

**Book Review**

**Developmentalism as Strategy: Interrogating Post-colonial Narratives on India's North East, Rakhee Bhattacharya (Ed.), Sage Publications, 2019.**

Reviewed by Yenshembam Chetan Singh

The book is an anthology which consists of articles written by different authors which are critical examinations of the development modules undertaken in India's north-eastern periphery. It is a strategical collection of twelve chapters which are comprehensive field work studies carved out in a form to depict the socio-economic conditions of the northeast India and how developmentalism would improve the conditions in the post-colonial era. The book attempts to reconstruct the narrative that the north-east India have been reduced to periphery and neglected in the national development strategy. With contestations between the national and local elites over the control of the region, it has become highly vulnerable to different market forces in the course of globalization process. Its resources, development and marketability has become a bone of contention among various global, national and local players. While keeping these considerations, the book critically examines the post-colonial developmental trajectory of the Indian State in the region. Besides the socio-economic conditions of the region, its unique historical geography has led to systematic marginalization and underdevelopment. India's economic nationalism within the North East has been largely acted upon the context of resource appropriation and national security, and producing new arrangements of knowledge, power and practices. Within this context, this book attempts to understand the exceptions to India's dominant development policies in the region by adopting a methodological approach of interdisciplinarity.

The book further analyses the changing post-colonial dynamics of the political economy in the region and examines the subsequent transformation of the narrative of the North East from geographic marginalisation to a Trans-Asian Gateway. It also delves into alternatives to the existing mainstream development approach by raising debates in India's North East. The book encompasses extensive fieldwork to define

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the link between development and security, which is critical to India's Northeast, within the context of the cross-border geo-political space it shares with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. It also looks for or a long-term sustainable solution to the limitations of the existing developmental policies. It also addresses various serious issues that include illegal migration, insurgency, displacement, environmental degradation etc. It proposes forging economic initiatives or collaborations and addressing connectivity problems in the region.

Capitalist development tend to concentrate at the centre and regions that are more advanced. Similarly, the capitalist mode of development of the nation led to marginalisation of the periphery. This unevenness of development is not just due to concentration of development at the metropolitan centres but rather at the expense of the underdeveloped periphery. Above supplying the primary products for industrialisation, the periphery is the market for readymade goods becoming the source to finance capital accumulation at the centre. This may have resulted in the marginalisation of the north-eastern region as the colonial development concentrated in central India. However, the book provides an in depth analysis of how the spatial references of the centre and periphery are abstract and does not correspond to the actual geographical conditions. Geographical positions are demarcated in terms of climate, soil, natural resources and topographical features. In those terms, the peripheries are far richer than the centres. The book argues that the historical, colonial socio-economic factors are the main reasons for capitalist development in the centre and the marginalisation of the periphery. It also argues that such backwardness and underdevelopment of the periphery were required to sustain the development at the centre because the resources came from the periphery. Such exploitation of the periphery has persisted for three centuries and therefore breaking out of it has become difficult. The exploitation has resulted in retarded social formations, destruction of environment, plunder of resources and stunted growth of local accumulation. This has reduced the north-eastern region to a periphery with stunted capitalist development despite being rich in natural resources, cultural heritage which is well-evolved, and customary economic practices. Such peripheral formation materialises within the presence of its own stunted forms of capitalist development within the region itself. The chapters in the book bring out such perspectives of the north-eastern region.

The book also carves out how, in the post-colonial era, the region is administratively compartmentalised into centre-periphery complex at the outset of capital accumulation which results in economic backwardness of the region. The chapters cover comprehensively the cultural amalgamation of the economy of the region being compromised by the seemingly modern market friendly policies, displacement, deprivation and alienation of the region. They also cover the alternatives and development strategies which are more inclusive and equitable. The chapters noted the efforts resorted to by the government to integrate the region into mainstream under neo-liberal paradigm by opening the cross border gateways supported by corporate capital. They critically examined how, in this process, the north-east has been internationalised and became a rhetorical gateway rather than being addressed as a periphery. Such rhetorical internationalisation , in no way, serves its purpose

while the development in terms of its infrastructural facilities still remains marginalised. Since the issues are complex, it is hard to make a blueprint for solutions but the book raises important debates encompassing different directions and urges all the concerned parties to allow a trajectory of development which is sustainable and economically secure for the region.

