The Routledge Companion to Northeast India

Edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO NORTHEAST INDIA

The Routledge Companion to Northeast India is a trans-disciplinary and comprehensive compendium of a vital yet under-researched region in South Asia. It provides a unique guide to prevailing themes, theories, arguments, and history of Northeast India by discussing its life-forms – human and not – languages, landscapes, and lifeways in all its diversity and difference. The companion contains authoritative entries from leading specialists from and on the region and offers clear, concise, and illuminating explanations of key themes and ideas.

A hands-on, practical, and comprehensive guide to Northeast India, this companion fills a significant gap in the literature and will be an invaluable teaching, learning, and research resource for scholars and students of Northeast India Studies, South Asian and Southeast Asian societies, culture, politics, humanities, and the social sciences in general.

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State and Nation: Politics of Peace in Nagaland and Mizoram, with Rita Manchanda and Tapan Bose (Sage, 2015), *The Beleaguered Nation: Making and Unmaking of the Assamese Nationality* (Manohar, 2016), *Pied Pipers in North East India: Bamboo Flowers, Rat Famine and Politics of Philanthropy* (Manohar, 2008), *Playing with Nature: History and Politics of Environment in North East India* (Manohar and Routledge, 2016), and *Forces of Nature: Essays in History and Politics of Environment in India* (Manohar and Routledge, 2016).

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NORTHEAST INDIA

An Introduction

Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba

How to write an introduction to Northeast India? After all, this is a huge and complex region, encompassing floodplains, valleys, hills, and mountains inhabited by many dwellers and dwelling communities, both humans and other-than-humans. Dominant representations of Northeast India as a cultural and political periphery of India often fail to appreciate the sheer size and diversity of this region. It is over six times the size of Switzerland and roughly one-and-a-half times the surface of Nepal and Bangladesh, its neighbours on the north and south, respectively. While most of Northeast India is not as densely populated as most of India, it is still home to over 50 million inhabitants, which is more than the populations of the Benelux and Scandinavia combined.

These inhabitants aggregate in manifold communities, language groups, and religions and together stitch a superlative ethnolinguistic embroidery that often ignites firestorms of identities. The region's linguistic richness and diversity in particular are unparalleled. It has more languages than every other Indian state put together; it has twice as many languages as all of China and holds between one-third and one-half of all the Tibeto-Burman languages (Post 2008). Mark Post continues: 'North-East India is without a doubt, and by any measure, the richest, most diverse, most linguistically significant area in the entire Asian continent, and is one of the top 3 or 4 most significant linguistic areas of the entire world' (2008, 5).

This tremendous linguistic diversity, together with a great variety of ecological settings and niches, intertwines with the region's distinct status as an ethno- and biodiversity hotspot. Communities arrived and formed in their present locations in pre-historic, historic, and more recent migratory waves, coming from all directions, as told and retold through flourishing oeuvres of myths, folktales, and oral histories, and gradually claimed autochthonous status in the plains, hills, and mountains that attracted and nourished them, and with which they co-evolved their cultures, histories, and attachments to land. With the arrival of peoples also arrived gods, deities, and spirits who also settled in these lands. They became intensely involved in human affairs. More powerful than humans, these beings were understood, early on, as invisible sovereigns governing the mountains, glaciers, rivers, forests, sky, and underworld. Myriad vernacular diviners, dream-interpreters, shamans, oracles, and other ritual and intercessory specialists emerged in response to the experienced need to accost them and to keep tabs on their demands (Heneise 2019). What evolved was a 'living landscape' scattered with cosmic polities that hierarchically encompassed humans. In recent centuries, new and more gods and

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deities arrived in Northeast India and dispersed across religions, giving birth to a complex, layered, and contested socio-cosmic order.

Northeast India consists of eight states today: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Sikkim is a late entrant and was appended to this region for its ethnic and cultural contiguity, despite it not being territorially contiguous to the 'seven sisters', as the other seven states of the region are euphemistically referred to. Unlike other Indian states, they are apparently gendered as they consist of seven sisters and one brother (Sikkim). However, it would certainly be a mistake to think of these territorial units as historically stable forms or of their societies, whether Naga, Mizo, Tripuri, Lepcha, or Assamese, as spatially contained within its boundaries. In this region, polities, kingdoms, states, boundaries, identities, and belongings have always been flexible and transient. This has also precluded the development of a singular ethnic or territorial identity representing the entire region. In fact, few in the region explicitly identify themselves as 'Northeast Indian', except perhaps when they are outside the region, for instance in Delhi or Bengaluru. Instead, they fiercely ground their identities in ethnic or tribal communities like the Assamese, Khasi, and Garo. Northeast India is a multitude, and the diversity, intensity, and effervescence of local identities variously animates, agitates, and aggrieves its social landscape.

Any introduction to the region needs to account for its inherent complexity. It also needs to account for the multiple spatiotemporal vantage points that are available for one who is introducing this region. The peoples of Northeast India simultaneously live in multiple worlds that are distinct yet often closely interconnected and at times overlapping. This, indeed, is a world of many worlds, a pulsating pluriverse. A mountain view of this region will look very different from a view from the valleys and floodplains, yet both these viewpoints are equally characteristic of Northeast India. This diversity extends to castes and tribes, temples, mosques, monasteries, and churches, subzero and scorching average temperatures, high-tech hydro-dams, and villages still unconnected to the national electricity grid, four-lane highways and cobbled roads, military outposts and rebel hideouts, sacred groves and monocrop plantations, and the embodied knowledges of yak-herders in the mountains, boat-fairing fishermen on rivers, shifting cultivators in the hills, and public- and service-sector employees in rapidly growing cities.

Considering the huge variation internal to this region, the unity and meaning of 'Northeast India', its status as a single 'thing', locational identity, or place is often cast in doubt, or seen as persisting within the 'debris of its own contradictions' (Subba 1998, 84). At a political and administrative level, however arbitrary a category it may seem, Northeast India *is* undoubtedly a place; that is, a socially consequential category, all too real in its effects, and an imposed position in the pan-Indian dispensation. The Northeast has *become* an existing unit through political and administrative conceptions of order and institutionalized discursive spaces, and by the enactment of special government institutions such as the North Eastern Council and the Ministry of Development of the North-Eastern Region.

