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## Sangh's Nation-Building Project in the North East

By: Richard Kamei

*As the northeast of India grapples with the spread of right-wing propaganda and the politics of Hindutva, 'The Greater India Experiment' offers a rich ethnographic account of the twists and turns taken in the past and the present by the dominant forces tied to the Indian nation-state.*

Arkotong Longkumer's *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast* is a well-reasoned warning on the rise of Hindutva in the northeast of India. Drawing from his PhD work, his continuing engagement with foot soldiers of the Sangh, and his keen observations, the book provides a rich ethnographic account of the twists and turns of the dominant forces tied to the Indian nation-state, in particular Hindutva. In doing so, he engages with the larger project of *Akhand Bharat*, the notional entity that extends over several countries all the way from Afghanistan to southeast Asia.

The scholarship produced in the book comes at a moment when right-wing forces are permeating a region known for resisting the nation state. Longkumer's work is an attempt to illuminate the themes of ethnic politics and of nationalisms rooted in indigeneity. He does this by presenting how they are situated in the current right-wing regime, and how they negotiate with and integrate into "the longstanding questions of land, blood, and belonging" (15). What is noteworthy about this exposition is that he puts the Hindutva accounts in the foreground, enabling readers to hear the reverberations of chimes and chants in the villages of the North East. We have an engaging account of the Sangh and how it has made alliances with indigenous peoples in a region long seen as isolated and unknown.

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Sangh activists are widely synonymous with violence in the areas where they are active. But it is different in the North East, as they are the ones who are at times subjected to violence. Longkumer says that one must stop being dismissive of the Sangh and pay close attention to it, studying its functioning with seriousness. In capturing the spread and intent of the right wing, Longkumer renders the voices of Sangh workers and various other personalities. Their accounts testify to the several narratives that exist, or existed, among right-wing circles and their networks.

By offering the voices with ethnographical insights, Longkumer helps us understand the working of the Sangh, its penetration into the region, its larger project, and its construction of meanings. The outcome of the research here sits in "lotus style" in the book, signalling that it is offering an insight into the moments and events unfolding in the region.

### Indigenous religion and prophecy

The North East is diverse, with multiple voices competing against each other and the nation state. Longkumer underlines the non-existence of connection when he presents the acknowledgement of the Sangh that "ethnic identity in the region is connected with the Mongoloids, the Chinese, Tibetan, or Burmese, but never with mainland India" (55–56). A similar argument is conveyed when he says that caste is absent to a large extent in the North East and divisions are more "tribal" in nature.

The region, with eight states and myriad communities, has a history of Christian missionaries spreading their faith. In the case of Manipur, *Vaishnavism's spread in the early 18th century* marked the modern history of the state. These two events left an impact on the indigenous religions of various communities because Christianity and Vaishnavism came to replace existing beliefs. However, some communities resisted. An instance of this was the Zeliangrong people of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. These groups became a site for the Sangh to propagate their ideology.

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*The Greater India Experiment* discusses in detail the Sangh's strategy of engineering its way into indigenous religions by drawing on two strands – one against Christianity on the grounds of cultural appropriation and denial, and the second of building common ground between indigenous religions and Hinduism. Logkumer sees that this enables the Sangh to claim that “Hindutva is a way of being in the world” (91), thus presenting it as rooted in indigeneity. He contends that these forces undermine the claims in the North East for autonomy and sovereignty won by struggling against nation states and assimilation.

## Gaidinliu and Nehru

Longkumer states that the ease of engaging with his respondents has to do with his background as an academic and his work on Apei Gaidinliu, a figure revered among the Sangh as well as her Zeliangrong people. (I prefer to use the title ‘Apei’, a dignified term for the elderly in my – and Gaidinliu's – Rongmei community, rather than ‘Rani’, the honorific commonly attached to her name.) Gaidinliu, along with her predecessor Jadonang, led a movement against British colonial rule. After 1947, the movement raised the demand for a homeland within India for the Zeliangrong, now split across the states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland.

There is a chapter dedicated to Gaidinliu that sketches her profile, describes the Zeliangrong movement that started in the 1930s and went on to the 1960s, and examines how her legacy is perceived today. The argument is that Gaidinliu's tribal and Naga background, and her image as an upholder of indigenous religion serve to make her a figure that bridges Hindutva and indigenous religions.

Gaidinliu evokes conflicting responses among Nagas. In Nagaland, she is seen as a controversial figure due to her version of Naga nationalism, her stance against Christian missionaries, and the current dispensation's right-wing politics in the region. Despite the varied opinions and perceptions surrounding her, Longkumer notes what her figure and legacy mean to the Zeliangrong people and remarks that it is obscured in the current conversation about her.

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There is a need to examine the role of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, in the Hinduisation built into the legacy of Gaidinliu. Nehru was instrumental in provoking two events in Naga history: first, the militarisation that propelled the rise of Naga nationalism after the 1950s, and, second, the bestowal of the ‘Rani’ title on Gaidinliu. The latter must be seen in light of the integration of the Heraka religion (founded by Gaidinliu and Jadonang) into the Hindu fold. Connecting these aspects, Nehru was complicit in laying the ground for the Sangh to make its presence felt in the legacy of Gaidinliu. After 1966, she became an ally of the Sangh, as explained by Longkumer.

