

**Jelle J.P. Wouters (Ed.). *Vernacular Politics in Northeast India: Democracy, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity*. Oxford University Press, India, 2022**

Reviewed by Tanaya Hazarika

*Vernacular Politics in Northeast India: Democracy, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity*, edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters, is a compilation of essays that attempts to comprehensively explore the complex political landscape of the Northeast region of India. It is an insightful analysis of the complex interplay between politics, democracy, ethnicity, and indigeneity by compiling research from a diverse group of scholars who possess an intimate affinity to the region, either scholastically or by being native to the region. Hence, it provides an understanding of the intricate web of politics in Northeast India.

The book opens with a detailed introduction by Jelle J.P. Wouters, which begins to introduce the multifaceted political, social and historical environment in Northeast India. This sets the stage for subsequent chapters that explore the vernacular politics of the region in depth from a variety of perspectives. The introduction provides a historical overview that highlights the colonial legacy, partition and the integration of the region with an independent India. These historical developments continue to shape the dynamic political experience of the region to this day. It then begins to explain the concept of vernacular politics and its importance in the region by putting emphasis on the role of local identities and agents.

The book also claims to move beyond the common narrative of portraying Northeast India as an insurgent stricken region, however, it is observed that in many instances the book falls short to do justice to its initial claim. One of the examples for this could be found in the Introduction under the heading 'Democracy and Elections in Northeast India' (Wouters, 2022, p. 37). The author highlights the common narratives of insurgency, counterinsurgency, protests and resistance.

Moving forward, the book discusses how democratic processes adapt and entangle in the existing historical, political, social, and cultural dimensions and get territorialized, ultimately producing a vernacularized version of democracy. In doing so, the book opens up some critical junctures by raising an important question: whether

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vernacularized democracy, contributes to an inclusive form of democracy that is adapted, experienced and localized as observed in the context of Northeast. These localized realities bring forth the diverse interaction of both the subaltern and the elites of varied tribal, ethnic, indigenous population with each other and with the state throughout history. Hence, with the help of ethnographies and interviews the book critically assesses the functions of democracy and examines the advantages and disadvantages of the election system as well as its effects on the marginalized groups. It examines the conflict between regional ambitions for autonomy and self-governance and the centralizing powers of the Indian state. The remarkable influence of community authorities and local sovereignties portrayed in the book also brings to focus the exceptional resilience of pre-existing cultural values.

The chapter by Sean M. Dowdy brings forth the historically persistent idea of a public and public meeting, locally known as a 'raiz' and 'raiz mel' in this region. By doing so, it also tries to highlight the counter sovereign nature of such assemblies. Hence, a glimpse of the vernacularized form of democracy can be observed in this chapter by highlighting the public, its existing loyalties and customary methods of political action. Carrying forward the idea of the public and the rule of many since pre-colonial times in Tripura, the next chapter examines how contemporary democratic practices have come up as a result of an amalgamation of modern developments with complex ancestral traditions of polyocracy and its continuity. Similarly, Joy Pachuau explains the importance experienced by non-political Mizo associations to uphold Mizo ethnic interests as opposed to relying on political parties. Non-political associations like various ethnic organizations and NGOs are the ones that engage in the political discourse of protecting their interests, keeping ethnic outsiders at bay and maintaining ethnic purity.

It is observed that most of the chapters provide evidences for practices that do not necessarily adhere to traditional democratic views, or what the author calls 'electoral practices in the region that upset the normative democratic theory but reveal themselves as a remapping of traditional political theory and practice' (Wouters, 2022, p. 43). There is an extensive focus on only one aspect of democratic and electoral practices in the region. A detailed analysis of the practices in line with traditional democracy that do exist in the region would have provided a more complete and clearer picture of the Northeast region's democratic electoral practices and ethnic and political mobilizations which remain deeply unaddressed in the chapters.

Furthermore, the book attempts to trace the roots of ethnopolitics in the region and its ever-present need of local identities to adhere to ethnicity. The author mentions that this fetishization with ethnicity is a recent phenomenon that emerged as a response to the requirement of proving one's ethnicity in order to be eligible for government benefits and affirmative actions that were conferred by the Indian state to safeguard tribal identities and territories. However, over the years, this growing desire for ethnic distinction has often resulted in competition amongst communities leading to highly fragmented identities, discrimination and an increase in conflict amongst neighboring communities which the edited book fails to address.

The chapter written by Thongkholal Haokip is an exception that describes the

dominance and ethnic majoritarianism of the Meitei community and how it can threaten the existence of other communities such as the Kuki and Naga. The chapter explains the fragile working of democracy over the complex and unequal ethnic power plays. The last sets of chapters also explore the political implications of binaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belongingness and otherness, and insider vs outsider debates in Northeast India. The chapter authored by Khamrang and Wouters explain how Christianity plays an important role in forming the Naga identity.

The chapter written by Kaustav Deka helps generate awareness around the making of citizenship in Assam. He places two significant moments, National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) that is unfolding in the intersections of political, social and legal aspects in Assam. His ethnographic fieldwork draws extensively from existing literature to understand the concept of ethnicity as a powerful ideological response that has been generated within the power structures of the state.

A notable strength of the book is the empirically rich research done by the contributors. The book's interdisciplinary approach helps integrate ideas from diverse academic fields to simplify the complexities of vernacular politics in the region. Although the book covers a wide range of subjects, it would have been beneficial for the readers if the chapters in the book were organized more systematically and arranged thematically.