled and disloyal subjects in the postcolonial period. Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first home minister, writing to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the wake of the Chinese invasion in 1961, stated:

All along the Himalayas in the north and north-east, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnologically and culturally not different from Tibetans and Mongoloids. The undefined state of the frontier and the existence on our side of a population with its affinities to the Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of the potential trouble between China and ourselves.³

Just as the figure of the 'Muslim' who supposedly swears allegiance to the 'other' nation, Pakistan, is seen in mainland India, the populations inhabiting the 'Mongoloid fringe' of India too were reproduced as groups with suspect loyalty to the postcolonial nation-state.⁴ Foucault's argument that the category of race introduces a break in the 'pastoral' functions of modern biopolitical regimes is, we think, applicable here. According to Foucault, the application of this more expansive notion of race/racism makes its reappearance in modern biopolitical regimes expressing its power to make live or let die. The application of racism as a tactic of power divides the 'population' – the object of biopower – into two groups: those that live (and live well) and those that can be killed off or exist at the point of death so that the former may be secure and live. The state security regimes in force in Northeast India that were brought into

effect to 'control' the rebellious subjects, such as the Armed Forces Security Protection Act (AFSPA), reframe the colonial figurations of subjection and sustain a continuing state of exception in the region. In fact, we can extend this to argue that the original locus of sovereign power and necropolitics in the postcolonial Indian context is the Northeast, a point noted by various commentators on exceptionality in the region (Akoijam, 2005; Baishya, 2014; Baruah, 2007; Lacina, 2008; McDuie-Ra, 2009; Oinam, 2007; Vajpeyi, 2007).

Recasting the region as a violence-ridden zone inhabited by turbulent populations, the postcolonial dispensation of exceptionality developed along two major lines: the first one focused on the origins or causes for the numerous insurgencies in the region (Bhaumik, 2009; Hazarika, 1995; Nag, 2002; Saikia, 2006), and the second shifted the locus from the anthropological study of primordial 'tribes' to how the reductive categories of 'poverty' and 'ethnic difference' precipitated, perpetuated and, in some cases, prevented violence and terror in this locale (Madhab, 1999; Raghavan, 2013). Poverty and deprivation, on the one hand, and clashes between ethnic communities, on the other hand, were identified as causal factors for the recurring episodes of violence in the region. Calling such broad tendencies 'greed and grievance debates,' McDuie-Ra states that while these models have 'proven useful for understanding the origins of insurgency in Northeast India,' they only managed to 'explain the causes of violence rather than analyzing the ways in which this violence is experienced, normalized and contested' (p. 17).

To be sure, alternative and powerful epistemological frames studying the history and culture of the region through materialist analyses (Gohain, 2006; Guha, 1977, 1991), culturalist analyses of socio-political issues (Misra, 2000, 2014; Prabhakara, 2012) and social histories of literary traditions (Misra, 1987) always existed parallel to these two trends discussed above. However, the last fifteen years or so have seen a steady trickle of academic publications that have slowly shifted the region from a passive, instrumentalized object of analysis to a dynamic subject that is the producer of complex discourses.⁵ At the risk of simplification, we can divide the dominant trends in this emerging body of scholarship under four major headings (these trajectories are not mutually exclusive, but intersect with each other): (a) works that critique the monolithic ascription of the locale as a bounded entity and probe its uniqueness as a crossroads where various cultures and cultural traditions interact in complex ways; (b) works that do not take 'identity' as a fixed essence, but study its plasticity and complex historicity; (c) works that focus on the environmental and ecological history of the region and (d) works that move away from the paradigm of 'exceptionality' and study the dimensions

