

Comments on Samir K. Purkayastha and Sucharita Sengupta: *Borders, Mobility and Migration: North East India*

Discussant: Sanjoy Barbora, Associate Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati.

The crucial arguments of the essay were built on two pivotal ideas: (a) that policy can and intends to change the socio-economic profile of Northeast India and (b) that there are certain challenges that are peculiar to the region, which even the the most well meaning policy will have to engage with. Both ideas have the ability to elicit deeper reflection on the current debates on development and politics in the region. The three issues that the authors want to investigate – borders, mobility and migration – are perhaps the ones that reflect the complexity that the authors allude to in the essay.

There are a few points that they may wish to consider while revising the essay for publication. They are enumerated below:

1. *Colonial History of flows and Races in the Northeast*: The authors have to ask why this section needs to begin with the usual mining of literature on the migration narrative in the region. The “flows” idea could be looked at much more critically. For instance, Judith Irvine’s work on 19th century Orientalist Robert Needham Cust’s language mapping project in the Indian sub-continent could be a useful text to rethink this particular section. At a time when when both cartography and linguistics had become exciting new areas of scholastic research, Cust – who was actually a civil servant in with academic aspirations – combined his interest in linguistic research with an almost missionary zeal to pin down languages and peoples to a particular geographical location. Using Cust’s letters as a source, Irvine tells the readers about his need to categorise and systematise the heterogeneous world of revenue collection and land titling in colonial Punjab. Fiercely empirical and woefully ill-equipped over his command of local languages, Cust would go on to create language field that he hoped could correspond to ownership and tenure of tenants and owners of land. Such cluttered visions, Irvine says, are responsible for creating a ‘...language map that erases multilingualism, constructs linguistic differences as absolute and pins mobile populations down to dubious “homelands”, which are identified with a single standard variety (where) the map not only places languages on territory; it also treats language as if it *were* territory” (Irvine 2011: 38). Irvine could well be talking to researchers attempting to untangle ethnicity and territoriality in present-day Northeast India. In its current form, the essay seems somewhat trapped in the two-dimensional 19th century context and unable to express the fluidity of migration and mobility.

While on the subject, it might be useful to avoid a very dated historical description of migration by imagining that one were to present this text among communities being written about. For instance, Adivasi activists are exhausted by the constant reference to their origins in Chotta Nagpur whenever they read academic articles about Assam. They rightly ask why this particular narrative of origin is not applied to caste-Hindu Assamese, or to the Ahoms. Some caste-Hindu Assamese claim to have come from places like Kanauj, while the Ahoms claim that they came from Southern China/Thailand. Yet their origins are hardly ever brought into question. This is a fair point and could be considered when the authors are revising their paper. A radical way out might be to relegate the migration story (especially the part that mines through old secondary literature) to a footnote and get straight to the problem of modern Assam.

While doing so, the authors might benefit from a closer reading of new historical material on the region. As it stands, the first section of the essay seems to suggest that the two valleys – Barak and Brahmaputra – have a history of industrialisation (and documentation) and are therefore capable of drawing the researcher’s attention. Historians such as Jayeeta Sharma, Andrew May, David Zou, Sanghamitra Mishra and Joy Pachuau have produced very engaged accounts of identity formation and population flows in the hills of the region during colonial times and an engagement with their work would enrich this essay immensely.

2. *Migrant: Who?* This is an extremely important section and one suggestion would be to begin the essay with this section. In particular, these few lines ought to be pushed to the front of the essay, because they explain the issue very well:

“Violence employed by the state to govern peace in bordering districts is thus legitimized and is as natural as the borders themselves. This is an extension of what Ranabir Samaddar argues that, violence and its manifestations of suppressing population flow is a combination of the legal, para legal and illegal, legitimized from the colonial period in the Northeast and existing till today.” (Page 6).

To begin the essay along these lines (with a few changes in tense and so on) would actually help keep the remaining sections in line with the critical ideas that are being expounded in the middle of the essay.

The creative use of quantitative data (NSSO etc.) is a good strategy but the authors might want to explain some of the statistically insignificant, but symbolically profound data that emerges from the data set. This is particularly true in the case of the data that has come from the hill states of the region.

3. The authors mentioned that they had collected data from Dimapur, Guwahati and Dawki. Yet there is little reflection of that data in the essay. One believes that adding the ethnographic element that describes the intersections of the infrastructure and logistics with the thematic areas identified in the essay would greatly improve the analytical part of the essay.