

Conflicts and Integration in N.E. India

'The Idea of India Has Not Been Embraced Yet, It Is Only Being Engaged With'

Thursday 26 April 2018, by [PISHAROTY Sangeeta Barooah](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2018).

In his new book, 'Strangers No More' Sanjoy Hazarika takes a deep look at all the Northeastern states and finds that 20 years down the line, the core issues remain the same.

New Delhi: Books on Northeast India are few, well-researched ones are fewer.

Over two decades after he filled this vacuum with his book, *Strangers in The Mist*, journalist-academic-rights activist Sanjoy Hazarika has returned with *Strangers No More*.

Published recently by Aleph, Hazarika's book takes a close look at all the eight states that comprise the region, holding up for readers how they stand today as separate entities with separate issues and challenges and also as a part of one unit – the Northeast. The author also takes a close look at neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan that form a ring around most of the Northeastern states, with the aim of providing a wider perspective to some of the issues that have triggered long-drawn conflicts and disturbances in the region.

In an interview with *The Wire*, Hazarika said that though the core issues remain the same in the last two-and-a-half decades, the focus has now shifted to other areas.

"For instance, what was at one time a bilateral issue between the Nagas and India has become an internal problem of India. This is a huge difference. Why I say this is because I don't think they are now asking for anything outside the Union of India," he pointed out.

Edited excerpts:

Twenty-five years ago, you came up with *Strangers in the Mist* and now *Strangers No More*. Should we look at the book as a continuation of the first one?

Strangers No More is a new book. You can compare it to the earlier one, but it is a different entity. I gave the title of the new book only for it to have some resonance to the earlier one. The world has changed in the last 25 years. In many ways, it has become worse; people have made it worse. But there is also a robust fight-back.

What I have done in this book is, look at all the eight states. I couldn't do that earlier because I didn't have much knowledge then. In this book, I have covered in great detail different areas of my interest. For instance, in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, I looked at the issue of dams, the environment and the conflict arising out of it. The 'Introduction' of the book is long because it gives a lot of details that set off the problems in the region. Besides looking at the environment in Arunachal, I have also tried to deal with the border issue by bringing in the new element of how Tawang was brought to India, highlighting the role played by the Naga Army officer Bob Khating.

I have also talked about playing a role in the Naga peace process, about writing two speeches for then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visiting Nagaland for the first time in 2003. Besides highlighting points like Labour Party leader Clement Atlee being a part of the Simon Commission to which the Nagas petitioned, seeking they be put under direct control of the British; that the Nagas could never actually hoist their flag declaring independence from India in 1947, and that they could never send telegrams to New Delhi stating so, as is popularly believed. As many as 12 telegrams were prevented from being sent out.

Also, I have looked at Gaidinliu, who founded a sect that rejected Christianity and espoused the Heraka faith with vague connections to Hinduism and idol worship. She was given the name Rani by Pandit Nehru. I spent a lot of time at the British Library in London for the research. That library was a huge help.

I have also covered the neighbourhood in this book, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. And also looked at how ULFA (Independent) chief Paresh Baruah, opposed to the peace talks with the Centre, has been one step ahead in the game, even now.

With this book, you are revisiting the region 25 years later. Any stark difference or similarities that you came across?

Though the core issues have remained the same, the focus has shifted in many other areas. Like in Nagaland, in Manipur, even in Assam, insurgency was at its peak 25 years ago. That is no longer so. In Manipur, the conflict is not as acute as it was. Today, if you look at the region, those key areas of conflict are gone or are much moderated. For instance, in Nagaland, all eyes are now on what's going to happen post elections (the recent assembly polls); that it is a test for chief minister Neiphu Rio; will the NSCN (Isak-Muivah) and the government of India be able to deliver the Naga Accord by the third anniversary of the secret historic agreement signed between them in 2015?

So, the focus has changed from conflict between the states to between the state and the armed groups, to between the state and peers, and also within the region. Especially in Assam, which is becoming an area where communalism, which was there in a slightly muted form earlier and was coming in bursts, is taking a more organised form. So that's why I am saying, the core issues are shifting in terms of balance and focus. What at one time were bilateral issues between the Nagas and India have become an internal problem of India. That is the huge difference. Why I say this is because I don't think they are now asking for anything outside the Union of India.

