

The background of the book cover is a collage of traditional Indian masks, likely from the North-East region, rendered in a sepia or olive green tone. The masks are arranged in a grid-like pattern, with some showing faces and others showing more abstract, stylized features. The overall aesthetic is cultural and historical.

SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

# Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India

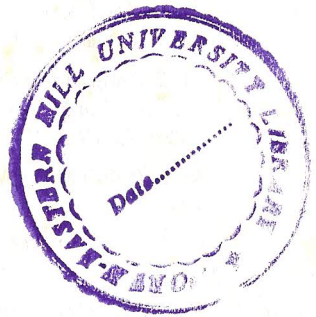
An Analysis

PRASENJIT BISWAS  
CHANDAN SUKLABAIIDYA



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To  
*Father Rawlson, Alfred Schutz and Nations-From-Below  
whose presence is emancipatory*

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## Preface

India's North-East or North-East's India—a coinage in terms of the peculiarity of the relationship between India and its North-East brings out the disjunction and the difference that pervades the balance of power and politics between the centre and its periphery. Neither the question of belonging and non-belonging to each other, nor their existence as mere 'disjuncts' exudes any sense of contemporariness either in the context of India or in the territory of the 'North-East'. Contemporary social and cultural history of North-East India has marked a tense and contested terrain of political claims and counterclaims with all its cultural overtones. The claims of peoples belonging to the ethnic and cultural settings of the North-East, and a consequent national identity of their own, posited against the Indian national identity has generated considerable debate and controversy among scholars, intellectuals, social activists and others. There is quite a bit of indecisiveness in finally settling claims of specific ethnic and cultural identities that defy the dominant logic of identity, as propounded by the Indian State. The dominant logic is that of construction of an identity that consents to an inclusion within the Indian national identity and thereby lives in agreement with the territorial and constitutional authority of the Indian State. Most of the identities in India's North-East assume a space of difference for realization of their own aspirations, cultural and political, with all other economic and social ramifications.

The phenomenal rise and growth of various identities in North-East India presents a picture of the possibilities of multiple emergences of identities with many distinct claims. However, the Indian State uses its ideological and repressive organs to simultaneously persuade these identities to join the Indian mainstream and coerce them into submission. In response to such a two-pronged strategy of the Indian State, various identities reciprocate to the persuasion of

the former in terms of insurgency and resistance with their strategic alliances with the state. In response to repressive organs of the state, identities from North-East India bring up their own insurgent groups; and such groups take the lead voicing the identity concerns of their respective ethnic communities. As insurgent groups take the decisions of resistance away from the domain of the public, the gulf between insurgence and its popular support widens. There is also no gainsaying the fact that various people's organizations, comprising of civil society members, have also joined the ideological struggle to protect human rights and democratic decision-making procedures in the course of this struggle, in order to stave the monopoly of insurgents. The latter also responded to such initiatives in a politically appropriate manner.

Insurgents and civil society organizations, on the one hand, and the state comprising of the army, police and other governmental organs, on the other, clash over issues such as citizenship, sovereignty, ethnic and cultural identity and human rights, including the right to development. In all such matters it is not the strength of the group alone which legitimizes and rationalizes, rather a stronger undercurrent of concerns with respect to rights, democracy and security determines the shape of the struggle between the two sides. But such processes of determination often take forms of self-determination and constitutional determinism, thereby bring the open-ended struggles for rights to some kind of resolution.

The book asks a deeper question: how is cultural politics a determinant of ethnic- and identity-oriented struggles as it happens in the North-East? At a particular level, this book examines the instances of life-world moorings and their reflections in constructions of the ideas of nation-state and self-identity. It argues that life-world norms are subordinated to official discourses of anthropology by the state, be it the colonial or post-colonial Indian State, thereby reverting to a subtle discourse of colonial domination. Ethnic insurgencies respond to such colonial discourses by a complex reworking of the history of self-determination, which statist discourses cannot appropriate. In doing so, they give rise to counter-discourses that remains a constant worry for the Indian State in its goal of achieving legitimacy and development in the North-East region. Civil society organizations join issues in terms of hegemony of the state and ruling classes, and its formation at the local and

