

Book Review

Resource, Politics and Northeast India

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Living with Oil and Coal Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India
(2019) Dolly Kikon. University of Washington Press: USA, pp. 188.

An anthropologist to reckon with, Dolly Kikon has made a mark in the field of academics with extensive research on the northeast region of India. Her recent work '*Living with Oil and Coal Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*' is an outcome of her arduous research in this area. It is probably author's personal reflection on the region's long history of militarization, violence, abject poverty, insecurity with parallel extraction operations taking place here that lead her to produce this work so engrossing with anthropological insights and theoretical reflections. This is a work which accounts how borders are produced and maintained. It depicts how security, commerce, border disputes occurs simultaneously in spaces dotted by strong ethnic ties. In borderland, resource rich territories between Assam and Nagaland, the author accounts the key nodes of interaction amongst local people. Her work is an astute combination of theoretical debates and references as much as storytelling. It can be read and enjoyed not only by those in academe but also anyone interested in having an idea about lives in borderlands specially those areas marked by rich resources. The book is divided into seven chapters with an introduction and epilogue.

In her introduction, Kikon narrates the borderland politics situated around commodities like bamboo, timber, coal etc. This marks the relation between the state of Assam and Nagaland where people, state and non-state actors interact centering around resource. These border gates, checkpoints or the numerous nomenclature used to refer to the boundary demarcation has been existent since the colonial times when the British first introduced the Inner Line Regulation in 1873. The colonial instrument was devised to distinguish between the hills of Nagas and the plains of Assam, figuratively between the savage and the civilized and importantly to safeguard the resources. Kikon traverses the world of many borders herself witnessing the 'political drama' (p. 7) in the resource frontiers and its effects on daily lives of people. It speaks of relation between people, also the state and the non state actors provides us with rich

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ethnographic insights and stories often unheard, of coal, oil, murder, love and many more. Set in the background of political economy of resource extractions, the people of these areas are also witness to decades of violence and armed struggle along with abject poverty, and this is where they see mines and oils fields as a solution to their economic hardship which would usher progress and development. Kikon sees in these spaces the dreams of a 'desired future', which definitely leads to conflict and competition amongst various actors tribal bodies, private owners, mining companies, state officials, insurgents thus forming newer alliances and politics around it. The author beautifully weaves series of events, histories, legends in negotiating these landscape marked by oil field, tea plantation and how common people conduct their daily lives in face of various levels of surveillance and security checks, citing the example of weekly haat (market) which sustains socio economic ties but susceptible to conflicts when they are shut down and trading stops. The lives in these resource frontiers are closely tied to the issue of citizenship, sovereignty as with security and larger human rights issues as Kikon goes on to narrate.

In her first chapter 'Storytellers' talks of the overlapping claim over territories in these foothills which falls within territorial and administrative jurisdiction of three states Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. She illuminates her anthropological discoveries of two villages Old and New Tssori found in colonial gazettes and notifications preserved by an influential village member whose great grandfather was one of the founders of these villages. Similarly Longtssori, Gorejan and probably numerous such villages speak of the same story of memory, history, claims of belonging, record, documentation and unending official procedure of recognition by government. This process is exacerbated by the race for resource excavation, overlapping claims of boundaries, existence of multiple ethnic groups seeking employment, land and resources and claims each with own history. These in turn become grounds for cultural and political alliances as we see in contemporary politics in Assam and the role of Assam Tea Tribes Student's Association (ATTSA), All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) and various such groups.

The second chapter 'Difficult Loves' takes us on a journey of something more intimate. The author in this chapter has invoked certain ideas which are possible only for anthropologists to depict. Here Kikon highlights the idea of love (*morom*) through stories of marriage, domestic violence in 'domestic, ethnic, religion and geographical' spaces and how this idea, she finds, is intimately connected with male ownership and gender relations. This idea also illustrates the 'social and moral boundaries of ethnic communities' which is very pertinent to maintaining relations of power.

The third chapter 'State Loves', talks of the multiplicity of definition when people invoke the institution called state. It is a multilayered understanding wherein sometimes it is referred to as 'a sinful sovereign entity' and at other 'multiple sovereign bodies and power structures, such as the tribal councils, insurgent groups, and Indian security forces' (p. 63). This chapter talks of the everyday dilemma of ordinary people residing

particularly in the foothills and borders of these two states. The author shows us how sovereignty is also socially constructed and here in such spaces maintained not solely by the state but also non state actors like insurgent groups. Ordinary lives are also ruled by the kind of 'love' extended or not extended by their respective state jurisdiction, so sometimes lack of water, security, public subsidies, schools and hospitals all become markers of a caring state. Kikon here elucidates the construction and characterization of state of Assam as an economic power compared to Nagaland, Nagaland in turn as a cultural state and the Indian state as a military authority. Because of the centrality of resource extraction and the aim of having some control over them, the terms of engagement becomes important for the residents in these foothills.