One place where things have not changed (across the region) is the general suspicion of, or concern, about immigration and 'the ubiquitous Bangladeshis', because this is misinterpreted in many ways. People don't think or recognise the fact that a Bangladeshi is one who has come after Bangladesh was formed. You can't discriminate against people who happen to be Muslims of Bangla origin. In the larger narrative, what is being forgotten is that there are people who are Indians who happen to be Muslims of Bangla origin. Everybody is not an outsider. All these figures (of people entering the region illegally from Bangladesh) that have been thrown around with abandon and without research, where are they from? I don't think we are looking at it in a logical and focused manner. We look at it emotionally and get carried away. In the end, our emotions let us down, our politicians let us down, the system lets us down, and we are back to square one.

The ongoing update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) should be able to pin down the number of non-citizens in Assam.

I think the NRC is using a flawed process. I may be called for contempt in the Supreme Court but the fact is that a lot of people are not there, at least in the first draft (released on December 31,

2017) even from old Assamese families, including some great-grandchildren of well-known Assamese, Radha Gobinda Baruah. Probably a few lakh people of Assamese origin who settled in Shillong, when it was part of Assam, will not be considered original inhabitants of Assam. I am not there in the first draft even though I am Assamese. People like me don't have the time to do the formalities of filling up legacy data, so I am out of NRC.

I think the critical question related to NRC update is going to be the issue of statelessness, which is not acceptable, either in India under the constitution as it exists and the laws that provide for people, or in an international situation. Even UN agencies are concerned about it. What people have not realised is that this can become an election issue for the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, where India's friend Sheikh Hasina (from Awami League) is seeking a second term in end 2018. Persecuting Muslims while giving citizenship to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, etc. can play out throughout the world.

My point, both in the book and elsewhere, is, illegal occupation of land encroachment is different from illegal migration. An illegal occupier of land is not necessarily an illegal migrant. Illegal migrants are anyway not as many as some people are making it out to be, certainly not what former Assam governor General S.K. Sinha mentioned in his report to the president in 1998 - four million. In one place, Gen. Sinha gave out statistics for Tripura (eight million) which was larger than its population then. What I am saying here is, there is a lot of hatred, misinformation and disinformation by vested interests.

The BJP, a national party, is a new entrant in the Northeast. It is talking about the economic uplift of NE primarily through a business model with private players, glimpses of which were seen in Advantage Assam and North East Development Summit in Manipur. Do you think this can help the region?

So far, the model of business seems to be one in which you give work to people who are seen close to you politically and financially. You are bringing in outside investment but where is the capacity being built locally? For instance, there have always been industrial parks in Assam, but these have never done well.

Many years ago, B.G. Verghese (veteran journalist) gave a proposal which I was totally opposed to. It was in regard to the disputed areas between the NE states. He suggested that the disputed areas be converted into joint economic zones or zones that would have industrial activities and would benefit both sides. Looking back, I think he was a wise man, and in some ways ahead of his times. If you use land like that, for a larger purpose, for a political and economic goal, it can create mutual goodwill. Ultimately, projects between states would create jobs and usher in a better relationship between the states.

I am not saying do this in the forest areas, but in non-forested areas where there is a land dispute between states. First develop a partnership, then a plan that will benefit both sides, if not equally but substantially. This could include horticulture parks, manufacturing programmes, etc. All these things can be linked to the Act East Policy.

As far as the economy of the region is concerned, it is fractured, not just because there are different states and, therefore, different issues that need different attention, but because it is very difficult to have a homogenous economic approach to a very heterogeneous economic and environmental region.

But if you don't look into these things, you just end up developing projects which are beneficial to people who are seen close to you. If you have a business model, it should make political and

economic sense and benefit locally. Something that is seen close to the narrative of taking things outside of the region has never worked in the Northeast.

Also, look at the track record of some of the companies internationally. There has been a lot of resistance against their projects because they are not particularly known to be pro-environment.

