

Identity and Marginality in North East India Challenges for Social Science Research*

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Conceptualising the Northeast as a singular territory is problematic. But this construction determines the way the region is governed by the Indian state that propagates the idea of a shared identity among peoples from various parts of the region. The Northeast, however, is as diverse as India itself in terms of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic representation. It is inappropriate to portray the region merely as a homogenous category. The recently held national seminar at the University of Hyderabad raised significant research issues.

The Department of Sociology of University of Hyderabad organised a two-day National Seminar on 'Identity and Marginality in North East India: Challenges for Social Science Research' on the 16th and 17th of January, 2017. The seminar began with the Dean of Social Sciences, Venkata Rao, welcoming the guests, participants and the audience at the UPE-LHC Auditorium. He expressed his happiness at the engagement of the university community with the geography, language and culture of the Northeast India at a time when the area is in the news for its problems. Aparna Rayaprol, the Head of the Department of Sociology, welcomed everyone and gave a short introduction on the history of the department that was started in the 1970s. Purendra Prasad, Coordinator, UGC-SAP talked about the importance of the Special Assistance Programmes which is an initiative by the University Grants Commission to encourage the pursuit of excellence and teamwork in advanced research, teaching and dissemination.

Welcoming the delegates, Hoineilhing Sithhou, the convenor of the seminar, pointed to the importance of having a nuanced discussion on marginalization and processes of societal integration. The North East India comprising eight states is the home of numerous ethnic communities and its strategic location is at the confluence of South, South East and East Asia. Conceptualising the Northeast as a singular territory is problematic and this construction determines the way the region is governed by the Indian state and propagates the idea of a shared identity among peoples from various parts of the region. The Northeast, considered a marginal geographical space, is as diverse as India itself in terms of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic representation. Therefore, the region cannot be portrayed merely as a homogenous category. There is a need to highlight the elements of heterogeneity of the different groups and their

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experiences, contestations and conflicts. The seminar was conducted in six main sessions with a focus on specific themes: The Colonial Encounter in North East India; Migration, Land and Identities; Negotiating Gender and Culture; Politics of Difference and the Articulations of Identities; Ethnic Assertions and Marginalities; and Borders, States and Markets is to enable and encourage the opportunity for scientific deliberations and exchange of ideas.

The keynote address was given by Sanjoy Hazarika, Director of Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative via Skype. In his talk, Hazarika delved into the need for young researchers to not only focus on the past histories of the North East but also see its connection to the present so as to seek answers to contemporary issues. He urged everyone to see the North East in a better context as there is a need to 'look outside' as much as there is a need to 'look within'. The speaker cited the example of the Women's Bill that affects the entire country and how the patriarchal Naga society is opposed to the idea of having 33 per cent reservation for women in the state's elected bodies. This resistance to women empowerment coupled with high women and child mortality rates in parts of North East, challenges the common assumption of gender equality in the area and forces one to re-examine the nature of equality, both within the North East and in comparison to the rest of India. He said, "it is extremely important that we take a view on issues like this because is it possible that in 2017, you can have a situation in any part of the country where women have the right to vote but not to be represented?"

Commenting on the nature of military and police abuse in the North East, Hazarika condemned the AFSPA and asked for its replacement with a more humane law. He also highlighted the issue of illegal migration that has been a topic of much debate in the area. The speaker said that we need to understand the nature in which human movement takes place and how migration is a dynamic process where if people enter North East and settle there, a similar movement is noticeable among North Easterners who are also moving to different parts of the country for studies, work, and better opportunities etc. This is the other side of how India is changing and how all of us are a part of the change. In 2012, there was a return of many North easterners due to security issues in other states, primarily Karnataka. The important element that was missed out in the discussion was that three lakh people chose to stay back. These issues proved that people are still treated or judged based on their appearance bringing us back to the crucial question of what an Indian is supposed to look like. Hazarika added that we need to engage with these questions both in and outside the classroom and thus prepare people for the challenges they might face outside their own state. He concluded his talk by urging the universities in the country to include papers on the history of the North East for better engagement with its past and its importance in the present. Following the Keynote address, N. Annavaram, Department of Sociology, gave the vote of thanks.

