

# INSURGENCY IN INDIA'S NORTHEAST: Identity Formation, Postcolonial Nation/State-Building, and Secessionist Resistance | By Jugdep S. Chima and Pahi Saikia

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*Insurgency in India's Northeast: Identity Formation, Postcolonial Nation/State Building, and Secessionist Resistance*, by political scientists Jugdep S. Chima and Pahi Saikia, offers an important intervention into the expanding scholarship on Northeast India. The book can be read alongside recent ethnographic works such as Roluah Puia's *Nationalism in the Vernacular: State, Tribes, and Politics of Peace in Northeast India* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) which challenges top-down approaches to studying conflicts in the region by emphasizing the agency of the people and the plurality of contestations that define such conflicts. However, Chima and Saikia's book diverges in its analytical focus, offering a much-needed theoretical framework for understanding the intersection of insurgency,

secessionism, and postcolonial nation-building, and exploring how the Indian state strategically integrates evolving sub-national identities.

The Northeast continues to be a focal point for inter-ethnic conflicts, federal tensions, and increasing demands for autonomy, despite sustained efforts by the Indian state to integrate the region. Persistent resistance to the state's hegemonic influence reflects deeper struggles over identity, governance, and territorial claims. These challenges are further intensified by the region's strategic geopolitical importance and the historical and kinship ties that cross national boundaries. Together, these factors add layers of complexity to resistance movements and the broader project of postcolonial nation-state building.

The book is structured into seven chapters, with the first chapter introducing the central arguments and conceptual foundations, positioning the study within broader literature on secessionism in Northeast India and emphasizing the need for a comprehensive framework to understand conflicts in the region. The authors analyze the Indian Union's strategy of integrating sub-national and ethnic identities through a dual approach: balancing democratic "accommodation" with "hegemonic and violent control" to construct an Indian nationality (2). This approach is essential for understanding the region's "sovereignty conflicts," shaped by historical, economic, political, and social processes that influence ethnic and subnational identities in contemporary India (5).

Chapter 2 builds an analytical framework to examine the relationship between nation- and state-building and insurgency in Northeast India. Drawing on literature concerning ethnic identity, boundary construction, and nation-state formation, the authors develop a three-part framework for examining insurgencies (11–23). This framework emphasizes the dynamic processes of identity formation that drive political mobilization; the boundary construction that extends beyond political borders to encompass social, cultural, and ethnic dimensions; and the layered processes of nation- and state-building spanning precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. In postcolonial India, integration is pursued through a dual strategy of collaborative adjustment and coercive control, highlighting the region's complex struggles for recognition and self-determination.

The chapter sets up the book's theoretical framework, focusing on how ethnic groups and sub-nationalities shape their identities within and against the nation-state building process. Using a historical approach, this study seeks to offer a broad perspective on the evolving relationship between nation-state formation and resistance in Northeast India.

Chapters 3 to 6 explore four major secessionist movements that have shaped the political landscape of Northeast India, focusing on the Mizos, Nagas, Meiteis, and ethnic Assamese. The authors operationalize the theoretical framework introduced in chapter 2 to argue that the ethnic identities of these groups have always been fluid, contested, and shaped by historical processes. They assert that the consolidation of these identities was largely influenced by colonial boundary-making, administrative categorization, and religious

transformations—Christianization for the Mizos and Nagas, and Hinduization for the Meiteis and ethnic Assamese. For instance, various Naga tribes, who originally spoke different dialects, were consolidated under the larger Naga identity through a combination of colonial categorization, boundary construction, religious conversion, and the spread of the English language. However, this identity formation was not merely a product of statist directives. The agency of these groups was instrumental in shaping their identities in relation to both the colonial and postcolonial state, evidenced by peaceful initiatives through organizations like the Naga Club (NC) and more forceful resistance by groups like the Mizo National Front (MNF). In response, the postcolonial Indian state employed a mix of democratic strategies, such as peace accords and asymmetrical federalism, along with coercive actions like counter-insurgency operations, to integrate the region into the Indian nation-state.

Two central themes in these chapters, though not fully explored by the authors, are the role of memory and the evolving nature of the Indian state. Memory is instrumental in shaping identity and autonomy claims, as insurgencies, counter-insurgencies, and nation-building efforts are selectively remembered or erased to support dominant national narratives, reinforcing state legitimacy while sidelining regional struggles. The analysis would have been further enriched by a deeper engagement with the changing nature of the Indian state and its policies, particularly under the current Hindu nationalist regime. The region's unique cultural and religious identity makes it a contested space, with Hindu nationalism adding complexity to its political landscape. This ongoing tension between national integration and regional autonomy continues to shape struggles over identity and resistance in the Northeast, keeping the region's future uncertain.

The book makes a significant contribution to the fields of Northeast India studies, borderland studies, and the broader scholarship on insurgencies and postcolonial nation-state formation in the South Asian region. Through a “macro-historical” analysis of identity formation and secessionist movements, the authors offer valuable insights into these complex dynamics (128). While the book would have benefitted from engagement with recent ethnographic studies in the region that underscore the socio-political agency of local communities, it remains a critical and timely intervention. The book provides a robust theoretical understanding of the region and its ongoing struggles.

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