The book begins with chapters on the prevailing narrative of the uniqueness of the traditional economy of the region and transcends through the market structure, policies, labour, cross-border market expansion to environmental concerns, displacement, financial overflow in the region due to the neo-liberal development strategies in the region. In Chapter 1, the author, Nongbri provides a detailed analysis of the self-sufficient cultural economy of the various communities of the region. The chapter demystifies the traditional economy of the region by providing the indigenous knowledge and practices of resource sharing engrained in the customary laws for a sustainable economy. State intervention, in the name of development, has brought socio-economic transformations which maligned the existing livelihood practices as primitive and uncivilized and thus created the isolation of the region. The region which was once self sufficient is consequently turned into a narrative of underdevelopment rooted in colonialism in the post-colonial era. Such narrative completely ignored the underlying principles of self-reliance in the traditional economy. This developmental strategy consciously marginalised the indigenous knowledge of the communities on sustainable economy (p-54-61). His depiction of the traditional economy provides a cultural critique of the policies of the developmental state. In Chapter 2, Samir Das critically examines the market regimes of the State in the region and their sustainability. State mediation has unleashed rampant market development to promote surplus value and integrate with global actors. He laid down the transformation of a market society where neo-liberal policies are introduced to an ethnically configured market through indigenous practices contesting state policies and finally to a moral economy defending customary laws and indigenous practices (p-72-84). This formulation gives fresh perspectives on theorising transformations in the north-east and enunciating alternatives. The next three chapters depict the consequences and implications of such transformations on the lives of the people. In Chapter 3, Walter Fernandes laid down a body of complex technology of development carried out since 1947 such as laws, Acts, State planning, regulations, policies and other institutional practices. This has helped in creating ideas on State developmentalism while considering the deprivation and displacement of the people in the North-east. He critically examine the relationship between land alienation and development paradigm by analysing the colonial Land Acquisition Act, 1894. He also articulates how State developmental projects such as dams, transport infrastructure, water resources, defence, industries etc. have displaced a large a number of people. He also provided an empirical analysis on resource accumulation, development projects and their consequences on the inhabiting people in the vicinity. These projects have resulted in new subjects of displaced and impoverished people. The chapter raises concerns on this new paradox created as a result of the state developmentalism and argues for traditional rights on the resources (p-98-110). He proposes an alternative of inclusive development by adopting Gandhian philosophy

on equitable society. In Chapter 4, Deepak Mishra brings out another dimension of the paradox created by state developmentalism which is of people's identity and migration. This is one of the most contentious issues in the north-east as it is reflected in the series of conflicts and contestations against the state in the postcolonial period. The chapter brings out debates on the connection between state developmentalism, labour market and crisis of identity and citizenship within an approach of ethnicized development strategy. The chapter also brings out the irregularities in demand and supply of the labour market in North east considering trans-border migration and state mediation and governance on such matter. The neo liberal strategy further resulted in migration of educated youth and consequently their insecurity and othering in their places of migration (p-122-141). In this complex capitalist development and state induced migration, the labour class are most victimised and thus the chapter argues for ensuring basic economic rights of migrant citizens. In Chapter 5, Archana Sharma continues with the discussion on labour market with emphasis on women labour. The benefits of state development have not reached majority of women, particularly in informal sector in peripheral region like the North east. She discusses the gap and the vulnerability of the indigenous women in the emerging labour market and workforce. She argued that the traditional asymmetric work pattern of women in the region has visibly changed to modern economic and financially more stable occupations (p-152-164). Therefore, the labour policy does not need to provide an exception for women labour. She suggests for a more symmetrical labour policy in terms of skill development, work participation, wage rate so as to break the othering of women in labour market.

In the next part comprising of four chapters, the book investigates more on the neo liberal approach of the State through market economy which results in forceful transformation. They deal with the emerging contemporary narrative of the State development and the new concept of regional development, regionalism by re-imagining the north east in such State action. In Chapter 6, Rakhee Bhattacharya critically engages the spatial significance of the north east in the prevailing State narrative and transformation within the conceptual framework of economic geography and market expansion at international level. She gives a critical understanding of internationalization of the periphery done with the aim of economic integration with south east Asian nations. She proposes an endogenous economic system at trans regional level so that every participant can share rights more equally. Such connected development will make the emerging transformation relevant with the communities from the grass root level (p-175-185). This endogenous approach serves the concern for alternative for the neo liberal developmental regime largely motivated by market integration and imagination of the north east as a trans-national gateway. In Chapter 7, Anita Sengupta continues with the politics of the transformation in the corridors at the outset of the developing transport corridor network. She critically engages the relationship between geographical connectivity and development in a historical approach. She highlights the geographical compulsion of connectivity with the South east Asian nations in the process of globalisation and the north east becoming the centre of the transport routes. She engages with the debates of the corridor politics being imagined as the solution for the underdeveloped and the political conflicts in