Up close, Northeast India is never one 'place', but always many places at once. Many, too, are representations of this region, including military (a geopolitically sensitive and insurgency-ridden borderland and hence to be protected), touristy (as an exotic destination to be gazed at), revolutionary (an occupied land, to be set free), developmental (a remote, backward zone, to be developed), capitalistic (an untapped resource-frontier, to be tapped), scholarly (an ethnolinguistic laboratory, vastly understudied, to be theorized), or, of course, as peoples' ancestral homelands (the centre of the universe, to be preserved). In 'seeing' this region hence, much depends on who is doing the seeing.

As a further case in point, the region can be understood both as a thriving contact zone and a remote periphery. On the one hand, its 220-odd ethnicities and tribes (depending on the criteria

one uses to enumerate them), religious multiplicity (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and arrays of Animism and Shamanism), and the innumerable languages and dialects spread across language families (Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, Tai Kadai, Austroasiatic, and several creole languages) make this region seem a microcosm of the world, not a remote corner of India. Yet, present-day Northeast India is often seen through the lens of insulation and remoteness: as a land of marginalized minorities, an economic backwater, the political and cultural fringe of India, a place where India's territorial sovereignty is defended, where raw materials are extracted to fuel its economic growth, and where ethnographic and other empirical data is mined to debate theories from elsewhere. In the classic centre–periphery style, whether of political, economic, or intellectual centres, Northeast Indian communities are seldom acknowledged as shapers of national history and political world-makers and thinkers *sui generis*. From the vantage of Indian national space and scholarship, this, indeed, remains the most marginalized, misrepresented, and misunderstood part of the country.

A further challenge to introducing this region is that its history is both long and short. At face value, Northeast India, as a region, does not have much of a history, although some of its present-day constituents like Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura have several centuries of recorded history, especially chronicles of kings and dynasties such as collections of *Buranji*, *Cheitharon Kumpapa*, and *Rajmala*. Northeast India was born only with the Partition in 1947. As Willem van Schendel (2018) shows, in precolonial times, the notion of Northeast India did not exist and there was little that foreshadowed its emergence. In fact, its creation took many in the region by surprise and they were asked, almost overnight, to think of themselves as part of the Indian national space. At the same time, this region was an important corridor of prehistorical human dispersal, a site of ancient mobility and settlement, a geography of connectivity for both humans and other-than-humans. Many of these histories have become concealed. Laments Van Schendel (2018, 275):

> The new spatial frame of Northeast India sets limits on our enquiries into history, both pre- and post-Partition. For most of us, it is now hard to re-imagine the web of connections that once linked the peoples of the region with friends, trade partners, and political associates in areas that fell to Burma and Pakistan.

And yet, it is impossible to understand contemporary Northeast India without, among others, apprehending these networks and their much longer histories.

The above are just a few of the many complexities involved in writing an introduction to this hugely diverse and complex region.

Deep Environmental History: Mountains, Monsoons, and Rivers

A satellite view of Northeast India and its surroundings shows a majestic line of snow-scarfed mountains from which glaciers hang downwards, like giant frozen tongues. To the east and southeast, these mountain-scapes begin to lower in altitude. Then they fold and unfold into wooded hill ranges that surround, almost siege-like, the vast alluvial plains that stretch north to south. This view from orbit also reveals meandering rivers that snake out from the mountains into the plains, where they become partially braided and link up with tributaries that gush down from steep slopes and gorges. In the plains, which quickly broaden out, rivers begin to cross and crisscross, like a labyrinth, and one soon loses track of its main channels. If the satellite image is taken during the monsoon, the larger of these rivers, the Brahmaputra in particular, will appear more like giant lakes as they submerge large tracts of land. During the dry season, however, these

same rivers shrink into narrower trenches flanked by now visible floodplains. In between the rivers emerge innumerable islands, called *char*s, made of settled sediments. It brings sharply into view how land and water often change places and are inseparable in this region. Further down, one sees a huge delta built by the soil and sediments deposited by these rivers before they drain into the sea. This satellite view offers a natural view, as it does not show the human-centred cartographic fragmentation of this transboundary landscape by nation-states.

The birth and formation of this landmass can be understood on the scale of environmental history and Deep Time. This history begins at a time absent of humans. Pre-human geological epochs and climatic conditions created this region's remarkable geomorphology, ecology, and biodiversity, including its many rivers. What formed was a fluvial territory, a riverine landscape in the extreme, especially in the plains but linking up with water that drains from the hills and mountains. Observed Walter Hamilton in the early 19th century: 'the number and magnitude of the rivers in Assam probably exceed those of any other country in the world of equal extent' (cited in Saikia 2019, 218). Adopting a water-view, David Ludden (2005) presents Assam as a borderland of the Asian drainage systems, as it straddles a watershed that, at the Patkai Range, separates the western trajectory of the Brahmaputra from the major drainages of southern China and Southeast Asia.

In its terrestrial creation, Northeast India was (is) a geomorphological tour-de-force, on what took many millions of years to form. When humans first arrived on the scene, the earth's creativity had arranged ecologically niched habitats at very different altitudes and aspects. It was these bio-geo-graphies that antecedently provided an important basis for the region's later ethnolinguistic diversity. These varied landscapes also came to be intrinsically tied to the integrality of the peoples' sense of belonging, place, and rootedness in the region, as well as are generative of indigenous ecological knowledge, sacred sites, and culturally valued natural heritages.