of everyday life in the region without ignoring the complex effects of race and racialization and gender and ethnic differences. We are not claiming that this attempt at cognitive mapping is exhaustive. For instance, this four-fold typology does not discuss the established trajectory of studying the genealogies of history writing (Guha, 1983; Saikia, 2005) and conversion and the role of Christianity in the Northeast (Eaton, 1984; Nongbri, 2014; Subba, 2006). Neither do we mention the work that studies the impact of the 1947 partition on the region extensively (Baruah, 2015; Dasgupta, 2003, 2008) or inter-ethnic and religious violence (Hussain, 1993; Saikia, 2011). However, our aim here is to cover some of the broad trends that have provided launching pads for some of our own studies and frameworks in this book. At the same time, this attempt at cognitive mapping is one of the first synoptic summaries of the contemporary state of scholarship on Northeast India. While we are cognizant of the fact that this mapping is provisional, we want to emphasize that such an enterprise becomes very necessary if the stakes of our project are to be outlined clearly.

Consider the location of this geopolitical region: connected to the Indian mainland by a slender 'chicken's neck,' Northeast India lies at the crossroads of South, Southeast and East Asia. Contemporary scholarship on this region (Baruah, 2004; Chatterjee 2013; Saikia, 2005) have increasingly begun to take stock of the dynamic exchanges that occurred in this borderland region. Here, Willem van Schendel's work is a key reference point although his designation of the region as the 'Bengal borderlands' (2004) places too much centrality on Bengal as the nodal point in this locale. Far more provocatively, van Schendel's coinage 'Zomia' has been studied extensively in James Scott's polemical anarchist classic *The Art of not Being Governed* (2010) as one of the last bastions where the modern state-form has been contested fiercely. A large portion of Northeast India also forms part of Zomia. Lintner (2012) and Bhattacharyya's (2013) non-fictional accounts of the guerrilla camps in the no-man's zones lying between India and Myanmar, and Anurag Mahanta's Assamese novel *Aulingar Jui* (A Harvest of Fire, 2007), a subject of one of the essays in this collection, are within the Zomia imagined by van Schendel and Scott.

While these fictional and non-fictional accounts talk about contemporary narratives of border-crossing and existing systems and networks of cross-cultural contact, what of memories of older forms of connections that refuse to disappear despite the hardening of national boundaries and its attendant politics of forgetting and remembering? This has been an important thematic in contemporary scholarship on Northeast India. Three longer works are exemplary in this context. Saikia's books, *In the Meadows of Gold* (1997) and

Fragmented Memories (2005), provide the peoples' narratives of history that are remembered in the region. Memories in these accounts spill over the boundaries of nation-state and national history and connect with neighbours in Burma, Thailand and even south China. Both memory and identity are in motion, and enclosing them have led to the transformation of the people and places of the Northeast into sites of contestation between local, national and transnational actors and agendas, as Saikia argues. Instead of looking westward toward Bengal, Saikia's narrative journeys eastwards to appreciate the lively connections forged through multiple layers of historical encounters and connections at the crossroads of Assam.

Similarly, Chatterjee's recent monograph (2013) explores the costs of 'forgetting' the precolonial past in the emerging intellectual debate on the region. Chatterjee's polemical point that a 'post-nationalist geographical sensibility' dominates the study of this region is a very important one and should open up new avenues for researching the precolonial past and its lingering impact on the present (p. 18). Of particular interest for us is what Chatterjee says towards the end of her book where she discusses the lessons she learned about memory from refugees in Mizoram: '...a general refusal of narratives of suffering could also indicate a profusion of an ethics of enormous discipline, the commitment to and cultivation of compassionate albeit hierarchized friendships. These histories of friendships, of expansive personhood and futurity, had been erased from the historiography of a South Asia conceived only in terms of freedom and rights, products and markets, here and now' (p. 364). In fact, these scholars urge us to look beyond the focus on the 'here and now' and probe 'histories of friendship' and of 'expansive personhood' beyond the present lacuna of the postcolonial mentality.

