

Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India by Sanjib Baruah, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2005, 265pp, ISBN 019 566981 9, Rs 495.

Sanjib Baruah's *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* is an insightful work which offers new and old observations of a region that is very complex and that has been somehow neglected by academics, the public, and the Indian government. The purpose of this book is to enhance our understanding of the Indian state, its complexities and diversities as well as the consequences of the colonial power which had evidently different outcomes for different regions within India. Baruah's first book, *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* deals with the United Liberation Front of Assam which is partially included in section four of *Durable Disorder*. In the latter, Baruah aims his political and historical analyses more broadly on the Northeast. He does this by looking at the different states in the Northeast, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. The title of the book supports the main arguments of the content of this work which implies that the issues the Northeast as a distinctive region is facing are permanent and persistent in the near future.

Baruah divides the book into five major sections. In his introduction he outlines one of the major arguments that runs throughout the entire book. He sticks to the idea of the importance of colonial structures within Indian society and the failure to deal with these experiences appropriately, but he also emphasizes that the Northeast as a region is different from the rest of India when looking at the colonial experience. Baruah categorizes the Northeast as a frontier region, underlines its exceptional role, and its obsession with security, as a part of the mindset of Indian society or Indian officials. The author mentions that the insurgency problem is the major issue the region is facing and one reason why the Northeast is treated as a special fraction of the Indian state (pVIII). Baruah's argument that the region faces persistent political confrontation, violence and conflict, runs throughout the book, and

suggests that the political system and the democratic fabric of the region have been tremendously affected, weakening the area further.

In the introduction Baruah states that most of the articles in this book have been published previously which gives the impression that some of the sections, though revised for this book, are not as significant to today's issues the region is facing. *Durable Disorder* provides a clearly written account on the history of the Northeast for readers who have not read about the region beforehand. However, the author might have expanded his work and gone more into depth on recent issues confronting the Northeast, especially since he mentions the significance of globalization and its impact on Asia in general. A major problem Baruah mentions is the 'dissonance between the ethnic homeland model and the actually existing political economy of the region (p11).' He brings into this discussion on the concept of nationalizing space, speaking of frontier space, which creates further conflicts between the ethnicities living in the Northeast and the Indian government in New Delhi. It appears the region has been neglected for long and has never made it into an Indian national mindset. It has therefore been isolated and now the Indian government is showing a greater interest in making the Northeast part of the Indian political and economic system. The author repeatedly emphasizes this point throughout the book.

The second chapter investigates the structures of governance and today's cosmetic federalism as Baruah calls it. He uses the example of Arunachal Pradesh to describe the concept of nationalizing frontier space which, in the case of the Northeast, creates more difficulties between states and the central government in New Delhi. Moreover, he emphasizes that the nationalizing process which the government pushes for is based on security matters following a couple of border conflicts which India has faced over the years. In chapter three, the author explores the situation of insurgents in the state of Manipur which appears to be a shift in theme, since he is concentrating on political and military aspects

that influence daily life in Manipur. Section three of the book, which constitutes chapters four and five, deal with the colonial regime in Assam and the Naga war. Again these sometimes feel slightly out of context since the author skips through many different themes trying to combine them under one broad theme.

Section five of Baruah's work containing chapters six, seven and eight are exclusively dedicated to the state of Assam and the United Liberation Front of Assam. In this section he discusses the concept of nationalism and subnationalism and tries to highlight its significance within the Northeast as a region and within Indian society. He explains that the idea of subnationalism is essential since different ethnicities built up their own sense of nationhood, not bounded by physical, national or state borders. These ideologies contribute to the persistent ethnic and communal conflicts in the Northeast and in India. Baruah describes it in the following way: most states can be described as nation-provinces in the sense that particular nationalities constitute majorities and they define the public identity of these states (p161). As long as this kind of thinking persists, the Indian government will be unable to nationalize the frontier states within a strong federalist system. Section five of *Durable Disorder* deals with the policies of the Indian state and its attempts to include all of the Northeast into a general Indian political mindset, but also shows that the policies enacted are rather treated as an 'invitation to violence' as Baruah calls it.

The epilogue establishes some excellent ideas on the imperative concept of 'Look East Policy'. This theme might have been better run throughout the entire book and not attached just to the epilogue since this seems to be a major concern in recent times when researching the Northeast and India. Throughout his work Baruah establishes the Northeast as a backward region which is economically, politically and socially underdeveloped but only in the epilogue does he offer resolutions. He accentuates that the Look East Policy has the potential of becoming Northeast India's road to peace and prosperity, which is questionable if the Indian

government is not capable of providing security and peace within its own country.

Baruah's book is a valuable contribution to the research of the political situation in the Northeast with all the issues and challenges it creates to the Indian government and to the people living in these states. Overall the author creates a careful discussion and analysis of the situation and possible ways to resolve the conflicts. But the book needs more flow in its themes and the way it connects the chapters. However, *Durable Disorder* presents a good introduction to the complicated and thorny subject matter of the Northeast for the unacquainted reader.

Reviewed by
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