Northeast India's natural history and landscape formation, and to which humans and other-than-humans variously adapted, significantly revolved around three overarching natural forces: the Himalayan uplift and wider geological contingency, the Brahmaputra River, and the Bay of Bengal. Northeast India, in its terrestrial landscape, is built on unstable geological structures. Here, tectonic plates collided and the thrusts faulted, uplifted, and folded into jagged mountain crests, plateaus, hill ranges, belts, folds, spines, and spurs. The Himalayas remain an ongoing orogeny as the continental crust of the Indian Plate continues to thrust into the Eurasian Plate. The mountains of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh – and Bhutan in between them – were formed in this manner. Some of these mountains, especially their peaks, became the palaces and playgrounds of territorial gods and deities, while their passes became passageways for trans-Himalayan pastoralists, traders, monks, and – more recently – for soldiers tasked with defending high-altitude international borders. To the east, additional tectonic pressure came from the Burma microplate, which resulted in fold-beds known to humans as the Indo-Burma Hill Ranges. The oldest geological formations in the region are the Meghalaya and Karbi-Anglong Plateaus that are part of the Indian peninsular shield. Tectonic stresses continue to produce folds and faults, creating a landscape that is continually in motion and earthquake prone. Massive earthquakes, whenever they occurred, changed not only the physical landscape and destroyed human lives and property but also altered socio-political configurations in the region (Guyot-Réchard 2015).

Geological formations were subsequently sculpted by weathering and erosion. The Bay of Bengal branch of the southwestern monsoon sends moisture-laden winds towards Northeast India. Across the plains of Bangladesh, these winds encounter no barriers, but when they hit the Meghalaya Plateau they rise, condense into clouds, and release heavy rainfall. The Meghalaya

village of Mawsynram is the wettest place in the world today, trouncing nearby Cherrapunjee, and receives over 10,000 millimetres of rain annually. The state's name literally means 'the abode of the clouds'. The rainfall on the Meghalaya Plateau again flows down and feeds the rivers of the Bengal delta, nourishing biodiversity, aquatic life, and agriculture before ultimately draining into the Bay of Bengal. Another sub-branch of the southwest monsoon first flows along the Ganga corridor but upon confronting the high Himalayas turns east. These clouds then bounce between the Eastern Himalayan foothills and the Patkai Hill Ranges, releasing heavy downpours. Ultimately, it is the proximity to the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean beyond, and the topographic relief that make Northeast India the most precipitous area of the country (Dikshit and Dikshit 2014).

These recurrent pluvial forces exert an enormous influence on floral, faunal, and human life in the region. The ensuing rains bring the Himalayan river system to live, nourish communities, sustain the land and the forest, and shape the landscape through floods and flows. They are also central to the rhythms of the agricultural and social life of many communities. Mirza Rahman (2020) relates how these communities evolved distinct vernacular expressions and imaginations, differentiating rain in terms of location, timing, intensity, duration, and colour in what reveals as a multi-layered understanding of rains and water in Northeast India. Anthropogenic interventions coupled with climate change are now changing rain patterns, causing both droughts and extreme flooding. Communities, in both the plains and hills, are recording these changes and responding to them through rituals, prayers, and shamanistic intercessions to appease angered river spirits and rain gods. They are also adapting and often struggling to attune their daily livelihoods and crops to the uncertainties and extremities of changing climatic realities.

The Himalayas and the monsoon together feed an elaborate network of rivers, including the Teesta, Subansiri and, the mightiest of all, the Brahmaputra, all of which are vital life sources. The Brahmaputra originates in the Himalayan glacier mass and first flows through Tibet, where it is known as Tsangpo. It enters India through Arunachal Pradesh, where it is known as Siang and Dihang, and then flows into Assam, where it becomes the Brahmaputra ('son of Brahma', in Sanskrit). In Assam, the river is replenished by a web of tributaries that come down from the northern and eastern hills. When the Brahmaputra moves out of Assam and enters Bangladesh, it changes gender and becomes Jamuna, a name it retains until it empties itself into the Bay of Bengal.

Arupjyoti Saikia (2019), the Brahmaputra's biographer, depicts this river as the 'sculptor of Assam's landscape' (xxxi) because, over very many millennia, it cut and chiselled a deep notch into the land and through continuous corrasion, corrosion, depositions, and other hydraulic actions sculpted the wider riverine landscape and ecology. The Brahmaputra is also 'the fluvial spine that connects the mountains, hills, valleys, and floodplains' (xxvii). Mountains and hills regulate supplies of water and are a storehouse of sediments, including sand, silts, and micro-nutrients that are transported and deposited downstream. This riverine collective made and irrigated the alluvial plains of Assam and helped create a living space for plants, animals, and humans. The Brahmaputra existed long before humans first arrived in this region, but once there, humans as well as other-than-humans co-evolved with the river over many millennia. It is this river that variously made, drowned, and remade arable lands and became a geographical passage for the trade of goods produced in the hills, plains, and territories further afield. The Brahmaputra also became central to Assam's political history, to the extent that the fortunes of early valley-states, but also of the British Raj and postcolonial India, significantly depended on their ability to navigate the river, whether for conquest and defence, commerce and trade, or the levying of taxes and tolls, as well as by their success in containing its waters with dykes and embankments to enable agriculture and protect crops. These geological, geomorphological,

ecological, and climate forces conjure a never-ending narrative of the transformation of the landscape. In it, humans, other-than-humans, and the physical environment interactively shape each other's worlds in what are animated more-than-human geographies.

Abiotic matter, too, is not inert but reveals as a constituent and contingent force of human and other-than-human relations. Alcohol is one such material that activates these relations. Maan Barua (2014) shows how, in Assam, both humans and elephants seek the comforts of intoxication in times of stress. Ethologies confirm elephants' heightened desire for alcohol when under environmental stress. In Assam, this stress relates to elephants' shrinking living space. With elephants now increasingly on the prowl for food, humans take alcohol, both to stay awake at night to protect their crops and to enhance their bravery when confronted by elephants. Stressed, elephants trace the huts where alcohol brewing takes place from the smell and trample such huts in search of alcohol. These elephant incursions into village distilleries, in turn, render such practices visible to the state, prompting excise raids and penalties. In this way, alcohol manifests as an active agent that binds humans and elephants in volatile relations that also draw in district authorities, the excise, and police departments. Barua's account is part of emergent scholarship in Northeast India that incorporates ethology – the study of animal behaviour – and plant- and seed-ways (Karlsson 2021) into the practice of ethnography. But, while the scholarship about this attentive ethno-ethological and human–other-than-human relationship is now beginning to offer much fuller and richer understandings of the deeply entwined life-forms in Northeast India, our conceptual and theoretical apparatuses remain slow to explain the diversity and entanglements of the multispecies world.