At the same time, we are also aware of the possible pitfalls of the normalization of such a narrative paradigm that valorizes precolonial connections and fuzziness. Such narratives often follow the trajectory of declension into nostalgia, one may argue. Nostalgia for the 'fuzzy' communities, a form that influences both nationalist and nationalist-Marxist variants, is predicated on a romantic secularization of a narrative structure with colonialism or modernity as trauma leading to the 'fall' from a sort of paradise. Politics then gets reimagined as a reinvigorated search for a lost 'nostos' (home) projected onto the present. This tendency is evident, for instance, in Uddipana Goswami's work (2013), a well-researched book otherwise. Goswami's call to re-invent an expansive sense of *bar-axamiya* as a politics of personhood and identity for the present is predicated on a desire to recuperate and reinvent older, fuzzier

forms of imagining community to break the present impasses. However, as in the valorization of precolonial relationships in certain forms of nationalist-Marxist theorizations (Ahmad, 1992), it may end up flattening the complex past somewhat and propel the historicist search for indigenous variants of contemporary categories like 'identity' or 'identity politics.'

Questions of identity and identity politics, of course, have always been important issues in Northeast India and it is no surprise that current scholarship is focused on this problematic. The difference between certain contemporary branches of scholarship on the problematic and the two frames of the colonial-anthropological and the security-centred studies (broached earlier), is in the approach to this subject. The latter sees identity in the Northeast as a primordial or a fixed category that has negative impact on the people and therefore requires 'taming' and/or managing through control and coercion. The more current scholarship produced by scholars of the Northeast conceptualizes identity as a category in flux and subject to contestations and critique.

Two scholars from Assam have been important in developing this new approach to identity study in the region. Yasmin Saikia's book *Fragmented Memories* (2005) and Sanjib Baruah's *India against Itself* (1999) and his later book, *Durable Disorder* (2005) generated this new discourse. Saikia innovatively synthesizes a vast amount of material from the *buranjis* (local historical texts of Assam) and a wide array of heuristic frameworks (archival research, political theory, discourse analysis, intertextual resonances between culture and politics) to historicize Tai-Ahom breakaway from Assamese 'subnationalism.' Baruah's study departs significantly from classic considerations of the problem that focused primarily on the middle-class origins and provenance of Assamese subnationalism (Gohain, 1973; Hussain, 1993). In his book *India against Itself*, Baruah considers the fluidity and flexibility of identity as an 'interested and implicated observer' (p. xiii), which goes against the strain of his social science training on 'objectivity.' Furthermore, his book was also unique in South Asian studies in that it was one of the first works to 'take seriously voices that challenge the Indian national formation' (p. xiii). At its core, Baruah is motivated by the desire 'to influence Indian public opinion and policy toward this region.' *India against Itself*, therefore, is both a scholarly as well as an interventionist book. Baruah's rigorous historicization of the discourse of subnationalism from the colonial to the postcolonial period and his appraisal of the tensions and contradictions within the discourse facilitated an analysis of identity and identity politics as malleable, dynamic processes. No wonder then that in the wake of his seminal works, the study of identity

in the region underwent a radical change. Although methodologies varied, increasingly scholars began considering politics and history in the region as forms of identity-in-becoming (Dutta, 2012; Goswami, 2013; Longkumer, 2010; Pachua, 2014; Saikia, 2011). Moreover, questions of identity and identity formation were also conjoined with explorations of space and spatial politics (Kar, 2004; Misra, 2011) for critically interrogating the spatial localization and eventual determination of the directional category of the Northeast in the postcolonial period.