The fourth chapter 'The *Haats*' shows us the centrality of this important institution in socio economic lives of the people residing in these areas, a 'vital sign of the social life' (p. 87). Kikon shows us how these *Haats* are spaces of historical, political and cultural associations. It is space, an amalgamation of people, goods, aroma, food, and motley of color yet underneath runs strong currents of tension too. It further highlights the hills and plains divide, wherein the people of the hill narrate their hard toil in carrying goods to the *haats* and also power hierarchies and relations inherent in these transactions.

The fifth chapter 'Extractive Relations' highlights the fluidity of borders demarcating these two states, where tea gardens and *jhum* fields marked the areas of Assam and Nagaland. The author portrays a picture of anxious relations between these states and also in the mining activities, which in case of Nagaland is a seasonal activity. It involved a huge network of traders, landowners, villagers, state government, insurgent groups and many others. Interestingly what the author highlights through such activities like coal mining is the forging of different kinds of friendship and kinship ties across communities in these foothills. These ties in the face of an extractive economy are something interesting to know about and the way people negotiate ethnic tensions and relations of power, and continue with their lives.

The sixth chapter 'Carbon Fantasies and Aspirations' brings up the debate around community ownership of natural resources and how people and various other stakeholders have been interpreting this relation which is very important for future politics and aspirations of people. For instance the exploration of oil by ONGC between 1973 and 1993 ignited the fantasies of people 'about a prosperous carbon future and potential benefits from oil exploration' (p. 120). It started forming newer alliances and power networks and understandings about ownership and access to natural resources steering the debate around Article 371 A of the Indian Constitution. Interestingly, the author here also explores the gender relation in the Naga society and the way mining sites further entrenched the gendered inequality, already existent in the society. Women's lives were deeply impacted by these mining activities which remain a 'man talk', and women were excluded from it. Furthermore, their conventional spaces are also under threat from the ever expanding activities of coal sites.

The seventh chapter 'Carbon Citizenship' highlights the interaction between Indian security forces and ordinary lives in these areas. The author reflects on a peculiar relation of 'extraction, citizenship, and militarism' in this chapter. A reader in this chapter is exposed to a narrative of security built up by the Indian state and how constitutional regulations like Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) and Disturbed Areas Act is at work and the activities under the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Act are being taken up as an effort to reach people. These various ways of reaching people has built up a process of shaping 'model citizens' '*bhal manu*' floating a whole new debate around canon citizenship in the backdrop of a violent history of resource extraction which continues.

Finally in the Epilogue the author succinctly reiterates the argument made in her previous chapters of dreams fueled by resource extraction which is marked by violence and militarization in the whole region. Her work very aptly depicts the lives of ordinary people living a 'carbon dream' amidst control and militarization and how land and resources are viewed by various stakeholders- the state and non state actors, people, insurgents, ethnic groups and so on. The stakeholders are many, so are dreams, the heartrending story of an English school narrated by the author depicts the picture.

Kikon makes interesting observation about the scenario of resource extraction in the region with elaborate anthropological exploration of places in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland. The merit of the author is in aptly depicting the everyday lives and struggles of the ordinary people involved in this politics. It is a story of varied nuances of politics and militarization of these areas and how multiple actors, the state, non state and even insurgent groups, have a bearing on the developments surrounding resource politics. In the growing field of borderland studies this work highlights people's emotions and sentiments around resource excavation and ownership. It is an intellectual addition to the plethora of works on the region and its resource politics but stands out because of the ability to reflect the otherwise mundane events of everyday lives, like a *Haat*, a *Jhum* session, yet politically very pertinent in describing the relation between the communities residing in the carbon landscape. Kikon successfully depicts the lives of ordinary people entangled in carbon fantasies. However, some reflection on the elite formation within the tribal communities and how they along with the state machinery has appropriated the opportunity provided by the discovery and exploration of resources to which both the state and community lay their strong claims for, could have further enriched the book. This work will inspire many more scholars to take up fresh research in this area whose historicity entwined with colonial legacy nonetheless remains relevant in contemporary times.

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