

Book Review

Jugdep S. Chima and Pahi Saikia, *Insurgency in India's Northeast: Identity formation, Postcolonial Nation/State-Building, and Secessionist Resistance*. London and New York: Routledge, 2024.

Reviewed by Rachel Khrasi & Ayush Mazumder

In the introductory the authors highlight the rest of the book by taking the reader to the heart of India's Northeast, a region that has seen decades of unrest and rebellion. Chima and Sakia start the chapter by talking about how the area is home to a wide range of ethnic groups, each with its own strong sense of history and identity. The authors mention that the problems and fights in the Northeast aren't just about the violence or separatism; rather, they are, in fact, about who gets to say what it means to be "Indian" and who belongs to what community. The chapter also talks about the Indian government having a huge role to play in uniting all these different groups into one national identity. While some groups were open to integrating, especially if it meant having their own rights or being respected for their culture and traditions. However, the other groups felt left out and even threatened, which made them fight back sometimes with violence.

The authors want the readers to know that the Indian government has dealt with this resistance in two main ways. First by giving certain groups special rights, protections, or legal recognition, which is a form of democratic accommodation. Secondly, through control, which can mean using force or strong-arm tactics to stop people from raising their voice. However, neither of these approaches has worked completely, as some groups have peacefully integrated, but others still hold on to their own identities and dreams of independence. The significant point is Northeast India's identity has been shaped by history, colonialism, and the actions of people and governments every day. The authors highlight the Northeast as a place where people are actively negotiating what it means to belong, who they are, and how they want to be treated and recognized. The region is not shown as a borderland that needs to be tamed but as a lively part of India where issues of justice, dignity, and identity are still very much alive. The authors set up the rest of the book as an exploration of how identities are formed, challenged, and reshaped and how the project of building a nation is never truly achieved.

The second chapter addresses the theoretical and analytical framework of the book. It helps readers understand how the authors see the conflicts in the region. The authors begin by examining the notions of identity: What leads individuals to perceive themselves as part of a specific group, whether it be ethnic, linguistic, or national?

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People who believe in primordialism think that identities are very old and hard to change and that they are passed down through blood and tradition. While some people believe instrumentalists say that identities are more like tools that people make and change for practical reasons. However, it changes based on the situation or the leader. The authors state that both views are important. People can feel a strong, almost instinctive connection to their group, but that connection is also shaped by history, politics, and the decisions made by leaders and communities.

The chapter continues to look at how borders, both physical and cultural, were drawn during colonial times and after independence. In their attempts to rule and control the area, the British often drew lines on maps that separated communities or brought together very different groups. These artificial borders often didn't take into account what was really going on in the area, and their effects can still be felt today. The authors contend that borders transcend mere lines on maps. They influence self-perception and interpersonal perceptions, potentially engendering enduring sentiments of exclusion or animosity. In the same way, the process of building a state, making a government that works, building institutions, and fostering a sense of national identity has been a double-edged sword. The Indian government has tried to deal with diversity by using federalism or special protections, but it has also set limits and used force, especially when it felt threatened by separatism.

The authors assert that the narrative of northeast India cannot be elucidated by any singular theory or straightforward account. Instead, they suggest an "intersectional" approach, which means looking at how identity, borders, and state power all work together to affect people's lives and political choices. This chapter aims to furnish the reader with the means to transcend superficial interpretations, recognizing that what appears to be a straightforward instance of rebellion is, in fact, complex in perceptions of community and national identity. It urges people in the northeast to stop seeing them as passive victims or troublemakers and start seeing them as active agents trying to make sense of their world and stand up for their rights.