Anyway, resources in the Northeast have been continuously exploited. It has been seen as a place of three pools – resource pool in terms of the environment, economic pool in terms of extraction and as a people's pool. The people of the region are now turning their backs on the existing system, and for the first time in its history, the Northeast has become a migrant producing region which is visible not just in the large metros but in small towns, too. They may not be doing top of the line work; some may be just unskilled labourers, but they are still coming out because they don't see a future in the place they belong to. That is sending a signal that the situation is not as good as one would like it to be.

Some people also tend to look at this migration as the willingness of the people of the region, particularly the youth, to integrate with mainstream India.

I believe it is an engagement, but not an embrace. I was recently part of the Northeast Day celebrations in three Delhi University colleges where I said in my lecture that make every day a Northeast day. You are wearing your dresses for a day; wear them every day; let people see that you are different but a part of larger India. But the idea of India has not been embraced yet; it is only being engaged with, even by the youth.

Even in the recent Meghalaya and Nagaland elections, the BJP didn't win the states. BJP, for the first time, got 12 seats in a seat-sharing arrangement with the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party. Now the challenge in the Naga context is, can you deliver on August 3? Rio is under a lot of pressure from the BJP to deliver it. If he can't, he can only turn to the Naga People's Party, the single largest party. Don't rule it out.

The Centre is also talking about lifting the region economically by connecting it to South East Asia through the Act East Policy.

There is more research and talk being done on Look/Act East policy than work on the ground. It is good. At least we have 20 years of research, seminars and summits now. The idea is good. You must be connected to your neighbourhood. Everybody in the region wants to connect with South East Asia. Maybe 20 years later, you can get into a car in Guwahati and drive down to Ho Chi Minh city, but that's not possible now.

The problem is, India is not known for rigorously following up what it says publicly, and certainly not delivering on the ground.

First of all, you need to have the infrastructure within your system. What's the point of talking when in the last four years you can't even build a road between Dimapur and Kohima? I believe, for economic planning which has an international component, you have to be strategic. First, you have to be able to do things on your side of the border.

The North Eastern Council has been given a budget to develop roads but those are for repair and upgrading, not to build new roads. That's not how you strategically plan an intervention of infrastructure. If you can't deliver at home, how will you deliver abroad?

The second thing is that we are not looking at issues around the rivers. Navigation is important but it can't be at the cost of other systems that also exist in the rivers. The Prime Minister's Office has

done the right thing by instituting a Rs 100-crore study first on the dredging of the Brahmaputra instead of straightaway investing over Rs 2,000 crore and not getting results. If you dredge a river, you also run the danger of affecting the habitat of many creatures, including the dolphins or xihu in the Brahmaputra. The last dolphin died ten years ago in Yangtze river because of extensive navigation. We are not living alone in the planet. That's why we have to look at things both in a narrow perspective and as a larger picture. If you dredge, do it in patches and where there is a scientific reason for doing it.

Talking about the Brahmaputra, China is building 27 dams, which would hugely affect Arunachal and Assam.

Yes. Of those, 11 are linking cascade dams on Yarlung Tsangpo. Those dams will not diminish the amount of water that comes to the Brahmaputra but will change water quality. There can't even be a grain of sand entering the hydropower turbines. So you are going to have 11 dams producing cleaner and cleaner water. Clean water will come to Arunachal and Assam, without any sand, without any good chemicals and nutrients for the fish, the dolphins. Nobody is talking about it. We are not talking about the issues that are going to affect the lives. We are only talking about how much water will come to us, some saying only 10% of the total water will be affected. But 10% out of billions of cusecs is a lot of water.

Another aspect is that all these rivers flow into Bangladesh. It will affect people downstream. If the affected people actually start to migrate upstream, as most of them are dependent on agriculture, we are then talking about lakhs of people. You can't fence the entire Brahmaputra to stop migration. At the moment, migration (to India) is happening, but not in that scale. So we can't look at an issue in a narrow perspective of how it is affecting us today.

Bangladesh's main demand (to India) is water. About two crore people move within Bangladesh every year seeking new jobs and if there is climate change, around ten to 20 million will be affected. No way will they stay within Bangladesh. About 20% of our own coastal areas will also get affected by climate change. It is interlinked. All this falls within economic planning.

Just like the migration issue, the issue of discrimination, the issue of internal violence because of the flaws in the NRC, will have a larger impact, not just on us, but on India as a nation that believes in diversity and in celebrating equality based on Article 21 of the constitution.