Alongside, environmental history and environmental politics are other fruitful and provocative nodes to analyze this region. Given the massive popular mobilizations against dams (Baruah, 2012), the issues surrounding floods and erosion and the problems associated with deforestation, agriculture and mining (Krishna, 2012), such an approach that combines space with environmental concerns is timely and necessary. While Amalendu Guha's materialist analyses are classic points of reference (1977), recent years have seen a steady flow of publications contributing to the development of this area of study. Karlsson's 'political ecology' (2011) studies the intersection of environmental and ethnic politics in Meghalaya. Cederlof's historical study (2014) considers the impact of climate and commerce in the consolidation of the empire's 'frontier' in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of Jayeeta Sharma's major emphases in her historical study of tea plantations is how an emergent capitalist order in the region buttressed by new developments in science and technology facilitated the shift from an 'idyllic vision of unordered Nature blooming into ordered gardens' (2011: 43). This processual shift was part of a colonial/postcolonial process of the disciplinarization of a 'wild' space into a productive area for capital formation. Place became space and environment became part of production, which locates Sharma's work within the two fields of study: environmental transformations and spatial politics.

Arupjyoti Saikia's panoramic survey of the shift from forest administration in the colonial era to the institutionalization of the Forest Department in the postcolonial period, shows how different types of spatial regimes gradually took hold in the region and reframed both ideas of 'nature' and human interactions with the environment. The move from environmental history to peasant politics in his next book, *A Century of Protests* (2014) seems to be a logical continuation of his previous work. In this richly documented book Saikia makes an important intervention by shifting the focus away from the 'picture of the continued unhappiness of the Assamese middle class in the new Indian federal structure' to narrating the untold story of 'peasant mobilization

and unrest which had engulfed rural Assam immediately after independence and in the following decades' (2014: 2).

In the current scholarship on the subfield that focuses on security issues, the trajectory has shifted from security oriented empirical studies to understanding the institutions and socio-political effects of the security regimes on ordinary populations. However, while such research is necessary, studying the region through the lens of exceptionality alone can be limiting. A parallel move that shifts the critical gaze from the exceptional to everyday formations that negotiate and contest with violence and terror is also critical. Of late, new work in this arena have started to appear. Makiko Kimura's book *The Nellie Massacre of 1983* (2013) juxtaposes a historical analysis of the infamous Nellie killing of the local Muslims with an ethnographic study of how perpetrators and victims continue to live on with the memories of the carnage in the present. Moving the politics of migration outside of Assam, Duncan McDuié-Ra's book *Northeast Migrants in Delhi* (2013) explores the vicissitudes faced by north-eastern populations in neoliberal megapolises like New Delhi. McDuié-Ra's focus on the discourses and realities of racialization and its connection with neoliberalism open up newer avenues of inquiry of 'race' and 'racism' for future researchers to undertake in the study of the North-easterner's experiences within India.

Another emerging field of scholarship, of special relevance to the study of the everyday and the ordinary in the Northeast, is gender and women's studies. While works on human rights abuses and gender, as well as descriptive accounts of feminist movements in the region like the hunger strike of Irom Sharmila and the protests by the Imas of Manipur abound (Banerjee and Basu Raychaudhury, 2011; Manchanda, 2001; Mehrotra, 2009; Haksar, 2013), Tiplut Nongbri's work moves the lens away from the impact of ethnic conflicts on women's bodies and instead shows the contribution of Khasi women to the economy in Meghalaya and dynamic platforms of entrepreneurship created by Khasi women (2008).

The relative paucity of feminist scholarship on Northeast India is, however, offset by powerful visions of feminist agency and collectivity in Northeast Indian cultural production in literary works. Thoibi Devi and M.K. Binodini's writings in Meitelon, Nirupama Borgohain, Indira Goswami and Arupa Patangia Kalita's Assamese novels, among others, are powerful cultural documents that simultaneously chronicle the histories of their times and also provide powerful accounts of survival and the negotiation with the everyday. Particularly, Arupa Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee* (first published 2003,

translated 2014) offers us a powerful feminist vision of relationality and claiming a sense of home. *Felanee* establishes working class women who are abandoned in a refugee camp as active agents who continually renew the promise of life even after violence dismembers their living environments. The final, haunting image in the novel of *kanhi* grass that is cut only to be thrown away, but continually and stubbornly grows back, is a testament to the potentialities of resilience and living on after violence and terror uproots and damages established forms of life.