Recent scholarship in this field also emphasizes heightened ecological precarity across the shared transboundary landscape of Northeast India. Studies reveal the anthropogenic impacts, including new capitalist relations and socio-political transformations that have turned earlier 'pristine' environments into apparent ecological disaster zones. Rivers are tapped for building dams and extracting raw materials for the sprawling construction economy, foothills are cleared for mono-crop plantations, higher hills and mountains are distilled down to natural resources, while the Northeast Indian landscape is particularly susceptible to global climate change. Ramachandra Guha (2006, 232–33) calls this region India's last remaining resource-frontier and highlights how 'Northeast India has been to metropolitan India what Iraq and other such countries have been for imperialist America'. The resultant environmental degradation is there for everyone to see: rapid deforestation, oil spills, subsidence and landslides, coal seam fires, air pollution, poisoned streams, and dying rivers. Palpable, too, is community destruction through the nascent privatization, acquisition, and depletion, mostly by ethnic tribal elites, of communal assets now embedded in newly capitalist relations (Wouters 2020). These are forces of change that are currently reshuffling the relations between ecology, environment, climate, landscape, humans, and other-than-humans in Northeast India.

The Making of Northeast India

Both a satellite view and a deep environmental history relate ecological continuities and linkages. Contrarily, a political map view of Northeast India emphasizes discontinuities and severances. Even a quick glance at it reveals this region's bizarre, uncanny political shape. Northeast India is everywhere surrounded by other countries – China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar – except for a narrow strip of land that juts westwards and compresses between southern Bhutan and northern Bangladesh. This connective tissue is popularly known as the chicken neck, small and brittle, and links this region to West Bengal and mainland India beyond. With

some imagination, the map of Northeast India is shaped like the side-view of an elephant head. Arunachal Pradesh is the forehead that forms into a trunk in Assam, which elongates and points up in Sikkim. Meghalaya is the mouth. Tripura and Mizoram are the tusks that point threateningly to Bangladesh. Manipur's Loktak Lake, the region's largest freshwater lake, is the eye, while the hills of Nagaland behind are one of the elephant's flapping ears.

Only modern humans could imagine such an awkwardly shaped territory and call it a geographical unit. In its conception, Northeast India is a deformed child. Its mother is the 1914 Shimla Convention which demarcated the boundary, known as the McMahon Line, between Tibet and British India. This boundary detached new cartographic maps from much older cognitive, mental, and imagined geographies constructed through circuits of trans-Himalayan trade, kinship, and pilgrimage (Harris 2013). This boundary, disputed by China and at the root of the 1962 Sino-India war, slices through the Tibetosphere, the Tibetan kin universe, of which Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are the south, when seen from Lhasa as the centre (Gohain 2020). Mao Zedong, who claimed Tibet to be historically a part of China, considered it as a palm, and the territories to its south, viz. Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh as its five fingers.

Northeast India was further deformed because it was born out of the territorial apportioning of British India into Burma, East Pakistan/Bangladesh, and India. Partition was its father. If Northeast India is the deformed midnight child of the McMahon Line and Partition, it is because it was burdened with a bizarre and unmanageable geobody. It lost crucial access to the Bengal delta (now in East Pakistan) and all it stood for in terms of communication – rivers, railways, roads, access to the Indian Ocean trade, professional and educational opportunities; cultural connections, and labour. (Van Schendel 2018, 273)

For some time, it seemed that Northeast India would not be born in the first place. In the mid-1940s, there was a tug-of-war between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress over the political destiny of Assam, with both making strong claims for it. Some colonial cabinet notes circulating at the time recommended Assam be attached to Pakistan to strengthen the latter's economic viability and defence. Another recommendation was to merge Assam and Bengal into a single Indian province, which would be a return to the Bengal Presidency of which Assam was a part until 1874. In the end, only the district of Sylhet (barring some pockets), which was a part of colonial Assam, joined Pakistan following a popular vote, known as the Sylhet Referendum (Dasgupta 2014). Yet another thought at the time was to reinstate the Ahom royal court and declare Assam as an independent state. J.P. Mills, then secretary to the Assam Governor Reid, opined:

> I would go as far as to make a gesture of offering to restore the old Ahom kingdom as a State – needless to say on very strict conditions. The chief condition would be that the new State would be deprived of none of the democratic institutions Assam now enjoys; the entire power would be in the hands of Ministers responsible to the legislature. The Raja would be nothing more than a figurehead. But, as a figurehead he might well arouse sentiment, and we should get a modicum of praise for restoring past prestige, instead of universal abuse for reducing Assam to an insignificant fragment.
>
> *(cited in Saikia 2004, 254)*

Colonial officials, including the Assam Governor Robert Reid, meanwhile, proposed the creation of a Crown Colony, also known as the 'Coupland Plan', in the tribal highlands, wresting them from both India and Burma. This proposal was on the grounds that its inhabitants were backward and shared no history and culture in common with them, as well as to continue a

strategic British presence in Asia (Syiemlieh 2014). The proposal was partially informed by, but also partially reinvigorated, emergent ethno-nationalistic impulses in the hills, with communities beginning to imagine political futures as free not only from the British Raj but also from India, Burma, and Pakistan. All these proposals were rejected and resisted by the Indian National Congress. Had any of these plans materialized, this companion would never have been written, or at least not with its current title.