Unless you think of the larger picture all the time, it will always have an adverse effect on people who would resent what is happening to them and this, in turn, will give them an opportunity to mobilise themselves. Some 25 years ago, there was insurgency in the Northeast, now there are different kinds of movements. Look at the Bodo Territorial Council areas. Why are non-Bodos so opposed to things there? You can't have a situation where 70% of the population is excluded from power and access to funds. Is that acceptable anywhere else in the country? The Sixth Schedule areas could protect themselves to a large extent from migration, but the Fifth Schedule areas failed to do so. If there is no Maoist movement now in Assam or in the Northeast, there is no guarantee that there will not be other kind of movement on the land issue. Why? Because of disempowerment of people and the state seen as complicit in it.

The Narendra Modi government has been able to sort out various pending issues with Bangladesh though.

Modi is able to sense the opportunity (of Act East policy). He is able to articulate it but depends on other people to deliver and that is where the problem lies. I think he has been able to develop an ideal relationship with Bangladesh despite the BJP's priorities in relationship with that country. It is

the only country in the region that is our closest friend. Modi saw that you have to connect with Bangladesh on security issues, give them a sense that we are on your side, give them economic support and divorce that from the BJP narrative on Bangladesh at the state level. Sorting out the trans-border issue with Bangladesh is a major achievement. I think he will have to take a call on the pushback (of migrants) and the NRC.

But he will not be able to do a similar thing with Myanmar because it is a semi-military regime. Unlike in Bangladesh, India has not been able to tackle insurgents on the Myanmar side. It tried to do it on its own and the Burmese didn't like it.

The Centre is carrying out over half a dozen peace talks with armed groups in the Northeast, some for years together, but there is no sign of any Accord.

First, the government's defence would be that the groups are talking, they are in the system, can't get back to the jungle. The government is giving a stipend to them and now they are seeking a raise; so they are completely dependent on the government, like a drug addict. The second thing is, as far as the insurgency is concerned, some of them have become extortionists and the leadership is not able to control them. It makes them more vulnerable to the machinations of power by the Centre. As far as specifically targeting and closing agreements with different groups, I don't think it is a priority with the government because it knows that these groups can't mount an offensive which they could have 10-15 years ago. They know where their camps are. They can take them out whenever they want. Hebron (headquarters of NSCN in Nagaland) is there, and everyone knows who is inside it. There is no secret about it.

So the part of the process of negotiation is that one of the parties becomes progressively weaker. People are speaking out against some groups, on issues, debating why these people are not joining the political process; all these voices are strong and vibrant. Ten years ago, people were afraid to speak out; that fear is going, which is good, people are engaging. I think a lot depends on whether the Centre is going to pull off, if at all, the accord with the Nagas. All the other groups are watching them. It is same with the NRC process. It is going to have a huge impact on the neighbourhood, not just in the states of the region but in Bangladesh too.

The Naga Accord is taking an unusually long time.

The big question on the Naga issue is, if at the end of 21 years of negotiations you are unable to give them a separate identity, what are you going to give? Those three points in the Framework Agreement are fairly innocuous. They don't really mean anything. One of the key issues is, the Indian army doesn't want to recruit the Naga cadres because the Naga army has a different training module, a different idea; it doesn't match with the Indian army's ethos. Earlier, the Sema Nagas were inducted into a battalion in the Border Security Force, not into the army.

Or, will it be like the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (in 1998) where everybody not just lays down arms but the arms are decommissioned? In Northern Ireland, decommissioning happened where they destroyed the arms and there was international inspection. India is not going to allow international inspection.

When amnesty was declared by the Mizo National front (in 1986), they surrendered their weapons. They didn't cut a very good deal though; the Accord is yet to be fully implemented. So what is the guarantee that the one with the Nagas will be implemented? This country is anyway always in election mode. So this issue is going to be important not just for Nagaland but for the neighbouring states too? For instance, how are you going to handle the land issue which has remained at the heart of the problem? Each of those state assemblies has passed a resolution that they would not give land

to the Nagas. If you don't give land to the Nagas or take it away from the others, how will you justify it?

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