Session 1: The Colonial Encounter in North East India

The session was chaired by Sajal Nag, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar. Prof. Sarah Hilaly (Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh) in her paper, 'Trajectory of

Colonial Intervention in the Arunachal Himalayas,' spoke of the ways in which British presence in the state encouraged influx and boundaries kept getting redrawn. Colonialism was justified on the basis of the 'barbarity' of the population within these boundaries. Arunachal was used as a buffer zone due to its strategic location on the borders of Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar. The porous borders that used to witness a flow of population from time to time ended up becoming a major transitional zone. One of the communities that entered the state was the Khamptis of Burma who in the beginning were appeased by the British. They were provided taxation rights and a small army. However, after they rebelled in the 19th Century, they were punished by dividing them into four groups of which two groups were allowed to stay in India and the other two were sent back to Burma.

Geraldine Forbes (Department of History, State University of New York Oswego, New York) presented a paper 'Reading Missionary Accounts for Naga Masculinity' which discusses the construction of the Naga male in the works of Samuel Alden Perrine. Perrine was a missionary stationed in the Naga Hills, who, in his letters created the image of the Naga man as a superior breed compared to men across the other corners of the country, describing them as 'manly man' and the 'finest people of the Ao tribe'. He praised them for their strength, honesty and character at a time when American men were facing challenges to their own masculinity due to demands of women emancipation and the abolition of slavery. At such a time, Perrine found the Naga men with their weapons, wars, wife-beating and head-hunting, the perfect example of preserved masculinity juxtaposed against his own anxiety about his manliness. According to Forbes, such overt description of the Naga men and Perrine's letters to the American Baptist Missionary bidding for more funds for the missionary work need to be read in the larger context of economy. The missionaries sent to India had to ensure that they each get a share of the limited funds distributed to them. In creating a hyper masculine image, Perrine had the added advantage of subtly saying, 'My convert is better than your convert' as such virile men would make for better Christians.

P. Thirumal (Department of Communication, HCU) along with Laldinpuii and Lalrozami Chawngthu presented a paper 'Reading the Acoustic archive: The play of Puma Zai (1907–1911)' that examines the way in which music and poetry became a source of colonial resistance among the Mizo community in the early 20th Century. According to the speakers, Puma Zai emerged as an alternative to the Christian hymns where the Mizos wrote and sang their own songs in an attempt to oust the former. It assumed the form of 'play-like festivities' where villagers would gather and resist the colonial opposition to their folk songs. The Mizo experience of the new lyrical composition has thus far only been studied with relation to the emergent Christian culture. This work departs from earlier studies in that it seeks to interpret the experience of the Puma festival, and in effect the new lyrical composition, in relation to itself (or Zo culture) during the early colonial period (1890–1910).

Session 2: Migration, Land and Identities -

The session was chaired by Bandana Purkayastha (Department of Sociology, University of Connecticut, USA). Rekha M Shangpliang (Department of Sociology, NEHU) presented a paper on 'Livelihood and Gender: Marginalisation of Khasi Rural women in land and forest rights.' The role of women in natural resource management has acquired a new dimension with the increasing focus on decentralization of community resources. In recent times due to changes in human-nature, relationship and increasing pressure on land and other resources, there is invisibility of women's livelihood strategies, marginalization of women's rights over Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP's) and other resource base leading to 'feminisation of poverty'. Amongst the matrilineal Khasi of Meghalaya, women are known to have heavy familial and nurturing roles besides being the basic providers of subsistence needs. Their indigenous ecological wisdom of edible and medicinal plants and herbs, water conservation, maintenance of sacred groves, village forests, etc has for centuries enhanced their roles as 'resource managers'. However in recent years, issues such as pressure of population, development, land acquisition and alienation, legislative policies of the Government, have undermined the role of Khasi rural women in resource management thereby denying access to, control over and decision making power in livelihoods.