In its genesis, Northeast India was imagined, negotiated, and sketched into existence in faraway political chambers and drawing rooms. Its coming into existence on a map was not an acknowledgement of what existed but depicted and invented a new reality. The fuzzy edges that initially remained on the ground, following the Partition, were demarcated in subsequent years, most notably when Nehru and his Burmese counterpart, U Nu, flew over the Indo-Burma Hill Ranges to settle the border, dividing communities, clans, and villages between the two countries. Not a single representative from the region took part in any of these border-making processes. This overlaying and appropriating of socio-natural contours with the artificial lustre of political boundaries was palpably problematic and remained deeply contested in the region.

That Northeast India is a new space reveals itself in the complete absence of its spatial imagination in precolonial times. While there rose and fell powerful kingdoms and dynasties in this region, such as the Koch, Ahom, Meitei, Jaintia, Dimasa, and Tripuri, none of them framed their territories and polities as located in Northeast India. Neither did the largely non-state polities in the hills identify themselves with Indian civilizations and their varied and vast empires. In the hills, they had probably heard about the powerful Mughals who reached the banks of the Brahmaputra in the 17th century. Some hillmen were conscripted into the Ahom army to fight them back, in which they succeeded. The Ahom's relation with the Mughals was indeed primarily one of defence. For diplomatic and political allegiances, they turned east, especially to the kingly courts of Manipur and Burma. Recurrent invasions by Burmese forces in Assam in the early 19th century indicated a breakdown of this diplomacy. Many communities either looked north to Tibet, which led to a thriving trans-Himalayan caravan-trade, or east, to the hills of Burma. When early polities sought to expand, such as the Ningthouja dynasty of Manipur, they ventured eastwards, and in the 18th century Manipuri horsemen conquered areas as far as the Irrawaddy River (Thant 2012). Reversely, Tibet expanded its political and spiritual influence into Monyul, today part of Arunachal Pradesh. Tibetan tax collection, pilgrimage, and trade between Lhasa and Monyul continued even after India's independence until border passages were sealed (Gohain 2020). The history of Sikkim, in turn, is strongly intertwined with those of Nepal, Bhutan, and especially Tibet, from where its ruling Namgyal dynasty, which ruled over Sikkim for more than three centuries, originated (Mullard 2011). India was a much later player in Sikkim affairs but politically integrated Sikkim into the Indian state after forcefully dethroning its king and annexing it in 1975.

Oral narratives, early textual accounts, and linguistic and genetic studies reveal that early movement into the region came through China and Southeast Asia. As a case in point: the Ahom, who ruled large swathes of the Assam plains for over 600 years – four times the duration of the British Raj – arrived there in the 13th century from what is today the larger China–Burma borderland. The origin and migratory routes of the Naga, Khasi, Garo, Kuki, and other hill communities also indicate their arrival from directions away from what later became Northeast India. Most of them were part of the great Tibeto-Burman civilization that slashed and burned their way through the hills and highlands. Origin and migration stories in the region testify to long mobility patterns within and across this region (Huber and Blackburn 2012). If one would draw a map of the migration patterns that are told by communities locally, up till their arrival in

Northeast India, this map would stretch from Mongolia through Tibet, Southwest China, and across most of Southeast Asia.

These histories of mobility and settlement pose conceptual challenges regarding the position of Northeast India for conventional area studies. It can well be argued that many communities in Northeast India are East- and South-east Asian populations settled in South-Asian space. This leads to questions of whether Northeast India should be understood as the southern borderland of East Asia, the western borderland of Southeast Asia or, as remains the dominant, institutionalized view, the northeastern border of South Asia.

Willem van Schendel (2002) transcended this discussion by his coinage of *Zomia*, a historically largely nonstate space, including highland Northeast India, now located at the margins of neighbouring nation-states. Zomia questioned the spatialization of social theory as channelled by 'methodological nationalism' and institutionalized area studies. Van Schendel's wider scholarship inaugurated the sub-discipline of borderland studies in this region. Through inventing, borrowing, and adapting a range of conceptual innovations – rhizomes, webs, flows, fluidity, corridors, fractals, process geography, friction, networks, and so on – a clique of borderland scholars began to investigate peoples' interconnections with old and new worlds beyond India's borders. Adding to the Zomia concept, in recent years, Dan Smyer Yü (2017) coined 'multistate margin', Dan Smyer Yü and Karin Dean (2021) 'perpendicular geospatially', Mandy Sadan (2013) 'borderworld', and Sara Shneiderman (2010) 'multiple state space' to further question state-centred analyses, while Gunnel Cederlof (2014) coined 'protean landscape' to merge climate and social relations. In this scholarship, Northeast India does not appear as a clearly demarcated unit but as a corridor and convergence zone.

For many centuries, indeed, this region was part of a vibrant corridor that linked the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan, connecting varied polities and territories into intricate networks of trade, commerce, communication, and political alliances. Contrary to popular perceptions, this region was never the 'smorgasbord of isolated and place-bound cultures', the way the 19th-century ethnology portrayed it, but a 'truly ancient passageway' (Van Schendel and Cederlof, 2022). Partition enclosed, and closed off, these age-old connections – of rivers, roads, and walkways; of exchange, labour, and tradespeople; of cultural, linguistic, and religious continuities – into different nation-states obsessed with jealously patrolling the newly found political borders. From the early 1990s, ironically, the Look (now 'Act') East Policy has attempted to restore some of these ancient networks through new connectivity infrastructure, border *haat*s, and cultural exchanges, but so to limited effect.

The idea of a Northeastern frontier, still without it being explicitly linked to India, first gained currency during the colonial epoch when, following the first Anglo-Burma war and the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, Assam and Manipur became an appendage to the British Raj. Gradually, and not without setbacks, adjacent hills also became subjected to colonial rule. Only ever in part, however. By the time the British Raj retreated, there still remained vast hill tracts, along what became the Indo-Burma borderland, which had escaped colonialism. For them, colonial occupation started with the forceful enclosure of their lands into India, East Pakistan, or Burma, which they often fought to resist. Several formerly colonized societies also refused to join either Burma or India. Most notably, the Naga. Their refusal spooled into a violent conflict that endures up into the present (Wouters 2018). But also, the Apatani resisted their incorporation into India and armed with spears, bows, and arrows, several hundreds of Apatani warriors attacked an Indian military outpost in 1948 – this case of rebellion and resistance is scarcely discussed in published histories of Northeast India (Baruah 2018). Other communities first agreed to join the Indian state but later reverted their decision and wished to opt out. The Mizo declared independence in 1966, while representations of the Assamese, Meitei, Bodo,

Khasi, Garo, and Tripuri, at different moments in postcolonial time and with differential force and determination, also voiced dreams of independence. Some battled the Indian armed forces in what turned into India's most densely militarized landscape, with the partial exception of Kashmir during the Indo-Pakistan wars.