Chima and Saikia open their third chapter with a clear and careful account of how Mizo identity took shape over many years. They explain that the Mizos are part of a larger Zo or Zomi family whose homeland once spread across what is now India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Colonial rule drew sharp new lines on the map and gave people new names. The Zo people on the Indian side became known as "Lushai" while those on the Burmese side were called "Chin." The authors show how the term "Mizo" later grew into a broader, more united name that brought together different tribes and clans. This change became stronger after Christian missionaries arrived and many people turned to the new faith. Christianity weakened the power of the old tribal chiefs and created room for new groups such as the Young Mizo Association and the Mizo Union. These organisations mixed cultural work with political demands and slowly built a shared sense of Mizo belonging. At the time of Indian independence, the community was split. Some wanted full independence as a Zo homeland, others leaned toward Burma, and a few were ready to join India if they could keep control over their own affairs. The Indian government first tried to manage the situation by giving the Mizo Hills a semi-autonomous district inside Assam. Yet resentment grew when the 1958–59 Mautam famine struck and both Assam and the central authorities seemed slow and uncaring. This anger turned the Mizo National Famine Front into the Mizo National Front and sparked the armed uprising of 1966. The Indian state answered with force, including aerial bombing, and the fighting lasted twenty years. The turning point came in 1986 with the Mizo Accord. The agreement created the separate state of

Mizoram and gave the Mizos real protections for their language, culture, and way of life. Chima and Saikia see this as a rare success story of integration. They argue that the postcolonial state used a mix of firm control at first and then genuine accommodation later, which allowed the Mizos to keep their distinct identity while becoming part of India.

This view sets the chapter apart from Subir Bhaumik's *Troubled Periphery* (2009), which traces most Northeast troubles back to British divide-and-rule tactics and outside meddling. Chima and Saikia shift the main focus to what happened after 1947, showing how new borders and political deals shaped identities more than colonial leftovers. They also engage with Sanjib Baruah's emphasis on strong civil-society groups pushing cultural nationalism in *Durable Disorder* (2005). While they accept that these groups mattered, they insist that formal talks and agreements between leaders mattered more in the end. Bethany Lacina's work on state capacity and local autocracies in *Asian Survey* (2009) is also addressed, but the authors give more weight to the power of shared memory and the feeling that the state must offer real concessions. The chapter's strength lies in its careful step-by-step tracing of events and its use of original interviews with people who lived through the changes. It avoids treating Mizo identity as fixed or ancient. Instead, it shows identity as something that grew and changed through colonial maps, missionary work, famine, rebellion, and finally a political bargain. The result is a convincing case that the Indian state can bring even strong separatist movements into the national fold when it combines pressure with real concessions. This makes the Mizo story stand out as one of the few lasting peace settlements in the Northeast. It offers a hopeful but realistic lesson about how identity, borders, and power interact in postcolonial India. Readers come away with a clear sense that successful integration is possible, but it requires both firmness and fairness from the state.

Chapter four goes into great detail about the history and present situation of the Nagas, one of the most important groups in Northeast India, and their long struggle for independence or autonomy. The authors start by telling us that "Nagas" used to be a group of many tribes, each with its own language and way of life. British colonial rule and later Christian missionaries were very important in bringing these tribes together and helping them feel like they were all part of the same group. They felt even more connected to each other because they were ruled as outsiders by both the British and after 1947 by the Indian state.

The Nagas had to decide whether to join India or claim their own independence when India got her freedom. A lot of Nagas thought they had never really been a part of India and wanted to make their own choices. Some groups picked up weapons when their hopes weren't met, thinking that only through continued resistance could they be heard. The Indian government, on the other hand, went back and forth between harsh crackdowns, some of which included violence and serious human rights abuses, and attempts to negotiate, offering statehood, special protections, and peace accords. But things on the ground were still complicated: some Nagas agreed to these deals and became part of the political mainstream, while others thought that the main issue of self-determination had never been dealt.

The chapter is especially powerful because it shows that the fight for Naga identity is not just about politics or land but also about pride, memory, and the right to shape one's own future. The authors tell stories people from all walks of life, from old politicians to young activists. These stories show that the community is still very

divided between those who want to work within the system and those who want to be completely free. The authors point out that there has been progress many Nagas are now involved in Indian democracy however there is still a feeling of unresolved grievance. Especially among those who remember past violence and broken promises. The authors mention how years of fighting have changed people's sense of self, left scars that will last forever, and made communities constantly have to redefine what it means to be "Naga" and "Indian." The message is clear peace isn't just stopping the fighting. It's also about understanding people's pasts, treating them with respect, and giving them a real say in their own future.

