

Book Review

Dilip Gogoi, Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions, Routledge, 2020.

Reviewed by Chinggelniang

Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions by Dilip Gogoi, is an engaging book that explores topics of borderland, sub-state, territories, and geopolitics. The conceptual framework of the research examines state behavior and interstate interactions while drawing largely on theories of international relations. In addition to charting the idea of Northeast India's sub-state territory, it delves into the region's complex political and socioeconomic challenges. The first chapter discusses the notion of sub-state and its exclusion from the dominant theories of international relations. Gogoi discusses how he attempts to investigate the same through an intensive study on Northeast India, the region that is often viewed as a geopolitically sensitive and distinctive region of India (p 1). The rationale behind selecting the sub-state region of Northeast India for this study is linked to the post-colonial state-making process, which saw the introduction of a new notion of border and sovereignty (p 4). As a result, it prompted the construction of additional barriers, further dividing several ethnic groups who were on the "margins" of the process. It also led to the introduction of multiple political and socio economic issues in the region.

The following chapter presents a conceptual overview of the evolution of a frontier into a border and the concept of borderland. He refers to this as the "territorialization of the modern state system," which has been shaped as a result of the replacement of both the settlement frontiers and political frontiers borders with international borders. Territoriality is an important component of a sovereign state (p 18) since it is also inherently tied to boundary disputes. Gogoi asserts that while great efforts have been made to rationalize border conflicts, there are still a number of borders in the globe that remain contested regions. This not only tests the state's legitimacy in claiming

Chinggelniang is Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, New Delhi. [Email: huz228257@iitd.ac.in]

territory but also elevates territorial border disputes. In the same manner, Northeast India is a territorially trapped region subjected to geopolitical rivalry among the neighboring states (p 27).

Under the lens of realist and liberal perspectives of international relations theory, Chapter 3 extends the study of the dynamics of border and border conflict presented in the previous chapters. According to the liberal viewpoint, international borders have increasingly reoriented towards more "open systems" that enable the free movement of people, products, and services across borders. It has thus resulted in the state's territorial controls being dysfunctional. Contrarily, realists maintain that despite changes, boundaries are still important from the perspective of security rhetoric and hence cannot be undermined (p 41). Nonetheless, he argues that borders significantly remain an important aspect of geopolitics among the proximate states. Gogoi, in the next chapter, moves away from the theoretical framework and introduces the readers to the Northeast India region by providing a thorough description of the "formation of Northeast India" from a historical viewpoint. This region came into being as a result of colonial administrative intervention and frontier strategy. In fact, the British were substantially to blame for the hills' absence from the constitutional reform process. Independent India inherited the same system without taking the diversity of the area into account. The marginalization of the area was brought on not only by the state reorganization of India, but also by the growing number of separatist groups like the Nagas, Manipuri, Assamese, and Bodos, to name a few. The colonial history of administration in the region, i.e the Inner Line is equally responsible for the existence of multiple paradoxes at present within the region (p 74).

In Chapter 5, the focus is shifted on the geopolitical causes emerging from China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh to show the complex interaction between geopolitical factors and the increasing political and security challenges with regard to Northeast India. He explains how Northeast India is strategically situated along an international border that is prone to conflict and war by placing it within the larger geopolitical discourse. Inevitably, it exacerbated regional instability and social and military confrontations along the Sino-Indian, Indo-Bangla, Indo-Bhutan, Indo-Nepal, and other border regions. The author also stressed the need of enacting a comprehensive strategy that would promote trans-border collaboration between the borders of India.

The following chapter analyzes the 'ambitious' Look East Policy, which aims for a fresh start in trans-border cooperation through Northeast India. The liberalization that followed the fall of Soviet Russia and Cold War politics led to the emergence of the Look East policy. As a result, trade across international borders especially the East and Southeast Asia regions became essential for India's economic development. The policy thus restored historical connectivity through the promotion of trade and economic activities across borders. India's Look East policy, which was created under neoliberal influences, has substantially increased economic opportunities for Northeast India because it serves as a gateway to Southeast Asian nations. Interestingly, despite the significant changes brought about through the Look east policy, Gogoi discerns the delimits of the policy and its current challenges. Infact, it has had little positive impact and change in the economic activities of the Northeast concerning Southeast

Asia. Due to "poor connectivity" between the northeastern states, it has failed to improve the region's current situation on the ground, positioning the area as a geographical trap. Furthermore, the region continues to struggle with lack of infrastructure, standardized border trade mechanisms, political inaction, the China factor, a lack of civil society participation, lack of sustained development strategies, and internal conflicts despite the effort to connect with East and Southeast Asian neighboring countries.

In response to the limitations of the policy, Gogoi proposes integrating the North-east economy and offers specific activities as a step towards establishing capacity for increased cross-border economic interactions (p 152). He acknowledges the capacity of Northeast India to contribute to local growth and to connect with the larger Asian sub-region. Using a constructivist perspective within the realm of international relations, he suggests that the Indian government must consider enacting policies for Northeast India based on the principles of region-state making in order to improve economic cooperation with neighbors (p 160). Therefore, in order to put the 'region-state' paradigm into action, the Indian state must employ approaches that can be addressed at the regional, national, and international levels.

To put it briefly, the book offers a comprehensive understanding of the transnational interactions between Northeast India and its bordering nations. More specifically, it challenges the complex border politics and calls for the need to reassess the existing policies.

Gogoi does an excellent job of laying the groundwork for a new "region-state" paradigm, emerging from various perspectives within the theoretical frameworks of international relations. While there is no denying that a number of points he made across the chapters appear to be repetitive, the book under review would make a significant addition to scholarships in international relations, foreign policy, regional development, and north-east India studies.