

“HOMELAND INSECURITIES: AUTONOMY, CONFLICT AND MIGRATION IN ASSAM” BY SANJAY BARBORA, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022, ISBN: 978-0-19-285532-9

Assam, despite being home to many distinctive tribes there has always been struggle to determine who is ‘indigenous’ to the land. Sanjay Barbora in his book *Homeland Insecurities: Autonomy, Conflict, and Migration in Assam*, has focused upon the subjects such as:- autonomy movements, migration, wildlife conservation, and reconciliation, by applying long duration ethnographical study as well as his perspectives as a human right activists for over two decades. The Government of Assam has released the draft of National Register of Citizens (NRC) on 30th July 2018, which excluded the names of four million people, that would further raise the phantom of impending violence and the possibility of many being declared stateless in the process. The author has resemblance the NRC process with its proponents and critics as a Hegelian moment i.e. paradoxically universal, particular and individual- where the politics of autonomy, indigenous rights and homologize of radical ideas are put to rest for a moment. The book presents basically two different arguments that run through its chapters, such as:-first questions the causalities that are inferred in the study of all the mentioned subjects that has been overdetermined by militarization of crucial spaces of debate and dialogue within civil society; second argues that a dense reading of the subjects provide an elucidate, unfiltered description of what is happening in Assam and also diverge attention to a larger universal changes taking place across the globe. Each chapter in the book includes orthodox observations of organizations involved in the movements and also focuses upon primarily on people who settle in the heart and margins of the movements for autonomy, migration, and militarization. The author finds the inter-connectedness of these issues as self-evident, because they all came from and ended in the desire for enhancing social justice and equity.

This book explains a set of contrasting issues that continue to impact the political situation in Assam, such as:- in Brahmaputra Valley people look more into securing some form of autonomy for indigenous communities

compared to the idea of Indian Nationalism; the last quarter of 20th century noticed some form of solidarity among radical political advocacy groups and human rights organizations, where dialogues between people were encouraged to find common ground between indigenous communities of the Northeastern region. In the first chapter titled 'From Autonomy to Accommodation' the author has discussed in detail about two events i.e. the first NRC in Assam and the Naga plebiscite happened in 1951, starting from its historical background and its aftermath impact in the political-socio change in Assam. The commentators who defended NRC, at least in public domain thought it was a solution to the constant tensions arising out of the immigration issue in Assam and therefore 1951 is considered as an intriguing political moment for the region, where a number of major political leaders affiliated with Muslim League, Congress, and Communist Party of India, had sought a merger with the Indian Union and refrained from joining Pakistan after its partition. Sanjay Barbora has interviewed one of the signatories for Naga plebiscite, named Uncle Megometho, and claimed that plebiscite papers were sent around to the different villages in Naga territory and the leaders were busy in campaigning for people to vote for independence of the Naga Homeland. According to the author, the Naga plebiscite in 1951 provides a philosophical foundation for an analysis on demands for autonomy and also derive their legitimacy and appeal because the need for the Naga independence has been communicated with clarity and purpose in each constituency. Together the three processes in 1951, such as:- Naga plebiscite, First census and First NRC in Assam, indicate two different kind of pulls in the political movements of the region, they are:- autonomy and social justice. In Assam, the NRC has an effect on political mobilization since the mid 20th century and has been viewed as the legal and political way to address the issue of autonomy and social justice. Compared to 1951, the 2015 edition of the NRC was more robust, as the government sought to minimize the shortcomings in two ways:- by involving the entire state machinery, including all departments of Government of Assam, the Registrar General of India, the Supreme Court into the process; using technology to clear up unresolved deals that are attributed to the everyday workings of the State in developing countries. The NRC process brought together different strands of anxieties among different groups in the state. On one end, observers applauded the exercise as the inevitable culmination of a historically constituted process

of establishing a directory of citizens in a divisive location after the partitioning of the British empire. On another end of the spectrum, NRC was evidence of the state's civil society and government apparatuses' sectarian biases which further seems to be an effort to persecute minorities (religious and linguistic) in Assam, especially those in the Barak Valley. In Assam, these issues are intertwined with three factors: - colonial history, ethnic identity and resource management; which have been instrumental in defining the political discourse, fears and actions around the NRC process. Thus, demands for social justice are in line with the desire for territorial sovereignty over land, while demand for autonomy seeks to equality and citizenship under constitutional legislation.