the region and the strategical vision of the State for political, economic and social acceptance of such connectivity brought into the region (p-201-207). She further adds the importance of international organizations in cross border dynamics facilitating governance and producing infrastructural necessities. In Chapter 8, Gurudas explore the potential of the new approach in development and how can it be helpful in reshaping north east. He undergoes objective study of underdevelopment in peripheral locations. Lack of connectivity and high transportation cost has resulted in stunted economic growth. He analysed in detail the potential of opening of north east economy with particularly three nations- Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. He also provides justifications of the new approach of regionalism while opening gateway for trade and commerce which could weaken regional ethnic militancy (p-223-226). In Chapter 9, Thosngkholal Haokip provides an alternative in understanding trade and development by rethinking the debated Act East Policy. He argued that the north east has become a frontier region for various forces, including the market and the state, and is being experimented with postcolonial initiatives, development grants and political undertakings to reduce the tension and alienation which was created in the region. He also argued that the managerial bureaucracy led developmental policies in the region produced unintended consequences like economic stagnation with the nexus of corruption. The chapter also highlights the change of political strategy from cultural diplomacy to cultural economy by renaming the 'Look East' to 'Act East' in 2014 (p-242-246). He proposes a long term policy for sustainable development by highlighting the importance of local partnership in trade and giving comparative advantages to the local actors while bringing all elements of resistance to a settlement.

The last part consisting of three chapters engages with contestation against the economic coercion carried out by the state and explores people's environmental rights in the development discourses. In Chapter 10, Felix Padel elaborates the exposition of development strategy against construction of dams and extraction projects in the region. He brings out the long term impacts of such developmental projects on the communities and ecosystem of the region while benefitting the business elites. He also analyses the possibilities of natural disasters and loss of livelihoods caused due to the development projects. So such projects could end the sophisticated ways of economic practices of the indigenous communities. Such indigenous practices are time tested, sustainable and community based with ecological stability. He raises alarms of the political, social, economic and environmental impacts of such projects which are antithetical to the indigenous ways of life protecting the environment (p-267-272). Construction of dams is poor indicator of development and thus he attempts to give an alternative ensuring food, water, security, basic human rights and a sustainable healthy ecosystem. In Chapter 11, Akhil Dutta made a case study on Kaziranga world heritage site bringing out the debate on developmentalism against peoples' right to entitlement and resource conservation. He provides insights on the conflict between developmentalism and environmentalism by invoking a third dimension of peoples' right to entitlement (p-284-288). From colonial to postcolonial times, Kaziranga was changed from the site of economic plantation to conservation politics to protect one-horned Rhino and then to neoliberal corporatization recently

The corporatization of development and conservation has affected the livelihood of the communities whose tradition, culture and economy are closely connected with to the resources of the Kaziranga. He analyses these conflicts in three aspects- state action, non-state intervention and societal contestation- which are in conflict with each other. He proposes an alternative approach of participatory development paradigm between the state and the community which can balance ecological concerns of the state and the livelihood of the communities. In Chapter 12, Jiten Yumnam brings out the global-local dichotomy with the articulation of the power of international financial institutions in the development discourse of the north east. The aggressive application of the Act East Policy has resulted in the expropriation and extraction of resources wherein the corporatization of transformation in North east, especially in infrastructure and connectivity has increased the economic coercion of the state. He raised genuine concerns of the fate of the local people on the face of the state's attempt to unlock the region by unleashing global capital to extract local resources including hydropower, natural gas and renewable energy sources. Exploration projects undermining the indigenous rights has created conflicts and fear of another marginalisation above the existing one. He argued that the financial infusion on such projects and its environmental impacts may even more complicate the armed conflict in the region. He brings out the apprehension of resentment among the communities of the corporatization process of the exploitation of resources and the infusion of financial capital in the region which remains unaccountable due to nexus and corruption (p-311-320).

The book at the outset begins with the existence of traditional economy during the colonial times and its importance for sustainable development and carefully progresses to the changing dynamics due to the neo liberal development strategy brought into by the state in the postcolonial era. The book critically analyses various aspects of development ranging from land acquisition, labour market, women participation, transportation routes, infrastructural facilities, opening of trade and commerce with neighbouring nations to resource exploitation, environment conservation, displacement, migration and overflow of global capital in the region. The book further proposes alternatives to the development modules undertaken while raising concerns for the rights of the indigenous communities and sustainable development. Overall, the book is enlightening and opens many paradoxes and conflicts between the contemporary development strategy and the people's rights and entitlement. However, the book is little short of discussions on the political conflicts in the region which is the main reason for resistances in the communities against the neoliberal development. It focuses mainly on the developmental dynamics in the region which I feel is not enough as the condition of political scenario in the region directly affects the development strategy to be undertaken. The settlement of political issues will have huge impact on fast and smooth developmental process. Nevertheless, being a book on developmental studies, it extensively covers wide range of issues and will definitely help in governance in the North eastern region. I recommend this book to staunch readers on developmentalism in order to have a critical understanding of the postcolonial development narratives in North east India.