Home can never be destroyed, but like a phoenix rising from the ashes of ruin, like the *kanhi* grass that is cut away only to grow back, in Northeast India, the communities of people and the histories they have created defy the destruction of violence – internal and governmental. They make us think and affirm that violence can never be total, it cannot erase the human capacity of renewal to build positive human relationships and sustainable communities. We focus particularly on these moments of survival and renewal in this book, with the intention of unearthing vernacular and locally rooted modes of coexistence, interchange and collectivity.

Privileging human relationship: Northeast India in our perspective

Building on these established trajectories of current scholarship, our edited volume titled *Northeast India: A Place of Relations* raises new questions and offers a variety of empirical and conceptual essays that suggest different approaches for engaging the study of Northeast India in our contemporary times. Using local vocabularies of human relationships that persuasively engage distant history through intimate remembered memories, alongside an exploration of complex current issues of concern to local societies as well as the global audience, new interpretative frameworks are offered in this book for making the Northeast accessible on its own terms of dynamism and unfolding histories.

The essays in this book are guided by a set of common questions. We ask: how should we read the place and the people of the Northeast from the location of the present and its spatial context as a historical borderland? How have the narratives of people been shaped over time as a result of the encounters between internal and external communities? If people and place are linked, what is the relationship of the Northeast with the rest of India? Can deep historical memories of local communities inform a way of knowing the self and the other differently today? What are the forms of politics and collectivities that

have emerged through the processes of state-formation, militarization and techniques of governmentality? What are the imaginations for a sustainable future in the Northeast?

In short, in this volume we show the possibility of a new search enabling a 'discovery' of Northeast India from within. We engage the received scholarship but offer a new transparency to understand the people and place through the lens of their collective experiences. Northeast India in our narrative emerges as a place of relations between multiple people, histories, cultures and societies. No longer viewed through the lens of an objectified territory, in our narrative the Northeast is presented as a sentient, dynamic subject of multiple narratives that meet and intersect in this crossroads-like space. Thus, we read it as a place of new happenings in which there is the possibility of continuous expansion of the horizon of history and issues of current relevance, facilitating new voices of narratives between the borderlands of South, East and Southeast Asia.

Organization and structure

Combining work from both established and emerging scholars in the field, our book is divided into four sections consisting of three essays in each section. Each section is based on a sub-theme addressed from multi-disciplinary locations. Together they seek to overcome the site of the empty and static Northeast and advance an investigation of multiple issues for generating knowledge that would put the Northeast in dialogue with global issues and histories of the contemporary world.

Our book starts in the present. Section one called 'Contemporary Politics and Issues of Definition' probes a variety of issues that are of urgent concern to people in the Northeast. Focusing on the issues of migration, representation and discrimination, resource management and exploitation under the guise of 'development', the essays in this section provide radical new thinking on the relationship of the people of the Northeast with India. Following his previous work on racism against North-easterners in mainland India, Duncan McDuie-Ra in this volume offers us a close view picture of the impact of neoliberal globalization and mass migration from the Northeast to Bangalore and New Delhi and the ethnic and racial violence that follows in consequence. McDuie-Ra argues that by identifying as a distinct racial community, migrants from the Northeast build relationships and solidarities across ethnic and class lines that are far more difficult back home. Sanjib Baruah speaks in a new voice and asks about the politics of promoting a massive developmental thrust of the

Northeast. Hydropower is one aspect within this narrative of development, but the tentacles of penetration dig much deeper into the heart of the Northeast, which aims to transform and create new dependencies in the future. Baruah argues that this new kind of developmentalism is occurring under very different conditions than development's heroic era and calls for a serious thinking of the neoliberal global thrust of the recent governmental agendas in the Northeast. Similarly, Mitul Baruah's essay looks at the active role of the Indian state in the production and re-production of geographies of hazards and environmental vulnerabilities in the Brahmaputra valley. Baruah argues that the activities of state agencies, driven partly by the accumulation of capital and partly by the bureaucratic arbitrariness and the everyday practices of the state, are at the heart of the environmental crises facing the Brahmaputra valley.