Northeast India's modern history of insurgency and counterinsurgency, of violence and lawlessness, relates the particularly problematic experiences of decolonization and national integration in this region (Baruah 2020). True, violent conflicts and ethnic/tribal uprisings are less pronounced today than they were in the decades immediately following India's independence. Contested histories of the enclosure into Indian national space continue to have present-day ramifications and repercussions, however. Memories and narratives of state violence, longings for political reunification with kin and territory across borders, and fading dreams of independent polities continue to draw focus to the arbitrariness of this region's creation and its borders.

At the same time, most in the region today have resigned themselves – even if sometimes half-heartedly as 'reluctant Indians' (Karlsson 2011, 50) – to the spatial and political reality of Northeast India. Especially, younger generations now demand equal rights and recognition as Indian citizens, as well as to partake fully in India's new modernity and economic progress. In this, they are hindered by the fact that their cultural traditions, food habits, and phenotypes remain regularly non-recognized and misrecognized by the wider Indian society. Their histories and cultures, moreover, do not figure, or figure haphazardly, in school textbooks and are often ignored by large and powerful media houses. This neglect works to discriminate against and marginalize Northeasterners and compromises India's once-beloved adage of unity in diversity (Wouters and Subba 2013).

The very designation of 'Northeast India' contributes to this marginalization. 'Northeast', after all, is at once a directional – Northeast of what? – and relational term, and therefore, has its locus externally defined. The answer to the question 'Northeast of what?' is 'of Delhi' and India's mainland. But, significant parts of this region are, in reality, not located northeast of Delhi. The southern tip of Mizoram, for instance, is located at roughly the same longitude as Kolkata, while major cities such as Guwahati, Imphal, Aizawl, and Shillong are all situated southeast of Delhi, further suggesting the imaginedness of the region.

History, Settlement, and Identity

The political labour that produced Northeast India only makes for a fraction of this region's history. Its human history is much older. The question of where peoples first settled in this region is debated. Arguments that human populations historically first moved into and concentrated in river valleys suggest that the Assam plains are the oldest place of permanent occupation in Northeast India (Ludden 2005). After all, the alluvial banks of the Brahmaputra and other rivers, fertilized annually by the floods, were highly productive. Arupjyoti Saikia (2019, 45) offers a contrary view by tracing the earliest human settlement to the hills, however. Free from floods, he argues, the hills were easier to live in than the floodplains, where agricultural production necessitated more intense labour, but actual harvests remained at the rivers' mercy. Only later – for a host of reasons, including climatic, ecological, demographic, and technological changes – did early humans also migrate down, initially settling near smaller rivers before eventually moving in to the Brahmaputra floodplains. In this historical reconstruction, for this region, it was the hills that birthed agriculture. While it is (as yet) impossible to pin down the exact moment, the valley was first occupied by humans, comparative research does indicate that the plains were inhabited in Harappan times. Silk, then in use in the Indus Valley, was derived from insects endemic only to Northeast India and mostly distributed along the Brahmaputra floodplains, which suggests an

early human presence and possibly long-distance exchange networks (Saikia 2019, 46). For the hills, the material remains, including Stone Age tools found in the Garo Hills, suggest that some of these were inhabited by at least the Late Pleistocene or Early Holocene Period (Hazarika 2017).

What, in all likelihood, followed the initial peopling of this region was a complex pattern of forward and retreat movements between the hills and plains. Such fluctuating patterns, with several communities being *both* plains and hill dwellers across time, are attested to by an impressive arsenal of folktales and oral histories. James Scott, in his *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), famously put on trial the ostensible interdependence of 'civilization' and 'state' by arguing that hill peoples in Northeast India, as part of Zomia, were not so much left behind by civilization, as consciously seeking to avoid it by escaping to the hills, indeed fleeing military conscription, corvée labour, taxes, and so on. While Scott galvanized academia around a new idea, this narrative can only ever serve as a partial reading of human settlement and mobility in Northeast India. Not only were the hills possibly populated before the plains were, but, historically, an opposite flow of peoples moving from the plains into the hills was equally pertinent. In fact, rather than hill peoples necessarily avoiding any contact with pre-modern states, the latter's political life expectancy significantly depended on their strength and skill – military, diplomatic – to keep hill peoples penned up in the hills, to prevent them from raiding or expanding their sway downwards (Wouters 2011).

When seen in the long haul, the histories of hill and valley societies were of mobility and interaction, whether oppositional or reciprocal. These were never histories of separation, even less of highland isolation (Misra 2011, 1). It was the British administrators who translated the ecological features of the hills and plains into legal, economic, and socio-political binaries to begin with, which were given continuity by subsequent governments of independent India. They enacted these binaries to expand and consolidate their economic interests, especially in tea, and devised legal mechanisms to rule. The hills were administrated differently, including the promulgation of the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 that progressively sequestered the hills and their divisions into Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas that constrained the already limited civil and political rights extended to the colonial subjects. Cultural, administrative, and legal-political vocabularies emerged and circulated to emphasize these newly found binaries, which subsequently etched themselves at the centre of scholarly and everyday narratives of the region (Kar 2009).