It is important to take into account William Gould's words, cited by Longkumer, that “Hindu nationalism and its symbolisms also pervaded the political language among the Indian National Congress, who wavered between the majoritarian language of being Hindu and their commitment to secular nationalism” (6). Nehru is known as the architect of modern India, but to the Nagas, his legacy is of making possible cultural imperialism and militarisation rooted in assimilation – all in the name of nation-building.

## Hinduisation

The episode of Gaidinliu is one of the various routes through which the Sangh is building the narrative of oneness and propagating the idea of a nation-building process founded on assimilation. The Sangh forces are engineering their larger project by constructing the cultural map of India in terms of *Akhand Bharat*, Greater India, and “One India, Great India”. The propagation as such extends to bringing alive the search for the universality of Hindutva.

Longkumer adds that most of the Sangh's workers are aware of the turbulent history of the North East region and its diversity, yet they insist on this heterogeneous combination to realise a oneness as Bharat. Benevolence is prevalent in the activities of the Sangh, which acts like an over-caring parent towards the people of the region, depriving them of their agencies and voices. Longkumer lays out how they go about their activities in the region through social service and alliances with indigenous religions.

Through these activities, they effectively maintain their agenda of bringing the North East under the fold of Hindutva. They go about this by keeping alive the cultural appropriation and assimilation process. Knowing the cultures and interests of the people, they design innovative ways to capture attention. One such example is how stories of Eknath Ranade, an RSS leader, are written in English and illustrated using Japanese anime characters.

## Voices from communities

The BJP now pervades every state in the region. Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh are ruled by it, and governments in the remaining states are in alliance with the party. Longkumer discusses how BJP governments have succeeded in aligning their ideas with ethnic, vernacular politics and indigenous peoples' concerns and aspirations in Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland.

Yet, there are contradictions. Longkumer engages with the pressing issue of the homelands that cut across India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and their relations with multiple nations and ethnicities. He cites Willem van Schendel while presenting the various territorial aspirations in the region: “Adibashistan (which would unite Garo people across the Mymensingh-Garo Hills border), Rajasthan (which would do the same for Rajbongshi people living in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur), Swadhin Asom (an independent Assam), Great Mizoram (united Mizos living in India, Burma and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh), United Bengal, and Greater Nagalim (uniting the Nagas from Myanmar and India)” (232). Given these multiple aspirations, Longkumer ponders how they will speak to the Hindu universe founded on the idea of *Akhand Bharat*.

Longkumer talks about Twipraland, a proposed state for the Tripuri, an indigenous tribal people of Tripura. The issue concerning Twipraland is said to be about the presence of the Bengalis and their dominance. Longkumer adds that the region is punctuated by borders tied to nation states, a recent phenomenon. He implies that the region had shared histories and connections among various communities: “historical memory once nurtured by human connections brings about new challenges that go deep into the hearth of the nation” (266). The connections were not a neutral ground, as [Middleton \(2020: 5\) points out](#) when noting Bengal's internal colonisation of Darjeeling. He states that “when the British colonised Darjeeling, they not only put in place structures that still constrain life and politics in this erstwhile hill station, they also set the stage for colonialisms of another kind.” Drawing on this case, he suggests that “Bengali colonialism” must be looked into.

Longkumer also speaks about the power of indigenous beliefs and how they shape movements. Along with the prominence of Christianity among the Nagas, he points out that prophecy holds great power among them and it has had a relevance starting from the 1940s and 1950s. This also marked the beginning of the movement for Naga sovereignty. The prophecy here is about how a section of Christian Nagas seeks a solution to the Naga movement. Longkumer directs attention to various “prophecy files” – messages containing divine revelations – referencing several Indian leaders: M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi. The files acknowledge them as leaders with power, having the common goal of independence for the Indian state and the Nagas, emphasising that the former has already achieved independence. The significant message in the prophecy is that there is a “divine retribution for standing in the way of Naga freedom” (151).

## Conclusions

The case of the Sangh in the North East is well explained in the book, as is how the BJP is banking on it to keep it in power and concurrently serve the larger project of the Hindu nation. Longkumer's book informs readers of how making meaning and manufacturing identity without acknowledging power relations or history can lead to assimilation in the name of a nation-building project. During the colonial and immediate post-colonial era, the debate and discourse concerning indigenous people was centred on the “civilising” effort. In the present, the spectre of a nation state rooted in cultural imperialism and religious fervour takes precedence.

As Longkumer asks in the concluding chapter, in response to the rapid spread of right-wing forces in the North East: “What will happen to indigenous peoples and their movements if their voices are constantly undermined by dominant groups, whose population not only exceeds them but whose livelihoods depend precisely on land belonging to indigenous peoples?” (271).

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