



Book Review

The Routledge Companion to Northeast India by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba

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The Book

The Routledge Companion to Northeast India

by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba

Routledge, 2023, 497 pages

ISBN: 9780367725662 [hbk], 9781032259024 [pbk], 9781003285540 [ebk]

DOI: 10.4324/9781003285540, Price: £190/\$250)

Abstract

'The Routledge Companion to Northeast India', edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, represents one of the most comprehensive scholarly attempts to systematize knowledge about this complex and underrepresented region. The book brings together 81 contributions from leading specialists, the volume spans themes of ethnicity, indigeneity, ecology, migration, history, and cultural politics. Its emphasis on plurality, relational histories, and cross-border flows challenges reductive framings of the Northeast as either a frontier or a site of permanent conflict. While encyclopedic breadth makes it an invaluable reference for scholars, students, and policymakers, the uneven depth across entries occasionally limits critical engagement. Nevertheless, the Companion significantly advances Northeast India studies by situating the region within transnational debates on identity, mobility, and sovereignty. It is indispensable for future research and pedagogy on borderlands, diversity, and democracy in South Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Northeast India, Ethnicity, Indigeneity, Ecology, Mobility, Sovereignty.

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The Review

The Routledge Companion to Northeast India represents one of the most ambitious scholarly undertakings on the region to date, gathering 81 contributions that span anthropology, history, politics, ecology, linguistics, and cultural studies. Edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, the volume consciously positions itself as a transdisciplinary compendium that attempts to systematize the fragmented and often contested field of Northeast India studies (p. 6). The editors emphasize that the project is not bound by the administrative definition of the Northeast but embraces its “unbounded sense” as a region marked by flows of people, cultures, and goods across borders (p. 22). This decision itself is a methodological intervention, situating the Northeast within wider transnational and trans-Himalayan contexts. The Companion foregrounds themes of ethnicity, indigeneity, and political contestation. As the introduction notes, Northeast India’s body politic has been “near continuously gripped by aggressive agitations, constant protests, existential anxiety, and sporadic violence” (p. 3). Ethnicity emerges as both an identity resource and a volatile field of contestation, shaping claims to autonomy, rights, and representation. The entries, however, resist a reductive reading of ethnic politics by showing its entanglement with historical mobilities, ecological transformations, and colonial state-making. This approach aligns with Sanjib Baruah’s (2020) insistence that the Northeast must be understood through the lens of “durable disorder,” where state-building and ethnonationalisms are co-constitutive rather than sequential. The Companion extends this debate by documenting how identity politics interweave with environmental degradation, migration, and cultural production.

Methodologically, the Companion is eclectic, but the editorial framing emphasizes three key principles: plurality of perspectives, rejection of essentialist community narratives, and a focus on relational histories. The editors admit that no single entry can cover the more than 220 communities and 8 states, yet by juxtaposing diverse thematic lenses, the Companion creates a mosaic that reflects the heterogeneity of the region (pp. 18–21). This strategy addresses long-standing critiques of Northeast India scholarship as either overly ethnographic or narrowly securitized (Baruah, 2013). At the same time, the Companion’s encyclopedic structure—short, specialist entries—has both strengths and limitations: it makes the book a valuable reference tool, but occasionally sacrifices depth for breadth.

A striking strength is its incorporation of non-human life-forms—animals, insects, landscapes—as subjects of analysis (p. 9). This ecological sensitivity reflects a growing turn in anthropology and political ecology that sees the environment not as backdrop but as co-constitutive of social life (Barua, 2014). The Companion’s inclusion of ecological niches, rivers, and forests alongside ethnic movements and insurgencies signals an important

epistemological shift: Northeast India is framed as a dynamic assemblage rather than a static periphery. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on contributors, as the editors acknowledge, also shaped the project, with delays, losses, and the challenge of fieldwork interruptions (pp. 29–35). This candid editorial voice situates the book within lived historical contingencies, itself a testament to the vulnerability of academic production in crisis times.

The Companion also intervenes in debates on representation and voice. By including scholars from the region alongside international academics, it resists the external gaze that has historically dominated Northeast India studies. Yet, a limitation is visible: despite the editors' intentions, some entries still reproduce the region as an "area study" object, occasionally flattening lived complexities into categories like "tribal," "minority," or "frontier." This is a tension that future work must continue to grapple with. As Gunnel Cederlöf (2014) has shown, the colonial construction of the Northeast as a frontier space continues to haunt its contemporary representation, and while the Companion destabilizes such framings, remnants of them inevitably linger.

In terms of broader significance, the Companion situates Northeast India within global conversations on identity, indigeneity, and transnational flows. It dialogues with current debates on borders and mobility (Baishya & Saikia, 2018), showing that Northeast India's histories of movement and settlement complicate binary categories of insider/outsider. The Companion's rejection of fixed boundaries resonates with postcolonial critiques of the nation-state, offering fertile ground for comparative work with other borderland regions. At the same time, it emphasizes the unique historical layering of the Northeast—colonial statecraft, Cold War geopolitics, and neoliberal extraction—making it an indispensable text for situating the region in world history.

The strengths of the volume are evident in its breadth, interdisciplinarity, and editorial reflexivity. It is encyclopedic yet reflexive, regionally grounded yet globally connected. Its limitations lie in its very scale: with 81 entries, unevenness in analytical depth is inevitable, and readers may find certain areas—such as gender or disability studies—underrepresented compared to ethnicity and politics. Nevertheless, the editors' vision of creating an "intellectual family" of Northeast India scholars (p. 47) has largely been realized, and the Companion sets a benchmark for future scholarship.

In conclusion, *The Routledge Companion to Northeast India* is more than a handbook; it is a statement of the field's maturity and its openness to new directions. For researchers, it offers an indispensable entry point into the complexities of the region; for policymakers, it underscores the necessity of engaging with the Northeast beyond counterinsurgency or developmentalist clichés; and for pedagogy, it provides students with an authoritative, multi-

vocal resource. Its greatest contribution is its insistence that Northeast India is not a marginal appendage of South Asia but a central site for rethinking questions of identity, ecology, and sovereignty. In this sense, the Companion is both a mirror of current scholarship and a provocation for future research.

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