Bauna Panmei's (PhD candidate, Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies, JNU) paper 'Webs of Flow: Circulation, Survey and Violence in the Naga Hills, 1840- 1880', discusses the geographical surveys and military expeditions done by the colonial officials by the first half of the nineteenth century in the Naga Hills. The first part starting from 1820s to 1830s and the second part from the 1840s to 1860s. The geographical surveys assisted the colonial officials in controlling the 'marauding tribes' and to a great extent in accumulating geographical knowledge of the tract between Assam and Burma. Ilito Achumi (TISS, Mumbai) in her paper 'Nagas Response to Unauthorized Migration: Identity and Destination Impact', discussed the Nagas' response to unauthorized migrants in Nagaland, mainly the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Eviction campaigns, public lynching, branding of identities continues to be a deterrence campaign for identity survival projects. Her argument focused on an incident in Dimapur where a man was lynched for raping a Naga girl.

Venusa Tinyi 's (Department of Philosophy, HCU) paper, 'Of Stones and Feast: The Making of an Identity' narrates how amongst the Chakhesang Tribe of Nagaland, stones share a unique relationship with the people. They are not just natural objects for building structures or for making artistic products. They are integral part of history making and constitutive of culture and tradition. Married couples would organise 'feast of merits' for the entire village or community. And when they arranged the feast successfully, a stone monolith would be pulled from the jungle to a selected site near the village gate or some prominent hill top near the village for the people to see and admire. Rituals and related customary laws and traditional beliefs are meticulously observed during such occasions since it was observed as an embodiment of religious, socio- economic and political practices and beliefs of the community, giving a sense of

belongingness and identity. The tradition of the 'Feast of Merit' and 'stone pulling ceremony' came to an abrupt end with the advent of Christianity in Nagaland.

Session 3: Negotiating, Gender Culture and Identity

The session was chaired by Aparna Rayaprol, Head of the Department of Sociology. Ajailiu Niumai (CSSEIP, HCU) presented a paper on 'The Daughter of North East India: Rani Gaidinliu'. She began by asking critical questions on Rani Gaidinliu's role in the Heraka cult/practices and the Zeliangrong Naga movement as also the question of how a woman contested the colonial Britishers and the structured patriarchy of the Naga National Council. She discussed the way the Hindutva ideologues like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had positioned her as a political and religious icon/protagonist in the North east.

The second presentation was by Soibam Haripriya (TISS, Guwahati). In her paper 'From the Shackles of Tradition: Motherhood and Women's Agitation in Manipur' she questioned the popular notion that women in the North East have a significantly higher status as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. Taking the case of Meira Paibis, the paper brought out the dialectical trajectory of the representation of women and the 'real' status and power that women possess in the Meitei society. The paper explores the nature of women's agency and how women's collectives in some ways reinforce the traditional structures, taking the examples of the Nupi Lan agitations in the past.

Session 4 (17th January): Politics of Differences and Articulation of Identities

The session was chaired by Sujata Patel (President of Indian Sociological Society, Department of Sociology, HCU). Dr. Bimol Akoijam (Department of Sociology, JNU) spoke on 'Identity politics in India's Northeast: Challenges of Re-imagining a Future'. He put forward two propositions: firstly, the categories that we use to understand our beings as well as our inspirations are informed by what we call categories of colonial modernity; secondly, there is a tendency to think that the ethnic conundrum in India's North East is something that is inherent in that part of the world. It is actually a bi-product of state formation processes and other politics of the post-colonial Indian state. The paper examines the category or complexity of Indian Nationalism, especially the Naga Nationalism versus the Manipuri Nationalism. To understand Nationalism as a historical reality, it is essential to step outside the history that nationalism gives to itself. In identity politics in North East India, we are not able to step outside the history that nationalism gives to us.