regional levels. As a matter of affirmation of their specific point of view, civil society organizations seek to establish the significance of voicing concerns that affect a specific community and society without being oblivious of larger issues at the national and global level. They simultaneously perform the role of crusader as well as vigilante in matters of conflict and concern between state, insurgency and civil society. While both the state and the insurgent groups carve out their distinct ideological and political agenda, the civil society organizations only require an agenda of empowerment, as opposed to voicelessness, dispossession and disempowerment. In a sense, civil society organizations represent those aspects of culture and ethnicity that are unaddressed in the course of struggle against hegemony and, therefore, allow a free space of articulation of issues of empowerment, by mobilizing key resources of the community. The community operates at the level of articulation, while at the level of struggle it is only an opposition between the state and the community that propels the struggle. Therefore, unwittingly, such struggles against the state gets diverted into a struggle for political and cultural recognition by the state. The engagement in the struggle between the state and non-state actors stipulates the place of an enemy within the struggle, which necessarily comes from the supposed breaches in the relationship with other communities resulting into inter-ethnic and inter-community clashes. It is at this moment of diversion from state to others that such struggles lose the strength of self-determination and fall into the trappings of constitutional determinism.

The key issues involved in two major ongoing struggles— (United Liberation Front of Assam and National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Isak-Muivah) in North-East India are that of sovereign homeland and internal colonization. Both these issues generate a severe conflict and clash with not only the Indian State but also with other sections of people. But the appeal of both the movements lies in their critique of the Indian State and the parliamentary politics of justification for the role of the state. Although the capability of any such insurgent outfit in creating a separate homeland is doubted, their uncompromising struggle for it generates a kind of enthusiasm among the people to fight harder for rights and justice, be it within the Indian union or outside. The strategy of mobilization of this support often meets with severe crackdown by the state

nevertheless the struggle goes on, citing instances of excesses done by the state. In effect, counter-insurgency operations by the state help sustain popular critique of the Indian State by the insurgents and develop waves of sympathy for militant outfits. This is a way of using the acts of the state in support of ethnic insurgency. In fact, it is a discursive strategy in garnering support towards insurgencies and the success of the strategy can be understood from how insurgent outfits withstand the onslaught of the state.

Recent happenings in North-East India could be a good point of discussion in our understanding of the situation there. The movement against imposition of Armed Forces Special Powers Act in Manipur, which is led by *Apunba Lup*, the apex body of 27 social organizations of Meitei community, brought out the complex relationship between state, insurgency, human rights and civil society. The demand for withdrawal of the Act is met with resistance from the army engaged in counter-insurgency, while insurgents and civil society groups critique the act for its arbitrary extra-judicial character. Indeed the truth does not lie either with the state or with the other side. The fact of repression of struggles, armed or unarmed, which goes with the domination of the ruling classes, retains its validity amidst such a contentious battle of ideas. What is put to severe test here is the concern for security and a healthy social life as part of a democratic political and moral order, for which both the state and the struggling groups acts as contingent players; and in a sense it is the autonomy of 'good life' in an Aristotelean sense, independent of state and insurgency, that poses a high stake for the political state and the civil society. The fear of losing the very idea of good, which is greater than the cause of the state or insurgency, is what raises the value of democratic self-governance, part of which could be recuperated in a relationship of responsibility, which lies away from insurgency and counter-insurgency. What *Apunba Lup*, as a civil society body is engaged in, is this reclamation of the right and the good, in its forced entry into a sphere of battle over human rights, legality and constitutional propriety. Nothing could be more neutral, and at the same time, more engaged than a voice like *Apunba Lup*, which is neither on the side of the insurgents nor on the side of the state, but, which voices the larger common good. Will the parties in conflict pay heed to its voice?

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There is a kind of self-pity that emerges at this point. If the Indian State goes ahead with its counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations, and if the insurgents carry forward their struggle for sovereign, independent North-East India, how would the people of the region poise themselves? In fact it is a pity that the voices of the silent majority fall on deaf ears and there is a constant erosion of democratic sensibility and commitment to the larger good. Nothing seems to find its rightful place beyond a cause, even if the cause involves the interests of the silent majority. The practice of political and moral majoritarianism, in the drive for legitimacy for social and political action, leading the actors astray to a point of irreconcilable justification for one's own acts, often derives from a counterfactual response to the act of the other. This is an inversion of the moral sense of the self, into a politics of morality that prioritizes the act of the other, in order to overcome one's errors, make-beliefs and dogmas. Insurgency in North-East India has got diverted to this abyss of moral vacuum, in which it emerges only as a respondent of the state and vice-versa, in an uncanny silence about the larger common good.

