

Social Change and Development

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Book Review**The ‘Host’ and the ‘Other’:
Narratives of Migration and
Identity-Politics in Assam****Uddipan Dutta ***

Nandana Dutta (2012) *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity*, Delhi, Sage Publications. 269 pages

The book *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* is a fascinating detour around the issue of migration, Assam Movement and the prevailing culture of violence in Assam and marks a departure from the usual discourses around issues. It is refreshing and captivating because of its effort of looking at the movement as it was – the events that constituted it – the everydayness of the movement. It intertwines the personal and the social in a rather dense narrative that oscillates at will both in time and space. The author locates the contemporary history of Assam plotting it in three decades starting from the beginning of the Assam Movement by addressing three concerns – the migration to Assam during the colonial period, the resulting hybridity and the identity discourse. In her dense and intense narrative, the author is in a conversation with the reader as well as to herself to comprehend the deeply entrenched and embedded violence still extant in the contemporary society of Assam. She tries understanding identity narratives that construct the ‘other’ in the migrant communities very often to make grounds for the perpetration of violence. What however makes the book most endearing is the author’s continuous struggle with the forms of disciplines and the disciplinary boundaries, the locational advantage and disadvantage of knowledge production and the use of theories that travel from elsewhere.

The book has been arranged into five chapters with the opening chapter ‘Conditions of Knowledge’ introducing the key theoretical concepts as

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well as the author's personal quest to understand her own journey vis-à-vis identity discourse in the state. She discusses different disciplinary practices and the ways they constitute knowledge. The discussion is necessitated by her engagement with her own discipline that is Literary Studies or English Studies precisely, which according to her own admission is 'steeped in theory' and its primary enterprise is to interpret and evaluate discursivity. So, she goes on to explain how she has to negotiate between her disciplinary practices with her object of study that is Assam Movement, the often acknowledged watershed in the post-colonial history of Assam. In essence location, migration and hybridity are three main tropes that have been used by the author to understand her object of study.

The concept of hybridity with its roots in the life sciences has been used extensively by post-colonial scholars to mean transcultural forms in the contact zones produced by colonialism. The idea of hybridity is also observable in the concepts like multiculturalism or racial mixing though the element of ambivalence is quite strong in its post-colonial use. The author has used the term in the sense of 'keeping one's roots and yet having an eye to the world'. The various theories of migration and different discipline's approach to it have been discussed by the author though she locates her study on the host society, the way it receives migration – with greet, indifference, violence or brutality. The book is about the socio-psychological fallout of migration on the host community of Assam and the way it had reacted to migration on the face of its perceived threat to identity. It is with this objective, the author approaches Assam Movement and the embedded violence in this supposedly non-violent Gandhian movement.

The author's take on Assam Movement and her continuous engagement with its ingrained violence is the essence of the book. Though violence during Assam Movement has been discussed at length by many commentators, their discussions have remained mostly confined to the pre-poll violence of 1983. The well-entrenched violence within the programmes of the movement ever since its flare up has seldom made its way into the discourse of the movement which often is caught up in a wrangling over the number of migrants after the nation-state of India was born. The author has not only brought up the issue of physical violence but also incorporates the invisible forms of violence like corruption in

public offices or insistence on a particular dress-code for women within its parameters.

The methodology that she uses to understand the historic movement is also a diversion from the normal academic practices. She starts talking to her colleagues in the university and to the people of her neighbourhood. Some shared their experiences. Some did not. Interspersed with her own intense memories these personal narratives of the informants form a dense account of the movement – an account that cannot be understood from the usual movement-documents like memoranda submitted by the students' body spearheading the movement, leaflets distributed by it or the government reports describing the incidents. She also analyses the literary texts produced during this phase to strengthen her argument of the inherent violence of Assam Movement.

The question of Assamese identity and the perceived threat to it form the basis of the Assam Movement and it would not be an exaggeration to say that it was the culmination of a series of migration of different communities and discourses around it ever since the colonial period. The author has looked at the issue through the analysis of different narratives, models and theories of migration. She observes that in most of the cases the focus is mainly the migrant communities. But her quest for understanding Assamese identity warrants an insight of the effect of migration on the host society. For that she analyses the discourses on migration in Assam which include the historical perspective that try periodising the migration, the attempts at defining Assamese community based on a multicultural model, the narrative of neglect by the central government and lastly the accusation of the linguistic and ethnic minorities supposedly within the fold of Assamese community of not getting equal treatment. The author concludes her narrative by a hint of change in the identity discourse in Assam and as a proof looks at the activities of two major organisations – All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and Asam Sahitya Sabha. AASU's support of a singer from the Barak Valley in a national singing competition aired in a private television channel and the discourse that got produced during the incident has been analysed to give credence to the shift that she alludes. The powerful writing of Kanaksen Deka, the president of Asam Sahitya Sabha condemning the killing of Bihari immigrants by ULFA in 2007 has been invoked by the author to look at this shift. She ends her narrative by

locating the existence of multiple and contradictory narratives of collective self making that define redefine Assamese identity. The author on her part suggests the importance of painstaking uncovering of the colonial modernity in Assam and its relationship with Bengal Renaissance which 'is so often perceived to have subsumed Assamese attempts at a similar awakening.'

The book however leaves the reader with questions both epistemological and methodological. The narrative perspective that the author adopts conforming to her disciplinary training though gives a fresh perspective to the understanding of identity politics in the region and the embedded violence within it, also becomes counter-productive when it adopts normative discourses as general statements in the course of its narrative. For example, her continuous assertion in the book that illegal migration into Assam has continued unabated over the last thirty years is a hugely debatable issue among the demographers. The increase of population as shown in the last two censuses may not necessarily be due to unabated large scale migration. There are myriad of reasons attributed to high birth rate among the migrant population like lack of education or early marriage. Their sudden 'visibility' in urban areas can also been linked to massive river-bank erosion. The disciplinary confinement on the part of the author here helps reinforcing the discourse of 'unabated migration'. The other major problem that one encounters is the representation of 'host' and 'migrant' as two distinct categories in the context of ethnic violence in Assam. But the distinction often blurs, shifts and even gets reversed in the local contexts. For example in the 1983 violence in Gohpur, the Bodo-speakers were made the migrant other vis-à-vis the Assamese speaking host. In the same way, during the long period of Bodo Movement and ensuing violence, the Assamese-speakers were projected as the migrant other in the Bodo dominated area as opposed to the host Bodo-speakers. So, the concept of the host and the migrant is quite contextual particularly in a situation of violence. The book is quite provocative as it probes the processes of making of a collective self in a continuous interaction with the writer, the reader and the other participants and undoubtedly, it would always remain a major reference text for the researchers willing to work in the region.

Journal

The journal Social Change and Development intends to provide an academic platform to scholars belonging to the northeastern region of India as well as outside to project issues focused particularly on the region, express their views and analyse the issues putting them in proper perspective, both historically and as guidelines for the future. However, issues cutting across the region's border are also welcome.

The unique diversity of the region in terms of ethnicity, culture, language and social institutions makes the region a challenging area of study for the researchers. Although, there has been a prolific growth of literature on the region, it is still lacking discussions with academic rigour. It is therefore, strongly felt that the social scientists would take up issues for academic debate and the journal acts as a platform for the exercise. This is expected to create a better understanding amongst the people of the region and the rest of the country. The geographical seclusion of the region from the rest of the country is sought to be broken through vibrant academic interactions.

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Journal Article

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Article from Edited Volume

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