Sajal Nag's (Department of History, Assam University) 'Betrayal of the God: Nationalist Discourse, Divided Identity and 'Othering' of the Self', used Josep R. Llobera's idea of how nation has become the modern day God and the formation of nation state as an omnipotent, authoritarian and the most powerful ideology of modern times. In the context of the North East, whatever this nation or god initially stands for, it disintegrates in the pursuit for nationhood or

autonomy or self-rule. He agrees with Anderson that in the context of NEI, the discourse was a derivative discourse. It was not derived from below but it was derived from the centre or from the mainstream of Indian society. The concept of Stanley J. Tambiah's 'ethnic galaxy' would best explain the diversity of North East India. It is also like the rest of India where the civilization of thousands of tiny small and large communities come together. The advent of modernity and nationalist discourse has brought each of this group into conflict with their neighbours with whom they have lived peacefully for hundreds of years. Now, there is a recurrent politics of indigeneity, thirst of homogenisation and xenophobic tendency. Instead of bringing unity, the process of Nation-building is actually dividing people. Mizos had started the Zo-reunification movement, which was supposed to unify all the Mizos of south east Asia, Manipur and Burma. But after the Mizo-Accord, the Burmese Mizos are a hated communities in Mizoram. Earlier they were accepted as maid servants and labourers, now that their population has gone up to 1 lakh, they are resented and branded as poor criminals and there is a movement to throw them out.

Papori Barua's (Centre for Women Studies, JNU, New Delhi) paper, 'Interrogating India's Northeast as an Object of Knowledge Production', engages with the question of knowledge production in the constitution of India's Northeast. It critically evaluates the dominant frames within which the Northeast has been studied and understood. In recent decades there is a realization that the dominant frames within which the Northeast has been analyzed are problematic and hence an attempt has been made to move beyond what is seen as the most persistent ways of seeing the Northeast—i.e. the national lens. There is the tendency for the emergence of new interdisciplinary fields like Northeast India Studies programmes in Indian universities. One notices two trends in the way this field of study is conceived, either as a critical field perspectives or as another region of India that has to be studied in order to better integrate the region into the nation. Barua argues that till such a time that we cannot take up a post-national perspectives, it would be impossible to truly engage with the North East. It would not be wrong to say our discipline in the post-colonial Indian university are enmeshed with the ideas of the nation such that any critique to these ideas are seen as a challenge to the sovereignty of the nation state. The question for the North East is to ask whether it is a study for the North East India or for the people of India's North East which keeps both the challenges and linkages; in other words, which keeps alive both the question of identity and differences without losing sight of a relational politics.

Session 5: Ethnic Assertions and Marginalities

The session was chaired by Kham Khan Suan Hausing (Department of Political Science, HCU). Rekha Konsam's (PhD Candidate, Delhi University) paper 'A Cultural Response to the Question of Identity and Marginality' draws on an exploration of the religious festival of the *Lai Haraoba* and discourses around it to argue that Hinduism, as it figures in this discourse, is not about religion but is significant as a category of thought in a self-conscious articulation of an ethnic Meitei indigenous identity and its representation. The dynamics of the Meitei cultural identity as shaped through the contesting discourses refers back to the construct of Manipur as a

state and the Meitei society in particular through its Hindu connection as the land of *Raslila* on the one hand, while on the other hand addressing it beyond its confines as constructed in the romantic Meitei nationalism. This dynamics needs to be further located in two centuries of a flourishing Hindu culture and the rise of revivalism in the mid-20th century which coincided with the shift in the state regime from traditional Meitei kingship to the modern state of India.

Thongkhohal Haokip's (Centre for Law and Governance, JNU, New Delhi) paper, 'The Morality of Law in Manipur and Marginal Identities', studies certain laws in Manipur in the light of the 'principles of legality'. The paper examines the process of how the three bills, the Protection of Manipur People Bill, 2015, the Manipur Shops and Establishments (Second amendment) Bill, 2015 and the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (Seventh amendment) Bill, 2015 respectively, were passed by the Manipur Legislative Assembly in August 2015. It also analyses whether they meet the minimal conditions in order to be counted as genuine laws. The secretive processing of the laws reflects the will and wishes of the dominant community and totally ignores the marginal identities. Thus, the idea of multiculturalism focusing on minority rights is obtuse and sidelined in the so-called liberal democratic space.

Session 6: Border, States and Markets

The session was chaired by Sasheej Hegde (Department of Sociology, HCU). N. William Singh (Department of Sociology, Pachhunga University College, Aizawl) presented a paper, 'Marginalization: Everyday Life Activities at Myanmar-Mizoram Borderlands'. Marginalized community, oppressed voices and stories of insecurities, one after another, represent the everyday life activities for Chin migrants from Myanmar at the borderlands of Mizoram. His paper details the collective consciousness and the politics of marginalization, which disowns the very people that are the real constituents of a civic order.