Such and other colonial histories are well documented in what is now Northeast India, which, indeed, is a marvellous playfield for historians interested in its 19th and 20th centuries. Unlike earlier kingdoms and empires, which largely confined their documentation to court chronicles, the colonial system produced enormous amounts of written materials, now stocked in archives across the region and abroad. Historians have depended on these in reconstructing the region's history. They still have only touched the surface of the plentiful historical material that is available, not to mention the oral historical literature. Simultaneously, historians' focus on written material has made them privilege some areas and communities, such as the Brahmaputra and the Assamese, and left out areas where literary traditions were absent before colonialism arrived and the paper trail is subsequently much thinner, such as in Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as the North East Frontier Agency, or in short, NEFA. Vanguard scholars have realized this gap and are now attempting to close it, for instance, by looking more seriously at oral narratives (Guite 2018), visual images that may exist (Pachuau and Van Schendel 2015), and the historical entanglements between humans, plants, and animals (Pachuau and Van Schendel 2022).

Beyond the immediate grasp of historical methods, or in an extension of it, lie the possibilities of archaeology, historical linguistics, and population genetics. The scope for new knowledge

in these fields is immense, but they remain significantly understudied within the region. In the 1930s, the colonial officer J.P. Mills (1933, 6) lamented how 'the spade, the chief tool of archeologists, has hardly been used in research on Assam'. He immediately added: 'What systematic digging there has been on ancient sites has, alas, been done with the object of looting ancient graves'. Now almost a century on, there is less talk about the robbing of graves, but archaeologists still talk about Northeast India as a *terra incognita*. Ecology and climate are partly responsible for the scantiness of archaeological findings even as scholarly neglect is also to blame, besides frequent floods, erosion, landslides, earthquakes, high humidity, and the continual deposition of sediments both wash away and cover material remains (Hazarika 2017).

The still meagre archaeological activity now coexists with an abundance of postulates, hypotheses, and theories about the region's prehistory, however. Fresh developments in historical linguistics, genetics, and archaeology point towards Northeast India as an early centre for plant and animal domestication, as well as of food production, including possibly independent domestication events of *mithun*s, *taro*, and paddy. The linguist Van Driem (2011a) deduces that present-day Northeast India, as well as the adjacent Eastern Himalaya, might well be the original homeland of the Tibeto-Burman language family, from where its speakers dispersed into multiple directions, a view that finds support in molecular genetic evidence. To be sure: these ancient movements existed at a deeper time scale compared to the later migratory waves and settlements that are told in oral histories locally.

Another early language family present in Northeast India may also have its original homeland close by, with linguistic evidence suggesting that the origins of the Austroasiatics could have been 'on either side of the Ganges and Brahmaputra delta' (Van Driem 2011b, 16–17). This contributes to a wider insight that foregrounds Northeast India as an important staging area and thoroughfare for the peopling of the Indian Subcontinent, Southeast and East Asia. All of these offer contours of new theories, new arguments, new intellectual possibilities, and new research avenues.

What is certain is that countless waves of migration – from all directions – have shaped the complex ethnolinguistic and genetic make-up of Northeast India's population. For the longest time, this social landscape was a palpably diverse, fragmented, and fluid world. Human identities often overlapped; local polities were home to peoples of mixed origins, while there was always considerable mobility and exchange among them. In this region, the historical sense of identity and belonging is related to migration, mobility, mingling, interaction, uprooting and re-rooting, and often also hybridity. This sense co-evolved with nonlocal cultural, religious, economic, and political forces of change and transformation, including the nascent rooting of the exogenous discourse and politics of 'indigeneity', which progressively inundated the gloss of the land. Comparatively, later arrivals in the region include Nepalis, Panjabis, Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis, Tibetans, and Burmese, among others. They further contribute to this region's bewildering human diversity. Simultaneously, recent decades witnessed the acceleration of out-migration. Every year, many thousands of Northeasterners, mostly youths, are drawn to metropolitan cities outside the region to take up educational and employment opportunities. Their experiences on India's mainland are often mixed, as many of them face measures of racial and other forms of discrimination for their supposedly 'non-Indian' looks and cultural expressions, which reveal the limits of India's cultural imagination (Kikon and Karlsson 2019).

In the postcolonial epoch, but particularly during the past few decades, identities in the region lost most of their earlier fluidity. They became more exclusionary and hardened. Migration especially has now become suspect and is progressively talked about in the language of illegality, infiltration, encroachment, and land-grabbing, with both local leaders and lay invoking it to protest against their experienced loss of tribal and ethnic identities and autonomy,

the seizure of indigenous lands, demographic shifts, and cultural erasure. The Indian state also contributed to the hardening and politicizing of identities through institutionalized ethno-governance and policies and politics of tribal and territorial recognition by the 'ethnographic state' (Middleton 2015), including for Scheduled Tribe recognition, Sixth Schedule status, and the 'ethnic homeland model' (Van Schendel 2011). The politics of ethnicity, belonging, and exclusive territorial rights, or 'ethno-territoriality' (Baruah 2013), now breed volatility and occasional violence in Northeast India. Questions of who belongs and who does not, and claims and contests over territorial recognition, tribal reservations, rights, and political autonomy agitate manifold ethnopolitical movements. The result is a body politic that is near continuously gripped by aggressive agitations, constant protests, existential anxiety, and sporadic violence. All across Northeast India, ethnicity has now become a particularly volatile expression of local identities, central to political subject formation, an ongoing site of fierce struggle, and a core register in which claims on the state are staked (Wouters 2022).

Numerous scholarly works now detail how the still recent ethnicization of identities, the politics of culture, and articulations of indigeneity and its insider-outsider binaries generated volatile winds of identity oppositions and antagonisms. When seen from a wider historical lens, this current preoccupation with exclusive identities signifies a moment of exception in Northeast India's long and rich history of mobility, interaction, and settlement.