In section two, called 'Creating Presence' we engage with history, human relationships and connections between the human and nonhuman realms that have evolved over time between different groups in the Northeast as well as a variety of outsiders. These narratives, told in the voices of multiple tellers, enumerate the understandings of personal and collective identities that are constantly evolving. Beppe Karlsson (2011) and Yasmin Saikia (2005) who had previously teased out silent social histories of the region using categories, such as 'memory' and contingent discourses of 'belonging', in this volume weave together personal memories along with ethnographic and historical evidence and write new histories of friendships and its loss in religious and ethnic violence. Karlsson's essay adopts an autobiographical approach and ruminates on how friendship and politics across borders facilitates the complex history of his 'entanglements' with the space called Northeast India. The changing terrain of politics in the region, within the Rabha community and in Meghalaya, are layered on top of Karlsson's personal friendships with individuals in these communities that documents for the readers the ebbs and flows of contemporary history in the region, flux alongside stable human relationships. Saikia writes about the 'absence' of Muslims created through the violence of history writing in Assam, but finds on the same site of absence a new history emerging in contemporary literature and everyday human encounters that refuse to forget the intimate presence of the Muslims in the midst of the Hindu-Assamese society and culture. The blended culture of Assam is the focus of this essay and Muslims offer an agentic site for reading Assam's history anew. Sean Dowdy's paper, inflected by insights from post-humanist trends in contemporary anthropology, studies relationships between human and non-human entities in Mayong, Assam. Like Mitul Baruah's paper in

the first section, Dowdy also focuses on floods. But while Baruah's paper focuses on state discourses that (re)produce hazardscapes, Dowdy examines the phenomenological contexts for how residents of Mayong collectively (re)configure and manage socio-ontological difference in times of crisis. For the Mayongians, the place of fish is central for the reinterpretation of social cosmologies. Through an analysis of technologies and practical activities, Dowdy studies how these subjects use forms of 'species management' to imagine local forms of social-cosmologies and ways of being in the world. His paper, thus, joins an emergent line of post-humanist thought (Maan Baruah, 2013) that are reconsidering the complex interactions between human and non-human agents in Northeast India.

In section three, called 'Knowing through Experience', Amit Baishya reads the literary fictions of erstwhile members of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). He argues that these fictional texts do not express justifications of revolutionary politics or mourning for their loss; rather, they unsettle commonly accepted binaries of 'plains' versus 'borderlands' and reveal how borderland subjects manage to endure and survive in conditions of diminished life in spaces of dislocation. They are narratives of life, although strangely confined and deprived of a simple living space. Continuing the same strain of his provocative anthropological work on Rani Gaidinliu, a figure who has been increasingly co-opted by the Hindu right, Arkotong Longkumer's essay assesses the Jadonang movement in Manipur from 1917–1932. Reading the movement against the prescriptions of colonial ethnography, Longkumer's essay argues that the movement was less about revolutionary millenarianism than about practices that sought to transform the sphere of everyday life. Continuing the focus on experience in this section, Longkumer argues that the traditions of prophecy, dreams and signs among local communities must be understood as resources through which indigenous resistance is mounted. R. K. Debbarma's essay focuses on some recent forms of political self-making among indigenous Tripuris and brings us back to the subject of mourning as a way of claiming forgotten forms of life in Tripura. Debbarma argues that in contemporary Tripura, beneath the surface of celebrating the forgotten or silenced – as evidenced in the recent commemoration of the supposed victory of a Tripuri king, Hamtor Fa, over the King of Bengal – lies a sorrowful mourning, a fixation with loss. Loss, in this sense, is not a negation but an affirmation that refuses to accept the power of erasure. Debbarma's essay looks closely at contested spatial histories of Tripura and identifies three levels of transformation through the memory of loss. One, it challenges the geographies