Lalmangaihi Chhakchhuak's (PhD candidate, Department of Sociology, HCU) paper, '*Global Markets and local Risks: A Study of Cancer Affected in Mizoram*', discussed the changing social and economic organization of Mizo society over the past few decades resulting in a new set of relations and networks. In the late 1980s in Mizoram, there were new market and trade relations between neighboring states as well as border trade between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The nature of globalization and economic growth relatively brought in high risk in consumption substances, a shift in consumption pattern and lifestyle, subsequently leading to heightened 'social risk' in terms of health related issues including diseases such as cancer that affect a significant number of the population in Mizoram.

Suryasikha Pathak's (Centre for Tribal Studies, Assam University, Diphu Campus) paper, 'Census as a Site of Contestation: Identity Politics among the Bodos in Colonial Assam' was read out by Lalhmingmawii Cira (PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, HCU). The paper looks at early censuses and the debates it generated within the purview of identity articulation. Early colonial censuses were ethnographic classificatory exercises. The census has also been an

important historical source as a part of ethnographic inquiry, but it has also become important to inquire into the relationship between quantitative and qualitative definitions of populations. Though census enumeration and its awareness led to certain rigidity in defining collective identities to a considerable degree, it also set into motion controversial mobility of nationalist, ethnic, communal and other identities. The situation in terms of enumeration and classification was complex in Assam, where the diversity of communities combined with remarkable fluidity in demographic structure made it challenging to pin down communities. Within such complexities reified identities took shape and articulated their politics.

Valedictory Session

The session was chaired by Pro Vice chancellor (HCU), V P Sanjay and the valedictory address was given by Tiplut Nongbri (Department of Sociology, JNU). Nongbri, in her address meticulously brought out the methodological constraints of doing research on the North East. She laid out three main challenges in research concerning Northeast India: the methodological question, the substantive question and the ethical question. On the ethical question, she raised issues pertaining to the consequences of the research; how will the research benefit the people of the Northeast. In other words, how will the scholars face the ethical challenges that entail their research, pertaining to question like, will it be beneficial or harmful to the people living in Northeast India? Earlier, the people living in these region had neither the space nor the opportunities to do a study or a research on themselves. Nowadays, the situation has changed. Supported by academic bodies like University Grant Commission (UGC), Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), many scholars from the NE India are taking up projects in various universities in India on Northeast India.

On the methodological challenges, she said that there were no coherent perspectives, frames and models to understand the research problems in the North-east, with its varied cultural and historical entities and also vis-à-vis rest of the country. For instance, it is inadequate and problematic to look at the Tribal society from the prism of Caste. Researchers cannot rely on the dominant models and perspectives. Researchers should not make the mistake of relying on these universal frameworks for they are inadequate and misleading. Narratives such as the glorified status of women in Manipur (as problematized by Soibam Haripriya earlier in the session) and the matrilineal structure in Khasi society which is matriarchal only in appearance (ingrained with patriarchy in reality) need an in-depth analysis. The prevalent narratives serve only as tools and fail to represent the reality. The representation of the region has been itself an imposed one and not a consulted representation as it purports to be.

The Northeast, as an entity, is ambiguous and diverse. However, we continue to use the term. Nongbri argued that the category 'Northeast' is in fact a construct and not an objective notion. The seeming factor of geography as one of the core elements that unifies Northeast as a category crumbles if one looks carefully at this nomenclature, its etymological background and the related issues. She emphasized that the term Northeast was a derogatory term during the

colonial period. The region was seen as a frontier, as a hinterland, where civilization ends, which is outside civilization inhabited by 'wild tribes'. When the people rebelled they could be suppressed through militarization. Nowadays, Northeast is seen as an ideal site to bridge the Southeast Asian countries and India. She cited the example of the Look East Policy.

The vote of thanks on behalf of the Department of Sociology was given by C. Nagalakshmi.

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