This Companion

This companion brings together 81 entries on varied topics that are relevant to the region. While admitting them, we have tried to see that no topic is limited, at least conceptually, to one single community or state, nor did we expect any entry to cover all the 220-odd communities and 8 states that fall within the region called Northeast India. To expect that would not be wise, nor would that be necessary to understand the region, its history, its peoples, and its environment. We have also used the region called 'Northeast India' in a rather unbounded sense, not as something limited to the current political boundaries of this region, which coincidentally overlap with India's international boundaries, but as something that overflows, along with its peoples, cultures, and goods, to countries beyond the borders. Through the same routes have entered some other peoples, cultures and goods and become indigenous over time. What has come from outside the region has taken care of some of its deficits, although at times, such inflows have disrupted the equilibrium, demographic or otherwise, of the receiving states. Such flows are never one-directional, whether it is across state or international borders, and they have been flowing for centuries. Many kingdoms have come and gone, rivers have changed their courses, and the hills have changed their colours in satellite images, but the flows have not stopped, except seasonally or temporarily.

We lay this companion on the table of all those who would like to know how diverse the region can be and how diversely the region can be imagined, read, and written about. Yet, we know what we have covered is only a semblance of it; the region is infinitely more diverse than what we have been able to display on the table here. Just as the vegetation changes when we arrive at a new hill or valley, so do the other lives that depend on the vegetation creating and sustaining distinct ecological niches. The threat that man poses to such ecological niches is not unknown to us, but we often do nothing about it, as if he is unstoppable. In this companion, we have made an effort, no matter how small, to at least make him conscious of his (un)doings and his responsibilities to fellow animals, birds, insects, and other beings that live with us and have a bearing on the well-being of our crops and us humans. More independent has the man become of his crops, his animals, and his spiritual world, more destructive he has become of his

own kind and of those other kinds whose lives he has no moral right to harm but whose lives he harms with impunity.

In this introduction, it is not possible to talk about the 81 entries separately, for that would definitely consume more space than earmarked for this introduction. We could, of course, map and classify the entries, much as the colonial administrators did about this region and its peoples, and thereby created some of the permanent problems for independent India, be that inter-state border conflicts or irrational international borders, the artificial hill–plains binary or the motivated Christian–Hindu binary, the salivating revenue areas of the plains or the tongue-dry mountain areas that evaded revenue collection, and so on. But, for ideological and intellectual reasons, we have refrained from doing that and thereby tried to stop, albeit symbolically, the prolongation of the colonial discourse on the region. We want our readers to savour each one of the entries or take those on their plate that interest them most, but we also encourage them to taste those foods that they might not have tasted before. We encourage them to do this, for who knows that they might find greener pastures for future research, pastures that are more rewarding than the pastures they have been grazing so far – if not more rewarding, may be more self-fulfilling; if not more self-fulfilling for them, may be more fulfilling for the others who are less fortunate than them. Each entry on your table is a surprise for you, not just because of who has prepared it, but how it has been served on your table.

We lay on your table the fruits that are fresh from the garden as well as those that are plucked from the seasoned trees, some of which may have borne the fruits this season for the very last time before they become dry and shrivelled. Plucking fruits from such trees was not always easy, but we made a special effort because we knew that the fruits from such trees might not be big and shiny, but they would be the tastiest of all. We also wanted to make those trees believe, as we do, that they were still important. We wanted our guests at the table to have their choice, the choice of a lifetime, for we do not know if such a variety of fruits from across the world would ever be served to you in the future. It is not impossible, but anyone who wants to do it has to make equal if not more efforts than we editors have made for making this companion happen. And that, we assure you, is not going to be easy.

Companion-writing, we must admit, was something new to most of our contributors, much as it was so for us editors. We needed to consult other companions, and luckily there was no dearth of companions published by some of the top publishing houses in the world to learn from. But we did not want just another companion for the sake of a companion; we wanted it to be different from the ones produced before this, different in content, different in approach, and different in orientation. How much we have succeeded in achieving all this is for the posterity to judge, but we wish to make it clear that we, as editors, have left no stone unturned to make this companion truly worthy of our contributors as well as our readers. We have on your table some of the most exciting, most sexy, and most happening topics in this region. We are sure each one of our contributors, as well as our readers, will find in this companion something to chew, something to swallow, something to play with their tongue like the finest wine, something to agitate them, and something to soothe their minds.

Above all, we want this companion to cater to the intellectual and academic interests of the young researchers who will be filling up the research space of Northeast India for the next two to three decades, if not longer. Without telling them in so many words, we want to orient their intellectual and academic interests towards what is going to be intellectually hot, cool, and seductive for the next couple of decades so far as research and writing on the region is concerned. We do not want to evangelize them into what we think is intellectually intoxicating about the region, but we certainly wish to show them some such aspects of the region. We want them to come and explore, knowing full well that not every exploration is successful, but every exploration teaches us something new.

We have tried our best to get the best scholars to write on the topics included here, but we have not been as fully successful as we wanted in this regard, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has held the world hostage for the past two years. Between our first solicitation for the companion and the final submission of entries, many of those who had committed themselves to contribute fell prey to the virus, or their family members did, or their close friends and relatives did, threatening this project to be abandoned. Many of our contributors had no access to libraries they were hoping to consult for writing their entries, or they were stuck in one place, whereas their personal research materials were somewhere else. We editors also suffered, as our own family members or family-like members were affected, not to speak of the numerous other persons who were very close to us. We relaxed our deadlines several times, which we thought was the least humanitarian gesture we could show to our contributors under the pandemic situation. We reached out to those who were suffering with whatever empathy we could show through emails. And we salute those who made extraordinary efforts to be a part of this project. A special heartfelt thanks to them.

We are aware of the fact that what we have been able to offer in this volume is not the limit of what is possible. We are very grateful that a great many scholars of repute as well as of promise whom we approached contributed to this volume, but some who had promised could not due to various reasons. In some cases, we might have pushed them to deliver their entries a little more than we would want to do under normal circumstances. While we apologize to them for doing so, we might also have helped them divert themselves from the depressing television news on COVID-related statistics or the entertaining but unproductive Netflix watching. On our part, we learnt a lesson or two in communication skills, editorial skills, and life skills generally. Above all, we are thankful to our contributors for their excellent contributions and to Aakash Chakraborty and Brinda Sen of Routledge for waiting most patiently and giving us the opportunity to create a huge international family of scholars from and on Northeast India, as this companion represents.

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