In chapter five on Manipur, Chima and Saikia carefully trace how Meitei identity grew from the old kingdom that took shape in the fifteenth century. They explain how the kingdom's language, Meiteilon, was put into writing and how its rulers gradually turned toward Hinduism, sometimes forcing the change on their subjects. This shift from the older Sanamahi faith to Hinduism was never complete, and many Meiteis kept parts of their traditional beliefs alive. British rule brought new pressures. The kingdom became a princely state under British oversight, and the British used the term "Manipuri" to describe the people of the valley while treating the hill tribes as separate. When the British left in 1947, the Meitei king briefly regained full power, and Manipur even had its own constitution and elected assembly. But in 1949 the Indian government pressed the Maharaja to sign a merger agreement that brought Manipur into the Indian Union. Many Meiteis still see this as forced annexation rather than willing joining. Chima and Saikia show how this memory of lost sovereignty became the heart of later armed resistance. Groups such as the United National Liberation Front, People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak, People's Liberation Army, and Kangleipak Communist Party grew out of this sense of grievance. These outfits kept the demand for independence alive, even as daily politics and elections took root in the state. The authors point out that the Indian state has used both strong military measures and ordinary democratic routines to pull Manipur closer. Yet the old claim to sovereignty has not disappeared.

This approach differs from Bethany Lacina's explanation, which puts most weight on weak local government and "autocracies" in the hills. Chima and Saikia give more importance to the power of shared memory and the feeling that the 1949 merger was unjust. They also move beyond Nani Gopal Mahanta's focus on economic complaints by showing that the Meitei movement draws strength from symbols of past independence more than from money alone. The chapter uses careful step-by-step history and fresh interviews to make its case. It avoids treating Meitei identity as unchanging. Instead, it shows how identity changed through kingdom building, religious shifts, colonial rule, and the painful merger with India. The authors make clear that integration is happening through elections, daily life, and even some Hindu cultural influences but it remains unfinished because the memory of lost sovereignty still matters to many people. This balanced view helps readers see both the advances and the limits of India's nation-building project in Manipur. It also adds to broader debates about how historical grievances can keep resistance alive even when violence drops and normal politics returns. Compared with Sanjib Baruah's work on durable disorder in the Northeast, the chapter offers a more hopeful yet realistic picture. Baruah stresses the role of civil-society groups in keeping ethnic demands alive, but Chima and Saikia show that the real force is the lasting memory of a sovereign past. The result is a nuanced account that explains why Meitei separatism continues even as

democratic life grows stronger in the state. Readers finish the chapter with a clearer understanding of why community memory matters so much in postcolonial India.

The sixth chapter deals with the most changeable identity of the four cases. Chima and Saikia begin by showing how the old Tai-Ahom kingdom memories slowly turned into a broader “ethnic Assamese” sense of self. Colonial maps and administration grouped many different communities together and gradually made the identity more Hindu. The authors explain that the late-1970s Assam Movement grew out of worries about outsiders taking land and jobs, and it soon led to the rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam. ULFA framed its demand for sovereignty by pointing back to the pre-colonial Ahom glories, but the group’s support base fractured along lines of class, caste, and language. The Indian state answered with the 1985 Assam Accord, which promised to protect local interests but was never fully carried out. At the same time, strong military steps and the creation of surrendered ULFA groups helped break the armed campaign. Yet some worries about culture and numbers remain. Chima and Saikia disagree with writers who see the conflict as mainly about money or jobs. They show instead how successive internal boundary changes inside Assam both weakened and reshaped Assamese identity. The chapter’s careful tracing of events and use of interviews make clear that identity in Assam was never fixed. It changed through kingdom rule, colonial mapping, language debates, and the politics of migration. The authors note that growing Hindu influence and everyday democratic life may be pulling this fractured regional identity closer to the Indian mainstream, even if quietly and not without tension.