In Assam, borders resort as an integral part of citizenship discourse emanating around the issue of undocumented immigration in Assam. Sanjay Barbora has quoted the anthropologist Ghassan Hage who considers modern border making as the re-establishment of older colonial projects and points towards the concept of settler-colonial mentality. In 1990s and 2000s conflicts took place in Assam, that led to widespread displacement among the communities like:- Adivasi-Bodo, karbi-kuki, Bodo-Muslim, Garo-Rabha etc. The Legal equality between states and determining national borders are the two principles that allow continuation of violence between citizen of different communities in Assam, each claims the right to evict the other from the spaces they inhabit. This creates conditions for communities to exercise power against one another and the state. In the later part of the chapter, author described in 20th century the category of peasant and the identity of 'Assamese'/(Oxomiya) have been challenged by the complicated history of colonial revenue collection, nationalist literature and political mobilization.

In the second chapter titled 'Autonomy or Death', Sanjay Barbora has focused on the history of autonomous movements and current challenges to political discourse on the ground. He argues that the military social milieu prevents the resolution of many of the nuanced consequences of conflicts that arise in the process of political mobilization and government's conflict management strategies. Two distinct but related issues have contributed to increased violence in Assam's autonomous territorial districts in recent times. One relates to the enduring idea of territorial arrangements (constitutional provisions or renegotiation of administrative powers) that suggest a closure

of debates around such issues. The other relates to the government's decision to categorize people and their entitled land to prove that they are not illegal migrant to the state. To the idea of closed ethnic communities, author relates the thoughtful metaphor of 'border-as-skin' given by the anthropologist Franck Bille, which argued that borders are not only linear, uncontested territories, but are rough and palimpsestic, similar to skin. Barbora further explains that contests and conflicts for autonomy emerge from a sense of belonging to the land, for example:- borderland in western Assam. He has also discussed in detail the conflicts and formation of Bodoland territorial autonomous district (BTAD) in 2003, which had three immediate consequences, such as:- first, being forced to leave their villages and can no longer cultivate or harvest; second, being reduced to a life without any security, individuals and their families are left out at the mercy of government's relief agencies (relief camps as permanent fixtures of life); third, polarization among people and narratives about the violence.

In the third chapter titled 'Migration Matters', Sanjay Barbora argues that the perception of peasant and worker's migration to Assam have changed since the early 21st century, affecting the political rhetoric around settler-indigenous disputes. This raises important questions regarding the alteration of Assam's stable, enclave economy framework which had been key to political and social analysis in the 20th century. In this chapter, the author looks beyond the statistical aggregates of migration and remittances and draws inspiration from Michael Jackson's work on illustrating the migrant's experience as a collective human condition and also focuses upon ethics as a crucial lens for understanding the elementary conditions that arise in new debates around migration. The political violence during the 1990s and early 2000s has subsided, resulting in a disruptive shift towards societal calm. It uses a concept popularized by sociologist and scholar of peacebuilding John Paul Lederach, 'both circular and linear', in which the objects that cause conflict seem to move in circles while taking on different forms. Migrants from the region are an emerging significant social fact and therefore their anger, dejection, and demoralization upon return serve an important aspect of research.

In the fourth chapter titled 'Elephants (and Rhinos) in the Room', Sanjay Barbora extended the story of land and livelihoods to human-

animal relationships. He mentions about the pressures and paradoxes of the conservation story in Assam. The interactions between humans and animals in Assam are often viewed through the prism of militarism (poaching of animals, as well as killing of the poachers) and development (as both a reality and a chance of coexistence). He chooses rhinos and elephants after seeing eviction of subsistence farmers, extra-judicial killing of the rhino poachers, and increased conflicts between humans and elephants in Kaziranga and Manas National parks. In the fifth chapter titled ‘Commune and Relief Camp’, the author examines the unstable world created by conflicts and the rising frequency of natural disasters induced by climate change. This chapter also raises questions about the changing ways in which communities, individuals, organizations are being driven to reconsider how and why they live, work and cultivate human interactions and associations.

The author has signified in this book about balancing old questions with fresh perspective that can provide insight into the path of diverse species (human and non-human) over the past two decades in Assam. Hence, the concept of homeland serves as a powerful symbol that can both heal and hurt.

Sandhanee Deka

PhD, scholar

Department of Political Science,

University of Delhi.