Given this self-pity and self-criticism, there is a move from larger globalization oriented bodies to take away the burden of critique by the civil society groups to some global agenda of removing the borders and trading across the transnational routes.

The apparent challenge to the nation-state by the insurgents is bypassed by these sets of global actors, who, in the name of advancing development and bringing in a global regime of Capital, are now trying to make deep inroads into the ethnically protected and community-owned cultural and natural resource base of the region. The state is becoming party to such propaganda of liberalization of the frontiers and boundaries, beyond the reaches of civil society. Insurgents in their trigger-happy mood are also kowtowing to the idea that the state will lose its sovereign territory, and would possibly wither away in the winds of global market and liberal trade regimes, with the North-East having a taste of free cash, possibly dollars, and luxury goods from East Asia. Both the state and insurgents are jubilant about the cash value of such an idea of removing frontiers and boundaries, and coeval with such dissolution, the rigidly fought barriers of identity and ethnic boundaries shall give way to integration to a larger global community. This is

the other face of bypassing the larger common good that organizations like Apunba Lup, Naga Mothers Association, various human rights groups and other civil society bodies are trying to stand up to. It is in this context, one also needs to look at the indigenous debates surrounding matriliney, and its proposed changeover to patriarchy, a distinct possibility that goes into a struggle for redefining identities in North-East. In a much deeper vein than 'Vandemataram', the unrecognized ethnography of matrilineal societies of North-East needs to be pondered over, to really sing the ode to the mother!

The book, in its seven chapters, attempts to knit together this kaleidoscopic land, the culture and human scapes of North-East India. While doing so, the book keeps in view the importance of imaging an inside of thinking and imagination, as against an outside of struggle against the state and hegemony. The bigger picture that the book tries to draw is a 'phenomenological representation' of the North-East Indian articulation against the hegemony of power and self, while the smaller picture that it draws focuses on logic(s) of practice as it obtains in the life-world. The availability of life-world actors makes it also possible to articulate a counterhegemonic ensemble of difference, marginality and dominance in the book. The book further tries to widen the philosophical and political imagination of communities of North-East India, by way of locating a subaltern position of imagination, that of the nation-from-below. Whether such a construction extends the scope of understanding the struggles of various identities, not merely in terms of self-determination but in terms of discursive self-articulation, is an open question that the reader can delve into. The authors refrain from taking sides and discuss issues of increasing relevance to the North-East as well as to India.

November, 2006

Prasenjit Biswas  
Chandan Suklabaidya

*Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis* draws upon the phenomenological notion of the life-world to understand the culturally-embedded construction of communities for whom the lived experience of cultural politics constitutes their identity. It analyses the cultural and political determinants of ethnic- and identity-oriented struggles in India's North-East, as well as the cultural politics of ethnic mobilizations in the region.

Such mobilizations are an attempt to construct a self-identity distinct from that constructed by the state—both colonial and post-colonial India—which becomes a source of concern for the latter with regard to its achieving legitimacy and development in the region. While both the state and insurgent groups carve out their distinct ideological and political agenda on to the life-world of the North-East, it is at the point of diversion that the struggle for establishing such agenda falls into the trappings of constitutional determinism.

This book analyses the articulation of ethnic politics in North-East India that takes into account moves for integration as well as apparent differences. In doing so, it critically examines two major insurgent outfits of the region—NSCN and ULFA. It also discusses struggles launched by the Naga and Assamese people and develops a neologism of nations-from-below, arguing that one needs to take into account the concrete totality of the people's lived experiences. It bases this analysis on a critical discussion of the colonial construction of tribal identity and its post-colonial critique.

Thought-provoking and analytical, this book opens a new window to the study of India's North-East, which will intrigue students and scholars across various disciplines of development studies, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, political science and ethnic studies, and will be of interest to policy-makers, NGOs and global humanitarian communities.

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