This view sets the chapter apart from Udayon Misra’s focus on economic grievances. It also differs from Dilip Gogoi’s treatment of ULFA as mainly an ideological break. Chima and Saikia place the insurgency inside a longer story of integration and resistance. They acknowledge Sanjib Baruah’s warnings about lasting disorder but suggest that a more fluid identity can sometimes bend toward the larger Indian Union more easily than a tightly bound one. The chapter ends by noting that the increasing “Hinduization” of ethnic Assamese identity under recent politics may point to deeper, if still contested, incorporation. This measured conclusion helps readers see why the Assam case is different from the clearer-cut Mizo or Naga stories. It shows that when identity is already mixed and changing, the state’s mix of pressure and political openings can slowly bring even a restless region closer to the national fold. The authors use original fieldwork to show how colonial boundary making and postcolonial politics worked together to create a fractured but still powerful sense of “Assamese” belonging. Readers come away with a clear sense that integration in Assam is happening, but it is uneven and depends on the state offering real space for local concerns. This chapter adds an important layer to the book’s overall argument about how the Indian state uses both control and accommodation to shape identities in the Northeast.

In the final chapter, Chima and Saikia bring together the four cases to restate their main argument. They show that India’s nation-building in the Northeast has used a practical mix of democratic sharing and strong control. Mizoram stands as the clearest success, where the state offered real cultural protections and the conflict ended. Manipur and Assam show deeper everyday integration, yet pockets of resistance remain. Nagaland is the hardest case, where armed groups still refuse full acceptance of Indian rule. The authors reject simple ideas that treat ethnic identities as fixed forever or as pure inventions for politics. They show instead that these identities are real, shaped over time by history, borders, and political bargains. Their framework

adds useful detail to Gurharpal Singh's idea of "ethnic democracy" by explaining how India's rules look fair on paper but often favor the majority in practice. At the same time, the book supports Alfred Stepan's "state-nation" idea while showing that the process is never smooth or complete. What makes this work stand out is its use of fresh interviews and careful step-by-step history. It offers a balanced, realistic picture of why some rebellions end and others continue, and why the task of building a united yet respectful India in the Northeast is still unfinished. The chapter also looks beyond the Northeast to other parts of India and South Asia. It suggests that the same mix of accommodation and control appears in places like Punjab and Kashmir, though with different results. The authors point out that alternative models, such as stronger consociational power-sharing or clearer recognition of multiple sovereignties, might reduce violence. Yet they are careful not to promise easy answers. They note that even successful cases like Mizoram required years of fighting before a bargain was reached. The conclusion leaves readers with a clear sense that nation-building is an ongoing, often painful process. Identities can change and become more complementary with the larger national identity, but only when the state offers credible space for difference. When it does not, resistance continues. This realistic assessment makes the book a valuable addition to the study of multi-ethnic democracies. It shows that integration is possible, but it comes at a cost and is never total. The Northeast thus serves as a useful laboratory for understanding how states and peripheral groups negotiate belonging in the modern world.

The authors compare their findings with other important works. They engage with Subir Bhaumik's focus on colonial legacies and external factors but argue that postcolonial choices matter more. They also build on Sanjib Baruah's insights into civil society while showing that formal state deals often decide the outcome. Bethany Lacina's emphasis on state capacity is acknowledged, but the book gives more weight to the role of memory and boundary making. By combining theory with rich case studies, the conclusion offers a fresh way to think about ethnic conflict and integration in India and beyond. Readers finish the book with a deeper understanding of why some movements end in peace while others linger, and why the Indian state's strategy of control mixed with accommodation has produced uneven but real results in the Northeast. This final chapter ties the whole book together and leaves a lasting impression of careful scholarship and clear thinking.